

## A TRAGEDY ABOUT LISTENING

CLAUDIO ABBADO, MASSIMO CACCIARI, LUIGI NONO, RENZO PIANO, EMILIO VEDOVA

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*No opera/ no director/ no set designer/ no traditional characters/ but/ dramaturgy-tragedy with mobile sounds that/ read discover/ empty fill up space.*  
Luigi Nono

Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac presents *Prometheus, A Tragedy about Listening*, an exhibition retracing one of the most important cross-disciplinary collaborations of the latter part of the 20th century. Including ephemera, letters, musical scores, archival materials and models, the exhibition provides precious insight into the making of the project and underlines its collaborative aspect.

*Prometeo, Tragedia dell'ascolto* [Prometheus, A Tragedy about Listening] is an opera composed by Luigi Nono, with a libretto by philosopher Massimo Cacciari, based on a selection of texts referencing the myth of Prometheus, the Greek hero who rebelled against the Gods. *Prometeo* is radically different from any other opera performance in that it challenges preconceived assumptions of what music "ought" to be. It premiered on 25 September 1984 in the secularized Church of San Lorenzo in Venice under the conduction of Claudio Abbado. Renzo Piano designed the wooden structure built in the church and Emilio Vedova participated in the elaboration of the light installations.

Nono began to work on *Prometeo* in the mid-1970s, amidst ideological struggles and failed revolutions around the world. A pioneer of experimental electronic music, he conceived his piece as a pure experience of sound in accordance with his concept known as *spazio sentito* [space heard]. The completion of the project ten years later reflects the artistic effervescence of Venice in the 1980s.

In a short note to architect Renzo Piano dated 6 December 1983, Nono wrote: "No opera/ no director/ no set designer/ no traditional characters/ but/ dramaturgy-tragedy with mobile sounds that/ read discover/ empty fill up space." Based on those indications, Piano designed a wooden auditorium that would represent a musical space within the church. The expertise of a violin-maker combined with shipbuilding construction techniques made the creation of this large soundbox possible. The project revolutionised the concept of a traditional concert hall, as the audience (up to 400 people) would be seated at the centre, while musicians were to stand around at various heights. Live electronics were designed at the German radio SWR's Heinrich-Strobel-Stiftung experimental studio, as was the acoustic infrastructure for "the Structure". The orchestra had to move during the performance, walking on stairs and along walkways as if on a ship deck, while Claudio Abbado conducted with the help of a monitor. In a radically new form, it revives a musical tradition of 16th- and 17th-century Venice, in which several groups of singers were positioned in specific places inside a church to create striking sound effects.

The stage design was considerably reduced over the creative process: no stage, no characters, no costumes, no set. The drawings presented in the exhibition show the few elements originally planned by Emilio Vedova, yet never realised. Vedova's intervention consisted of the elaboration of light installations that would accompany soundwaves and enhance the overall experience. His project for *Prometeo* recalls the immersive installation he produced for Expo '67 in Montreal, where he positioned coloured glass slabs before projectors to create beams of light that would bisect the space. Visually bare, *Prometeo* is also deprived of any type of classical narration. Loosely based on Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, Cacciari's libretto combines texts by Rainer Maria Rilke, Friedrich Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin, amongst others.

*Prometeo* was performed in a revised version in 1985 at La Scala, Milan, and was introduced to the French public in 1987 during the Festival d'Automne. It is today considered one of the major musical achievements of the 20th century.

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Luigi Nono (b. Venice, 1924 – 1990)

Luigi Nono was a leading Italian composer of electronic and serial music.

Nono began his musical studies in 1941 at the Venice Conservatory. He first came to public attention in 1950 with his work *Variazioni Canoniche*, orchestral variations on a 12-tone theme of Arnold Schoenberg, whose daughter Nuria he married in 1955. He continued to explore avant-garde techniques and lectured widely on his research in acoustics across Europe and the United States.

An avowed Communist, Nono often produced works of political substance and collaborated with other politically engaged artists. His opera *Intolleranza 1960*, which premiered in Venice in 1961, marks his first collaboration with Emilio Vedova. The performance was stormed by neo-fascists, causing a riot with the Communists. Other politically inspired works include the dramatic cantata *Sul ponte di Hiroshima* [On the Bridge of Hiroshima] (1962) and *Canto per il Vietnam* [A Song for Vietnam] (1973).

Claudio Abbado (b. Milan, 1933 – 2014)

One of a long line of Milanese musicians, Claudio Abbado is considered one of the greatest conductors of the 20th century.

Abbado studied piano, composition and conducting at the Milan Conservatory and graduated with a degree in piano in 1955. The following year, he studied conducting at the Vienna Academy of Music. He first conducted at La Scala, Milan in 1960, where he was named music director in 1968. He held this position until 1986, when he became music director of the Vienna State Opera. Abbado was actively involved in politics. During his time at La Scala, he organized a concert in opposition to the Italian Fascist Party prior to an election. He also organized special concerts for workers, students and others who would not normally listen to classical music. He was equally committed to encouraging young musicians. In 1978, he founded and began serving as music director of the European Union Youth Orchestra. Abbado is not only remembered for his effortless mastery of classical music, but also for his interest in contemporary music and his inclusion of avant-garde composers such as Luigi Dallapiccola and Luigi Nono in the repertory.

Massimo Cacciari (b. Venice, 1944)

Massimo Cacciari is one of the most important contemporary intellectual figures in Italy. Cacciari graduated with a degree in philosophy from the University of Padua in 1967, where he also received his doctorate. In 1985, he became Professor of Aesthetics at the Architecture Institute of Venice and in 2002 he founded the Department of Philosophy at the University of Vita-Salute San Raffaele in Milan. Cacciari has directed several of the most important philosophical and cultural reviews in Italy and published essays inspired by authors like Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein. In his work, philosophical and theoretical questions intersect with aesthetic but also political positions. After a brief affiliation with Potere Operaio, a radical left-wing workers' party, Cacciari joined the Italian Communist Party and was elected Deputy in 1976. He left the party in 1984 and was elected Mayor of Venice in 1993, a position he held until 2000.

Renzo Piano (b. Genoa, 1937)

Renzo Piano is regarded as one of the most iconoclastic architects of his generation.

Renowned for his distinctive high-tech aesthetic and ceaseless exploration of structural complexities, Piano graduated from the Politecnico in Milan in 1964. He started working with a variety of architects, including his father, until he established a partnership with Richard Rogers from 1970-77. Together they designed what would be a career-defining project for both of them: the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. Since then, Renzo has designed numerous cultural institutions around the world, always taking into account the building's context. The structure he designed for Nono's opera Prometeo was made of laminated wood and steel, with large horizontal, vertical and curved wooden beams supporting the entire enclosed system. A secondary steel structure held the yards and supported the infill walls. Metal supports made it possible to raise the parterre, leaving a space below for the foyer and placing the stage closer to the church vault in order to improve acoustics. The structure was disassembled and reassembled for another performance in the depots of the Ansaldo plant in Milan in 1985.

Emilio Vedova (b. Venice, 1919 – 2006)

Emilio Vedova is regarded as one of the most influential Italian artists of the second half of the 20th century. He pushed painting into new territories with his visceral and gestural works that engage the viewer and redefine the space they inhabit. His expressive strokes and smears of paint convey a raw and violent reaction to the political reality of the post-war period. In 1948, Vedova made his debut at the Venice Biennale, the first of many appearances in this event. In 1952, an entire room was devoted to his work and he was awarded the Grand Prize for Painting in 1960. From 1961 onwards, the artist created Plurimi, a series that consisted of freestanding, hinged sculpture-paintings made of wood and metal. He experimented with diverse media, including metal and glass, which engaged with light and space. Designing sets and costumes for the opera Intolleranza 1960, he established a fruitful cooperation with composer Luigi Nono. Twenty-four years later, he would design a highly original light setting for Nono's opera Prometeo.