

LUIGI NONO PROMETEO

Part of *Luigi Nono: Fragments of Venice*

SOUTHBANK
CENTRE

THIS IS AN EXTRACT FROM THE FULL PROGRAMME ON SALE AT BOTH PERFORMANCES. These notes are reproduced here as a help for audiences who wish to understand more about this extraordinary and complex piece in advance of hearing it.

Nono Prometeo (UK premiere)

(135')

- I. Prologue (20')
- II. First Island (23')
- III. Second Island
 - a) Io – Prometheus (18')
 - b) Hölderlin (8')
 - c) First Stasimon (8')
- IV. First Interlude (7')
- V. Three voices (a) (12')
- VI. Third, Fourth & Fifth Islands (17')
- VII. Three voices (b) (7')
- VIII. Second Interlude (5')
- IX. Second Stasimon (9')

Please note there is no interval in these performances.

Royal Festival Hall
9 & 10 May 2008, 7.30pm

Royal Festival Hall at 6.15pm on 9 May:
Marshall Marcus gives an introduction to experiencing this extraordinary work.
Admission free with concert ticket.

Royal Festival Hall at 6.15pm on 10 May:
Professor Christopher Fox of Brunel University leads a discussion on listening to *Prometeo*,
as part of The Royal Philharmonic Society's Hear Here! listening project.
Admission free with concert ticket.

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Programme notes

A 'tragedy of listening'? What is Luigi Nono's *Prometeo*? Even in the 20th century's long history of unclassifiable works of music theatre, *Prometeo* – 'Prometheus' – stands grandly alone.

This is no opera, nor is it even an attempt to satirise or explode the generic conventions of writing for the stage, in the manner of, say, Mauricio Kagel's *Staatstheater* or György Ligeti's *Le Grand Macabre*. Nono's own output before *Prometeo*'s premiere in 1984 offers clues, and yet *Prometeo* is still unprecedented.

Nono's previous works for the stage (if that's even a way of talking about *Prometeo*, which was first performed in a deconsecrated church, San Lorenzo in Venice) like *Intolleranza 1960* and *Al gran sole carico d'amore* (In the bright sunshine, heavy with love), premiered in 1975, seem models of theatrical conventionality by contrast. For all the political propaganda of *Al gran sole*, whose texts are culled from revolutionary thinkers over the centuries, its theatre is uncompromising and direct, and makes it Nono's most powerful expression of the cyclic histories of humanity. As Nono himself said, '*Al gran sole* is a monster of resources, of everything. It's unbelievably limited'.

Prometeo has its limitations too. For much of the two hours of music, you won't hear many words, you won't experience the unfolding of a linear narrative, and you won't see any theatrical special effects. So much for what *Prometeo* isn't. But you could say that *Prometeo* is no less a 'monster of resources' than *Al gran sole*: just look around at the musicians arranged all over Royal Festival Hall, the banks of electronic equipment, the variety of sound sources, from amplified voices to loudspeakers, and an exotic instrumentarium that includes contrabass clarinet, bass flute, and important parts for glasses, whose hypnotic, ethereal sound is an emblem of the world of sonic extremes created by much of the piece. These are the forces that create *Prometeo*'s unique sound-world, a space encompassing abyssal depths, stratospheric heights, and sometimes overwhelming intensity.

The words on which *Prometeo* is based come from Massimo Cacciari's libretto, more like an assemblage of texts, which includes the earliest versions of the Prometheus myth alongside quotations from Walter Benjamin, Friedrich Hölderlin, and the final words of Schoenberg's libretto for his opera, *Moses und Aron*. But Nono's approach to these texts is not to set them, either dramatically or dialectically. Instead, the words are reduced to their vowels, their phonemes, liquefying their semantic content and becoming sound material. You'll hear that process happen all around the auditorium in the second part of *Island 2, Hölderlin*, in which fragments of the poet's *Schicksalslied* (Song of Destiny, the same text Brahms once set), sung and spoken by two sopranos and two speakers, transform from comprehensible words into a glittering cascade of sound, both acoustic and electronic.

And that's one way to approach the whole of *Prometeo*, as the most lavish and seductive essay in Nono's work with electronics and live instruments. Some of the soundscapes he creates are unforgettable, in conjunction with the studio of South-West German Radio, with whom André Richard has long been associated. He supervises the electronics and sonic architecture of these performances, and worked closely with Nono for the work's first performances in 1984 and the revised version of 1985.

The music of the final section, *Second Stasimon* (a *stasimon* is one of the chants of classical tragedy) for five vocal soloists is a case in point, pitched at the limits of the singers' ranges, and the threshold of the human ear's capacity to hear quiet sounds. At the other end of the spectrum, there are the violent contrasts of the first *Island*, in which gigantic brassy outbursts shatter a halo of high, shimmering stillness. The effect of

these indelible sonic experiences is magnified by the way the sound sources of *Prometeo* are projected in space: Royal Festival Hall has never sounded like this before.

But all of this electronic and architectural extravagance is not an end in itself; rather, it's a route to the poetics of *Prometeo*. It's precisely in Nono's rejection of conventional theatre and spectacle that *Prometeo* creates its expressivity. The real 'drama' of the piece is the way it dramatises the act of listening. The truly 'Promethean' aspect of *Prometeo* is that we each create our own way through its sounds and textures. Much of the work is vertiginously poised on a musical edge, whether at the extremes of instrumental register (both high and low), or dynamic, extremely loud or, more usually, preternaturally quiet. It is up to us how we experience and interpret the sounds we hear.

But is there a politics as well as a poetics of *Prometeo*? Nono's turn in his final decade away from grand revolutionary statement to a world of inner intensity and reflection is embodied above all in this piece, as if, disillusioned with the failure of the Marxist ideology he once so fervently believed in, Nono retreated to a hermetic musical universe of experimentation and abstraction. Yet the physical experience of *Prometeo* belies that interpretation. *Prometeo* contains some of the most direct music Nono ever conceived. Sitting inside the piece – surrounded by the sound-making apparatus all around the hall – you feel every minuscule transformation of pitch and texture, of word into phoneme, of electronic into acoustic sound. Far from a 'tragedy', *Prometeo* is a consummation of listening, both for the audience, and Nono himself.

Programme notes by Tom Service

Prometeo: A Listener's Guide

As Tom Service's programme note points out (pages 12-13), *Prometeo* is a work of great extremes. Many of these are not difficult to pick out as one listens, particularly the contiguous mixing of opposing sound blocks: very short bursts of enormously loud music followed by immensely sustained periods of almost exaggerated quiet, exceptionally high and low pitched notes together, clear and dense textures, near and far sound, vocal and instrumental sounds morphing into each other. Whilst all of this detail is in itself relatively straightforward, the scale of *Prometeo* as a single piece of music is so complex that at the first listening it can be rather challenging, if not intimidating.

This difficulty is not without reason: Nono deliberately set out to free classical music from its often rigid performance style, in the process destroying many of the conventions that have governed the way audiences have come to listen to classical music in the concert hall over the last 200 years. This is a revolution in the way that we are being asked to listen which is wonderfully freeing. But one of the consequences of its complexity is that understanding a little about what Nono intended will undoubtedly help listeners to get more from this piece in live performance.

Listening & Space

To begin with, Nono makes a fundamental break with many of the spatial hierarchies of the traditional concert hall. The first deconstruction is architectural. The normal concert hall has the performers placed at one end of the hall raised up on a stage with the audience facing them from the other end. Audience and performers become two separated blocks, the musicians all facing inwards to the conductor, the audience all facing towards the stage. In this way the sound is created on a stage completely divorced from the audience, in a 'room within a room', removing the sound source from the vicinity of the listener and forcing the audience to listen across space rather than within it, encouraging listening which is often as dependent on looking as listening.

In *Prometeo*, Nono places the performers around the outer sections of the hall at different heights and in different areas, placing the audience within this space and restoring to the concert space the characteristic of normal everyday listening in which sound comes at us from all 360 degrees. He reinforced this sensation by having speakers hung around the hall, with a sound director distributing live amplification of the performer's sound through these speakers into and around the space of the hall. The live sound of the performer is mixed in real time with the amplified sound, increasing the sense of a natural three-dimensional sound environment and creating a sound ballet which, critically, we can perceive only by listening to, not by looking at.

The next level of spatial deconstruction is the hierarchy of leadership itself. Throughout the 19th century audiences grew used to the idea of the conductor as a godlike figure, who created and conjured the performance and its interpretation from the performers.

So who is in charge in *Prometeo*? To start with there are two conductors (mainly for functional reasons so that the dispersed performers can always face and see one of them), but neither conductor is any longer physically at the centre. Nor are either of them responsible for the placing of the sound throughout the hall, which is the job of the sound director. The hierarchy of the orchestra and singers is loosened further by placing the performers into a variety of separated groups around the hall. Nono democratizes the performance, destroying the old pattern of who is in charge.

Gradually one arrives at a point where the 'stage' itself ceases to exist in the usual sense. Instead, the entire space, occupied by audience and performers alike, has become a new stage, the hall itself has become an instrument, and as listeners we are placed within this instrument, creating our own listening experience through the single – and thereby powerful – modality of sound.

Listening & Understanding

The inspiration for *Prometeo* is the Greek myth of Prometheus. Prometheus, the Greek god who means so well, but always seems to spell trouble. One of the most talented and audacious of the Greek gods, a byword for the best of human creativity, he cunningly steals fire from heaven and gives it to humans, and is punished for this by being chained to a rock and having his flesh torn at daily by an eagle. In *Prometeo* this story of eternal repetitive misery is used, as it is so often elsewhere, as a symbol for the misery as well as the magic that he brings to humanity. With Nono's remarkable setting of fragments of various texts relating to the Prometheus story, a new stage of listening is now set for the beauty and tragedy of *Prometeo*.

Of course the presence of a Greek myth at least suggests a narrative that can be followed in order to understand the line of a story. Surely this storytelling is what is at the root of all myth? Not here; or at least not in the usual sense of a narrative. Nono is trying to get us to understand by listening, not by reading a chronological narrative. He is trying to stop the verbalised mental thought processes of reading from interrupting the listening – in the same way that the spatial arrangements of the piece are an attempt to stop looking from interfering with listening. It's certainly important to understand the text of this drama (see page 17), extraordinarily important states, ideas and emotions are revealed in the text, and it is itself highly poetic, but focusing on it as a crutch to help 'read' the story during performance is a danger, and Nono is instead relying on us to understand by listening. For Nono then, true listening is itself a form of understanding.

Listening & Structure

To accomplish the writing of *Prometeo* Nono created a new type of structure in music with his use of islands of sound. Five numbered islands function as the most visible structure of the piece, carrying the most charged and dense moments of action, and these are interspersed and surrounded by a prologue and a number of interludes, voice movements and *stasimons* (an ancient Greek theatrical chant). But behind these movement titles lies another deeper structure in which the two interludes separate and mark the passing of a series of crises in the drama, Promethean tragedies of listening.

There are immense rewards on offer here. *Prometeo* emerges for many people as one of the great concert encounters. It's premiere at the Venice Biennale in 1984 was a *cause célèbre*, and there are tales of performances such as the one in Salzburg in 1993 when at the end of the piece the audience was transfixed, unable to leave the auditorium. Nono frees the listener from the constraint of time as we normally experience it, from conventional narrative direction, from the narrow confines of traditional spatial acoustics, and from the visual domination of perception that rules so much of our experience of the contemporary world. Instead, time, like architecture (so often described as frozen music) becomes frozen itself by the music. At such moments the journey through the islands becomes a series of sound crises in which the music paints terror, but also a haunting magnificence, and as one descends gradually from the Third, Fourth and Fifth Islands to the second three-voices section, the *Second Interlude* and finally the *Second Stasimon*, a unique sense of beauty is encountered in the music. Terror and beauty; finally one understands Nono's constant injunction to us with that powerful Italian word that is the talisman of the entire piece: *Ascolta!* Listen!

Notes by Marshall Marcus, Head of Music,
Southbank Centre

Prometeo: A meditation on listening

As Tom Service and Marshall Marcus illustrate, Nono's *Prometeo* is a dramatisation of the act of listening; offering the experience of focused listening as a form of understanding in itself. *Prometeo* exhilarates through its articulate call for absolute auditory attentiveness – a celebration of hearing and listening over our other senses; and it energises because it is a sensory, profoundly visceral event engaging us as audience to perform the art of listening both individually and collectively. Like focussing on breathing, *Prometeo* is an act of mediation on listening, practiced by the audience.

Prometeo is informed by thoughtlines that reach back to the origins of culture. Some have discussed Nono's piece as being an imaginative landscape of the found objects of 'western' thought. But *Prometeo* is not an interpretation of the Promethean myth, or Euripedes, Aeschelus, Hesiod, Jung, Marx, Nietzsche, Walter Benjamin – or any of the other texts that influence the work. Rather, *Prometeo* is a condensation of the historical memory of thought, feelings and ideas that underpin the principles of rebellion, revolution and radical democracy. We are not here to have our minds in thrall to someone else's overarching dominant narrative, nor are we here in search of a univocal meaning. Nono does not offer a narrative map to lead us through story and interpretation because the texts and artistic impulse informing the work challenge the forms of disempowerment people experience when forced to occupy a grand narrative designed and controlled by someone else.

Forms of oppression that limit freedom traditionally privilege the eye over the ear – the naming of things, the objectification and classification of people through constructs of gender and race and class and sexuality, stratifications of difference and the exercise of power have so often been channelled through the dominance, surveillance and fixing of the eye. In many traditions, it is the ears, not the eyes that are the gateway to the soul, and the beginning of the dialogue between the inner and the outer world of the individual.

In *Prometeo*, Nono asks us to be attentive to the democratic, radical impulses in our sense of hearing, rather than seeing. To use the touchstone of the informing texts, from Aeschelus to Marx, it is the power of listening and voice, whether chorally collective or the lone raised voice that is the beginning of the journey to liberation.

Prometeo is overwhelmingly quiet music, revealing the boundaries and faultlines of power at the limits of the audible and inaudible. This is the place where Nono takes us, and offers up a meditation on opening up another dimension, the space of a different intervention in the flow of time. What does democracy and freedom feel and sound like? It sounds and feels like this.

Rachel Holmes
Head of Literature & Spoken Word,
Southbank Centre

Prometeo:

A guide to the text

Nono's word setting is extremely complicated, and was never intended to be followed as a simple linear narrative. Taking Massimo Cacciari's 1982 libretto as a starting point he produced a version in which the various texts are pruned, combined, integrated, and interleaved in an intricate multifaceted style, with words cut into syllables and these syllables piled vertically together, phrases sung in varying word order by different voices at hugely differing times, and some texts placed into the score but with a note that they should not be sung or spoken.

The text below is intended as an aid to the listener coming to *Prometeo* for the first time by giving a lyrical sense of the libretto, and is only one version of how a listening text might be put together.

The original Greek, Italian and German of the score (including a phonetic version of the Greek text) can be found in the full programme on sale at both performances. Where it is thought helpful to understand that a particular section of text is 'spoken' by a particular - often mythological - character, the name of the character is enclosed in brackets (). Greyed out text indicates that the words are present in the score with an indication by Nono that they should be read and/or understood by the performers, but not sung or recited.

{ } brackets are used occasionally to indicate that a section of text comes from a different source from the surrounding text. Exceptionally, there is no text associated with the *Second Interlude*, which is entirely instrumental.

Notes and textual interpretation © Marshall Marcus

I. Prologue

Gaia first bore starry Uranus
bore the tall mountains
also gave birth to the barren sea
but later after laying with Uranus
she gave birth to deep eddying Oceanus
and Coecus and Crius and Hyperion and Iapetus and Theia and Rhea
and Themis and Mnemosyne and Phoebe {listen} the mountains
{listen} the gold-wreathed charming Tethys, [then] was born the
youngest of them Cronos, crooked of counsel most terrible of the
children

Iapetus led the beautiful-ankled maiden, the Oceanide Clymene
{does not a breath of air still resonate here that the past breathed}
dauntless Atlas, she bore him a son, Menoetius Epimetheus
Prometheus
mutable wily Ithax {listen does not a breath of air resonate here that
the past breathed?} prolific Tethys, born of Tethys, nothing that is not
Zeus
{listen does not the voice of those silenced endure in the echo?}
Rhea Cronos Iapetus Clymene bore, was born, led, bore

Gaia mountains sea
Uranus Coeus Crius Hyperion Okeanos Rhea Themis Iapetus
Mnemosyne Phoebe Tethys Oceanid Cronos Iapetus Menoetius
Atlas Epimethea {listen} Prometheus Tethys Ithax Zeus Prometheus
{endure} Epimethea Menoetius {voice} Atlas Oceanid {echo voice as in
the face of the beloved that of brides}

Prometheus starry great barren
deep-eddying gold-wreathed crooked of counsel beautiful-ankled
mutable wily charming youngest most terrible dauntless prolific born
{never known?}

{Secret agreements resonate, they get entangled in the wings of the
angel}

Gaia Cronos Ithax Mnemosyne Oceanus of the angel Tethys Uranus
Iapetus Epimetheus Prometheus bore gave birth led bore children
Gaia Uranus Oceanus Uranus Gaia Iapetus {they know how to put
together the broken, this weak power is given}

Uranus barren sea starry Phoebe
gold-wreathed charming Tethys most terrible Cronos crooked of
counsel children Clymene beautiful-ankled Oceanid dauntless Atlas
mutable wily Prometheus

{weak power is given do not lose it, do not lose ...} Gaia first bore
Uranus great mountains also the barren sea

II. First Island

(Prometheus)
know: although seeing they did not see although hearing they did not
hear
ephemeral men apparitions of dreams
under the earth they lived like ants
until I showed them dawn and sunset.

(Hephaestus)
you, son of Tethys, I shall bind

(Prometheus)
I, forced the beasts into the yoke tormented earth with them
invented the chariots of the sea

(Hephaestus)
you, with inextricable knots

(Prometheus)
I, and the number I found

(Hephaestus)
you, to this unmovable rock

(Prometheus)
I, such arts and resources I have contrived

(Hephaestus)
you, will wither in the sun's blazing

(Mythology)
Prometheus, this hope to free themselves from the god?

(Prometheus)
I interpreted the dreams, the flights

(Hephaestus)
you, the omnipresent punishment will gnaw

(Mythology)
are you like a new master
jealous and troublesome, listen

(Hephaestus)
know: it is hard to calm
the heart of Zeus, dispenser of fates

(Prometheus)
I interpreted the dream the flights the voices the omens, the
encounters, the customs, love

(Mythology)
do you believe your fire omnipotent? do you call truth, this narrow
clearing?

III. Second Island

a) Io – Prometheus

(Io)
Ha! what land, what race
Cronos, Ha! Ho! Hu!

(Prometheus)
the deity, always violent, chases you
untilled lands

(Io)
Ah! oh, What am I saying, oh, burn me in the fire, cast me onto the
earth,
feed me to the monsters, but calm me

(Prometheus)
where in the houses of rush
on carts the Scythians go,
Europe, you will enter Asia
cross resonant rivers
go to the sources of the sun
follow the coasts of Ethiopia, where from the mountains the sacred
river plunges, where Canopus lies, bitter wedding always violent

(Io)
violent lash, calm my madness, calm for me, Cronos, this jealous god
of the nocturnal rite
calm me, it chases me mad, divine storm he, ha, hi, calm
what land, misfortune to live, he, hu, oh Cronos I am dying

b) Hölderlin
(Mythology)
oh but to us is given no place to rest

they disappear
they fall
the suffering people
blindly like water
from cliff to cliff, suffering people blindly like water from cliff to cliff
into uncertainty, downward downward

but to us is given no place to rest
into uncertainty downward
fall the suffering people, the suffering man, blindly from cliff to cliff
downward into uncertainty downward but to us is given no place to
rest

they disappear they fall the suffering people blindly like water, from
cliff to cliff into uncertainty downward

{one of man, one of god, race of god unhappy brothers of god}

c) First Stasimon

nor the voice of Orpheus
nor Thracian enchantment
nor remedy of Phoebus
calms her

nor altar nor statue
nor blood sacrifice
nor Chalybean iron
bends her

she knows no shame
inaccessible
she holds the summit

IV. First Interlude

do not lose it {and on many}
this weak messianic power
{arguments having touched}
not to us alone {stronger}
endures the echo, past silences,
{nothing} moment {than Ananke I found}

V. Three Voices (a)

listen, seize this moment
an instant flashes, a blink of an eye
an instant, do not speak of yesterday
today the sun casts the noose of the dawn
today the sun dawn, here here resonate
secret agreements, at the peak
of danger wasteland spread your wings secret agreement to sweep
along,
angels burst in sometimes
angels crystal of morning
purple wings beat,
the measure of time peaks,
listen, listen, listen

VI. Third, Fourth & Fifth Islands

Prometheus your journey is at an end
procure a house and an ox

(Mythology)
consider

(Prometheus)
that a storm that gets entangled
blows in my wings

if it is given to you to be a hero
you can only do it on the sea
come and a muse women

my journey is at an end
make your return Prometheus

nothing more to console weeping of the son listening to the mute soul

god's voice calls to you
where the blue of the sky opens
begin to plow
avoid the hoarfrost harmful

(Mythology)
that there is one who bursts in
and bears the fire
that is self-evident

I see sonorous you see resplendent Bora on the sea rise rages
the stars tighten your hand on the rudder, listen to me
do not deploy ships into the whirlpools of the Pontus

(Mythology)
but that you reveal the fire
and that revealing
becomes a law
that is a miracle
divine city famous Athens
your words in its silence
here you will grow a tree

(Mythology)
that there is transgression
recasting of another law

(Prometheus)
that in the disquiet
persists our patience always
our expectation endures

(Mythology)
far from Justice that is a miracle

(Prometheus)
that is a miracle

here I will grow the narcissus

(Mythology)
that there is Law Unjust abandoned by Justice

the crocus that Asia does not know rainbow-coloured
fleeing the wild fury of Orion
pull them to dry land
on the sea your rudder will follow

swift Nereids
hole rain does not rot keel

(Mythology)
but, walking may be truth of blue seeing each other again

(Prometheus)
there will come rough nights
drop down I will be tired

on the sea my rudder will be a thousand blue sails
the pile of memories to the angel here you will say from an altar with
Zeus

(Mythology)
at each other in amazement, resounding

(Prometheus)
truth of the blue silence

you alone bear in the distance and wait you are in the wasteland of
the sea invincible festival and tragedy

(Mythology)
proceeds and abandons comprehends and transforms
that is miracle

(Prometheus)
that is liberated in you proceeds watches transforms abandons and
comprehends works and passes away

and no god will be able
to take this fire from me

VII. Three Voices (b)

listen in the wasteland praise to Earth
to us is given the weak power
but enough to make an epoch leap out of history
silence the empty duration
listen to this moment, a weak power thinking bringing to a halt
they await the thought, occasions,
a work out of the movement of the works, happy instants
making crystal from the silence full of events
dreadful ones the secret agreement speaks, but enough to make a
life leap out of its epoch a face out of the mourning of the passers by,
a secret breath a profound agreement
this weak power
listen to them, listen to them, listen to them

IX. Second Stasimon

of many names but one form
it is primeval division
it is the bursting in governing
it is the transgressing the recasting
it is the plunging the defending
it is what the circle of the fire reveals
it opens multiple paths
it urges us to arouse the broken
to renovate silences
it transforms
it recalls
it flashes
it is invincible in the wasteland