

In December 2001, I received a phone call, out of the blue, from a writer for *Chamber Music* magazine. She had heard of me (from “someone in New York”) as a composer who works with political issues in chamber music, and she wanted to publish an interview with me about music and politics. She warned me that she wasn’t sure her editors would accept the idea, so soon after September 11, but that, she said, was one of the main reasons she wanted the interview: to push an envelope inside of which she was feeling increasingly uncomfortable. I agreed to do the interview. For over an hour, we cast about in search of something to talk about that would satisfy the demands of a sentence opening like “Music is political because....” or “Music is political when....” She needed an affirmative statement about music’s role, and I didn’t have one. The interview was not, as far as I know, published.

Here is the way I wish that conversation had gone.

*Let’s get the huge questions out of the way first. What is music? Just kidding.*

Whew.

*What is political?*

Are you still kidding?

*Nope.*

Urgh. I’m going to borrow an idea from the poet Ron Silliman. He wrote that a poem’s political effect should be gauged not by how much, or how well, the writer manages to integrate “political issues” into the poem, but by the extent to which after reading the poem, the reader finds her/himself “reading” the world around her/him differently. In other words, the artwork casts a shadow on whatever comes after it. Music can do that.

*That’s it? I look at the world around me differently? That’s political?*

You have a point. Let me refine it: “Looking at the world” is not easy. Most views of the world leave most of the world out. This is nothing to be ashamed of, nor is it something to be content with. Filling in gaps is rarely a smooth process; new knowledge doesn’t fit into the old knowledge’s gaps like a piece of a jigsaw puzzle. I know there’s a lot I don’t know, but I also know that learning more will interfere with what I do know, and it might not be worth the effort, the time commitment, the emotional struggle, and so on. So I’m left with an unchanging view of the world which I know is incomplete, and maybe I’m defensive about that. My incomplete world view calcifies, becomes stagnant and gelid, all the time. Music stirs it.

*So music gives you a new perspective on the world?*

No, music doesn’t give me the new perspective on the world, necessarily; it invites me to experience new perceptions which require new perspectives. If the world looks different to me as a result, then I say the effect was political.

*But it sounds like an essentially private experience.*

There is indeed something private about it. But, listen, when I say the world I really mean “the world.” Some people think that going out to look at the world means going out and looking at the plants in their front yard, or turning on their television. I’m talking about perspective on a global scale. In order to change my perspective on something taking place in Bolivia, I need to enter a public space, at least one that exists somewhere in my mind, where the private aspects of my perception remain important but not sufficient.

*Okay. I’m going to transpose your earlier paraphrase of Ron Silliman into a sentence about music: Music’s political effect should be gauged not by how much, or how well, the composer manages to integrate “political issues” into the piece, but by the extent to which after hearing the piece, the listener finds her/himself “hearing” the world around her/him differently.*

I don’t like that last “hearing.” It should be “perceiving.” Music’s political role isn’t bound

to the acoustic domain; it also exists in the domains of performance, reflection, representation, and memory.

*So you don't agree that a composer's first responsibility is to sound?*

First, but not only. A composer at the writing table had better be thinking about sound. But the composer, being a human being, is going to get up from the writing table and think about other things during the day. If none of those other things ever end up back at the writing table, I suspect something's wrong. This composer either is unable to think about interesting things when not at work, or reserves a special place for sound as an escape from other concerns, or simply thinks nothing is as interesting as sound. Such a composer's life would seem very strange to me.

*What troubles me is that this definition of political you've given me seems to suggest that music can be political without any reference to a specific political issue. Isn't that perilously close to saying that all music is political, or that all good music is political?*

Yes, you're right. That's a problem.

*And isn't that, in turn, perilously close to saying that putting political issues into a piece a music just messes up the delightful abstract shifts of perception which we musicians enjoy distracting ourselves and a few of our close friends with?*

Yes, yes. But back up. When I say that a piece of music "was good," I mean that it caused a shift in my perception. Perception *of what?* This is the key to what political music might be. Do an experiment: tell a group of people who have never heard Beethoven's seventh symphony that it's a piece about a great victory, and that they'll understand the piece better if they think about some specific victory that's important to them. Play them the first movement and ask them to talk about or write down what they heard. Hopefully they'll have heard that the individual triumphant chords beginning the movement give way to a gently stirring residual noise, which slowly builds into an ascending motive. That motive ultimately sounds more

triumphant than the chords, because you hear the effort it takes to reach a goal. Then play the second movement, in which the same thing happens, but this time the ascending motives are much more exploratory, more creative, more *interesting* than the blunt, forceful fortissimo chords into which they ultimately coalesce. If the listeners are paying attention, they'll notice that perspective has shifted away from goal-driven and towards process-driven (and in fact, the new perspective is somewhat fearful of the goal). Now here's the important part: this change in perspective will have a completely different significance to a listener who imagined a grand military victory than to a listener who imagined some sort of personal achievement, or a high school basketball victory.

*Are you saying that the military listener heard a political piece, but the basketball listener did not?*

I'm saying that the abstract relations of the sounds in Beethoven's music may have a political function, but that function remains latent, unactivated, until we start thinking about what those sounds and relations call forth in our minds. Do they stir our own desires, memories, historical awareness? Does the world seem transformed in their light? Because I honestly don't believe it's political if they just stir each other.

*But you can't be suggesting that political music requires a teaching assistant to tell everybody to think about the great victory.*

Don't make fun of teaching assistants! Everybody needs a teaching assistant now and then. But you're right. I think a composer who wants a piece to have a political effect *does* need to make the piece call up something specific, to activate the latent political function of a perspective shift which would otherwise remain abstract, disconnected.

*That would suggest that Ron Silliman should in fact riddle his poems with little bits of political information.*

Which indeed he does.

*And you don't think music can do that itself?*

If I thought this whole interaction could take care of itself, I wouldn't be so worried. Look, let's stop being so innocent. We know that the world we live in is now in a continual state of war, famine, and disaster. And we know that the channels which are supposed to keep us informed about the state of the world have completely failed us. Recently an alternative news source circulated around the internet a Pentagon report predicting that within about fifteen years climate change across the world will have led to massive droughts, deaths of huge numbers of people, and world wars over water. Who knows whether this report is real or whether it's right (I've doubted the Pentagon before); we all know that this is a possibility, that the possibility is increasing, and that our current political system (by which we are meant to redress grievances and find solutions) is not alleviating the problem but exacerbating it in every possible way. And to say that the mass media support the current system is to give them way too much credit. The mass media ARE the current system. We will not get information from them about how to escape them. When I go to my desk to compose music, these are the things I've been thinking about. I have no idea if new music audiences are also thinking about these things (and I won't find out by going to most new music concerts, which do not mention them in the slightest), so I don't know how much a piece of music has to refer to them specifically, generally, or at all. But in a world whose state of emergency has become its default state, and whose dominating media stand to gain only by making it worse, "shift of perspective" is a high-stakes commitment, not a neutral abstraction. One of the goals of any progressive political program right now should be to counter the widely-held belief that thought is a play of abstractions.

When we talk about music that has been political in the past, we are talking about music whose political message is now known to us in some way that it may not have been then. We assume a context of "Vietnam" or "Stalinist Russia" or "The Great Depression" with which we are now familiar — we can read in a history book, for example, that the United States did not defeat the North Vietnamese, and that affects the way we hear a piece of music written in 1968 and performed by people who couldn't read any such book. But of the situation we are in now we can't assume any such context. The most politically vigilant people I know do not know the

answer to the questions: who was responsible for the ousting of Bolivia's president last October? has the Chad-Cameroon pipeline been completed? We have to create the context which will give sense to our desires, our needs, our protests and our dreams, and hope that our efforts enhance the possibility that there will be someone around in the future to judge them.

*You think this can be done with music?*

I don't see how it can be done without it.

*Do you want to change the subject?*

Yes, but I can't.

*Well let's look at some of those pieces that have been political in the past. And let me point out that looking at those pieces is not easy — I mean, they aren't easy to find. And when you do find them, you have to claw your way through a kind of crust built up around them of people who want to deny their political message. I think of the first Darmstadt school as being a political environment, with arguments between Adorno and Stockhausen taking place on every corner, but about the individual composers' politics there's a virtual blackout. Even Luigi Nono, the famous Italian Communist, is rarely discussed in terms of his politics these days. I've bought several CDs of his music which don't provide translations of the texts he used — even his operas! One CD, of pieces on Lorca texts about the Spanish Civil War, not only denies me the texts but actually replaces them with an essay in the liner notes insulting Nono's politics: "All that remains of him is the past, a faith, often blind of the point of absurdity, in an antihistorical philosophy, and a multitude of works that oscillate between the most perfect of masterpieces and the most banal political propaganda." Strange that even the people who want to record Nono's music are willing to slander and censor his reason for writing it.*

Not so strange, unfortunately. The Olympia Chamber Orchestra, who performed my piece "The Rattler's Narrative" last year, refused to print my program note about the San-Diego Tijuana border — which is exactly what the piece is about. And here are a few quotes from the

CD liner notes of “The People United Will Never Be Defeated!” composed and performed by Frederic Rzewski: “There always have been, of course, composers who have tried to combine political or sociological statements with music in order to inform or, in some instances, radicalize their audiences; unfortunately, this usually leads to the creation of pretentious non-art” (Art Lange), and “I have come to be leery of political art. Often more concern goes into the politics than the art, and even when the craftsmanship is good, I often find myself still wondering whether a well-made advertisement for a political point of view is ultimately any more valuable than a well-made advertisement for an automobile” (Tom Johnson). I wonder why Rzewski allowed these anti-political messages to adorn his CD. There’s plenty of lousy political music and plenty of lousy apolitical music — we don’t have to read about the lousy apolitical music every time we buy a CD of good apolitical music.

*What are your feelings about politics in the music of the first Darmstadt school?*

Brian Ferneyhough taught a course at UCSD about his own experiences as a young composer in which he emphasized that the composers of the Darmstadt school worked under the agreement that society and culture as they stood needed to be negated with some force. Serialism, he said, was based on a strongly felt political need to negate the musical culture of the society that had preceded the second world war.

*How was that society defined? What exactly was wrong with it?*

Well, it had led to the second world war. Bombed-out buildings still crumbled in European city squares. To allude to the crimes and failings of society, one had only to wave one’s hand in any direction. One did not have to be particularly politically “aware” to notice that something had gone wrong. Bernd Alois Zimmerman’s opera “Die Soldaten,” though set in a previous century, makes continuous reference to the catastrophic effects of war in the 1940’s (including, ultimately, atomic war); this was possible because the referent was directly on hand.

For composers like Nono (and Zimmerman) who worked with specific political texts or subtexts, society was to be criticized for its character as a destructive force. The second world

war, the clearest and most incontrovertible example of this force, provided Nono with a reference point to which he repeatedly returned, though many of his fiercest social criticisms explicitly deal with other forces of destruction (such as the factory in “La Fabbrica Illuminata”).

Shrewdly, Nono brought the second world war (which could not be ignored) metaphorically close to other forms of social violence (which might have been) through the all-too-often literal concept of destructive force. It is precisely this destructive force of society which Nono’s pieces portray and transcend.

*What is being destroyed by destructive force?*

The individual. In Nono’s most straightforward pieces from the 1950’s and 1960’s (“Intolleranza” and much of “Il Canto Sospeso,” for example), individual martyrs are portrayed by single voices against overwhelming orchestral odds. However, choruses transcend orchestral forces. Nono’s famous technique from “Il Canto Sospeso” of dispersing a single text across many layers of choral texture yields a vision of doomed individual struggle succeeding through collectivity. The individual voice is destroyed by society, but the amassed voice pervades, survives, transcends.

*So Nono used the orchestra to portray destructive force? Or did he assume audiences would know what destructive force he meant?*

No, he portrayed the force. Significantly, Nono’s criticism of society’s destructive force yielded for him a compositional palette in which destructive force was one of his chief musical materials. In his very early pieces, the Lorca settings for example, loud, dissonant horn chords or military-style percussion rhythms may signal the presence of destructive force, and quiet voices or strings play fragmented, underaccompanied quasi-modal melodies to indicate something destroyed. These are early serial pieces, so it’s interesting to hear what happens when a loud horn chord, signaling the arrival of force, undergoes a serial procedure basically inimical to hierarchy and stability.

*What does it sound like?*

It sounds like it's being eaten away from the inside. Destructive force is shown up as hollow. Even if you don't know the text, you hear in this music a clash of forces, one destructive and the other destroyed, and you hear the triumph of the destroyer exposed as a grotesque sham, while the destroyed are embodied, enriched and poeticized. The music takes sides.

*But surely Nono doesn't simply use loud sounds to represent bad guys and quiet sounds to represent good guys. That sounds like Mickey-Mousing.*

Nono's early political pieces are indeed programmatic, but his use of serialism, which distorts their vocabulary, makes them more dialectical than narrative: the strong sounds cannot escape their weakness, and the weak sounds cannot be voided of their strength. When the pieces succeed, they succeed because these dialectical contradictions ally them with the future (a la historical materialism), saving them from the Disneyesque fate of a sort of musical realism.

Nono's trajectory as a composer took him away from the programmatic depiction of destructive force by small steps. In "Il Canto Sospeso," the wedge-shaped tone row is sometimes used as a process that evokes destructive force. At the beginning of movement six, the chorus sings in unison "our murderers are here;" but as they sing, their unison is slowly ripped apart with each succeeding tone of the row. Thus the serial material itself vividly presents a pure sound undergoing damage. In "A Floresta é Joven e Cheda de Vida," the Vietnam-era piece Nono wrote for the Living Theater, the role of destructive force is given to a spoken list of US military scenarios. The scenarios are numbered, and Nono fades them up and down more or less in the background to suggest that this bureaucratic layer is always somewhere present. Instead of arriving with a fanfare, they pile up through droning persistence, and their "force" dawns slowly in the listener's mind.

*Aren't there any pieces in which Nono attributes destructive force to the power of revolution? Aren't the good guys supposed to fight? Or was Nono an advocate of nonviolence?*

As far as I know, Nono was not an advocate of nonviolence, and he certainly supported the right of the Vietnamese and the Algerians to fight, for example. But the texts of his pieces reveal that

when he attributes force to the resistance, it is not a force of destruction, but of vibrancy and persistence. “A Floresta” takes its name from the line “They cannot burn the forest because it is young and full of life.” Nono’s piece written for his friend, the Chilean revolutionary Lusiano Cruz, is titled “Like a Ray of Strength and Light.” That piece attributes great force to the revolutionary movement, but as the title implies, the object of the force is to prevail, not to destroy. Unlike the solo voices in earlier Nono pieces, which sang broad, ethereal, almost ghostly melodies, the solo soprano in this piece belts out repeated fortissimo tones and shouts words and phrases with a repeating inflection — gestures of stubbornness and defiance. But the central event of the piece has no text: it’s a long march (ten minutes long) from the very lowest sounds of the orchestral register to the very highest, culminating in startlingly long fortissimo notes held by piccolos — a sound so commanding that one hardly notices the disappearance of the marchlike (serial) rhythms. If this represents the force of the resistance, it is the resistance’s ability to persevere, to slog through the dark times and to transcend them (in fact, to transcend the militaristic “march” character of the perseverance — someday we won’t have to march!) which Nono evokes as a force that could counter the destructive force of current society.

*So is that the only kind of force the resistance has? The ability to withstand hardship?*

No, there is another kind of force the resistance can have, according to Nono. It appears most bluntly in another piece by Nono that uses a clearly spoken text: a piece from 1968 for tape (including many recorded singing voices) called “Contrappunto dialettico alla mente.” This piece lasts nineteen minutes, and for most of it, the voices perform strange madrigals on an experimental poem which rarely contains complete words — instead it contains fragments that prompt the listener to guess which word was meant. But in the last few minutes of the piece, a female voice, in a menacing alto undertone, mutters the text of a pamphlet distributed by the Harlem Progressive Labor Club. The text begins with “Uncle Sam wants you, nigger,” a phrase repeated with small variations many times during the remainder of the piece, and ends up with “to die in Vietnam.” It’s an odd, ugly text to hear in a piece of new music, and it’s even odder for being spoken in Italian. I don’t speak Italian, so the words that I really hear are “Uncle Sam,” “Nigger,” and “Vietnam” — but I suspect those words would stick out to any

listener. Especially after the fragmented, quasi-rarefied texts of the previous fifteen minutes, hearing a text like that gives the political message the force of clarity.

*Like the piccolos at the end of the long march in the piece about Lusiano Cruz?*

Yes, they also embody the force of clarity, especially after a ten-minute march out of the murky lower registers.

*Clarity is a relative force?*

No, clarity derives its force from its dialectical relationship to something else. Remember this is about revolution, changing history. A place of clarity has a historical force when we arrive there, but when we stay there forever, it becomes a traditional force, possibly inimical to someone who wants to change history. In the case of “Contrappunto dialettico alla mente,” we hear the clarity more, and care about it more, because of the long period of experimentation beforehand. But the ability to experiment, to be flexible, open, and malleable, is also something this music argues for.

*That's also a force?*

No, no, not everything has to be a force. There's a poem by Brecht which Nono must have known:

IRON

In a dream last night  
I saw a great storm.  
It seized the scaffolding  
It tore the cross-clasps,  
The iron ones, down.  
But what was made of wood  
Swayed and remained.

*[Brecht p. 442]*

It's not the swaying itself that makes the wooden buildings resistant. It's the buildings' swaying *and remaining*. The swaying is positive in that it allows the buildings to remain, just as experimentation is positive not just as a way to distract oneself, but because it allows something new to emerge with the force of clarity. This clarity may not always be of a political variety, but these pieces of music make a strong case for clarity as a political force.

*But isn't destructive force also a force of clarity, of too-rigid definition? Isn't that why ambiguity is seen as politically subversive?*

I think it's a mistake to understand ambiguity as lack of clarity — ambiguity is a clear choice between two clear alternatives, a choice not yet made, or not possible to make under the circumstances. And I wouldn't say that destructive force imposes clarity at all. Destructive force (both in reality and in Nono's pieces) disorients, leaves confusion in its wake. What destructive force wants (if you'll pardon my personifying it) is for the confusion and disorientation it engenders to become the norm. Ambiguity becomes politically subversive when it replaces a steady state of confusion and disorientation with a clear and urgent choice.

*That's an unusual definition of ambiguity.*

I know. I'm still testing it out.

*I want to get back to the other Darmstadt composers, but first let me ask: what happened to this idea of destructive force? Do composers still use it, and does it still function as a central political reference point?*

Yes, composers still use it. It has become "post-serial," though, and has thereby taken on an emblematic quality and lost some of its dialectical complexity — and that's a loss it really can't afford. For example, the two-piano version of "Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues" by Frederick Rzewski uses churning perpetuum mobile clusters (a constant eighth note motor rhythm) starting in the lowest register and becoming wider and wider, in opposition to the depression-era song "I Got the Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues." The blues song is transposed and elaborated

in various ways, escaping to registral spaces the churning clusters have not yet filled, being drowned out dynamically, reemerging, but finally being swept away as the churning rhythm takes over the whole keyboard and drags the sound back into the low register. Clearly the clusters represent a destructive force, probably the force of deadening repetition, and the song represents the spirit which is deadened. One could accuse this scenario of simplistic depiction, but to me the real problem is that without a dialectical (or a historical) component, the piece fails to negate what it depicts. The clusters and their motor rhythm are exciting, even if malevolently so. Their triumph may be evil, but it's still a triumph, and as such it has all the exhilarating, unidirectional narrativity of a classic horror movie. The blues song, with its modulations and reemergences, seems like a trickster a la Brer Rabbit — an interesting idea, but one that in this context cedes all force of clarity to the clusters. No alliance with the future is forged — no future is even imaginable. I think this piece means to be a negative piece, but in fact it's energetically affirmative — it just affirms the wrong thing.

Another, slightly different example: the third act of Wolfgang Rihm's setting of Heiner Müller's play "Hamletmaschine" ends with a long slow snaredrum roll crescendoing to not-quite-forte over the course of several minutes. It's a tremendous, elemental sound, clearly representing an imminent calamity (the snaredrum of course implies a military calamity). The last sound one hears before the drumroll takes over completely is a young boy shouting single, evenly spaced syllables in a marchlike tempo. It's a great performance: you can't tell whether the boy is shouting in alarm or with enthusiasm. As such, the sound of the boy embodies the contradiction of people who cheer on the wars that ultimately kill them — and then the long drumroll allows us to feel the force of that violence, suffered and perpetrated at one and the same time, in one and the same space.

My worry about this piece politically (aside from a few successful moments like the boy's shouting) is that its violence is so emblematic as to be opaque, yielding nothing to scrutiny. It's simply "violence in general," "horror in general." European history is envisaged as an enormous wound, and as art, that's a fantastic image which sticks with you forever — but does it really suggest an alternative way of looking at things, a shift in perspective? Isn't this fear and

horror pretty much what we all have been taught since childhood the world is like? Isn't that the way the world looks in one of Spielberg's war movies?

*Well, I was never taught that Europe was a gaping wound.*

Okay, but if you go to certain art festivals, you get the impression everyone is pretty much in agreement on that subject. Composers today, if they allude to our political situation at all, often allude to it in terms of the broadly understood "disasters of the 20th century." The Second World War has pride of place among those disasters, and one can't help but feel that composers who allude to it today are reaching for a place of consensus. How else can you explain the fact that there are so many pieces about the atomic bomb, but no pieces (that I know of) about cluster bombs, daisy cutter bombs, beehive shells...

*I could explain it by saying the atomic bomb is an emblem for the destruction of the whole species. There's an aspect of primal fear to that. Whereas a cluster bomb only kills one or two people far away, and that may be harder to grasp emotionally.*

But that to me is a problem. The atomic bomb is an *emblem*. It's like saying "Remember when you felt primal fear? Feel it again." It doesn't work anymore. Using it for its emblematic weight is not only lazy on the composers' part, but is likely to evoke laziness on the audience's part. I can't believe a composer couldn't, with some work, convey the primal aspect of losing one's hand to a cluster bomb.

*Or I could explain it by saying that many pieces about the atomic bomb were written during the sixties, when the antiwar movement was strong, international, and fully committed to the idea of cultural upheaval. For composers now, writing about the atomic bomb must call up nostalgic feelings for those days.*

True. I'm terribly nostalgic for them myself, and I completely missed them.

*So, it doesn't sound like you're very excited about destructive force anymore.*

Well, it's been generalized, and like all general ideas, it has decayed. I think we've become very comfortable with the idea that we're a destructive society, that the world is a horrifying place. The news anchormen show us pictures of our government dropping bombs on Iraqi neighborhoods; they show the bleeding corpses of children, call it a tragedy of war, and seem to have completely accepted the situation. So as a political category I don't think it's very useful right now to point out that elements of our society are destructive unless one makes it very specific. As a musical category I think destructive force still can be quite interesting if it preserves its elemental character, rather than, say, adopting a metaphorical function. Sitting in a room with an elemental sound is a rare experience in a culture so excited about reproduction that live performances often function as reproductions of recordings. Of course, elemental sounds could find other kinds of sounds to interact with. Maybe in that interaction, sounds whose elemental force has a destructive quality can become politically persuasive again.

*What would you replace destructive force with? If you can't criticize society for being destructive, then how do you criticize it?*

It's not simply a matter of finding something else to criticize. Think of society's various productive energies. Foucault writes over and over throughout his books that we need to understand power not in terms of what it destroys and restricts, but in terms of what it creates and promotes. The individual is produced, not destroyed, by society.

*Are there types of musical experience power creates and promotes?*

Certainly musical, but also acoustical. I'm very interested in listening to the sounds of the promoted activities. Certain types of talking, for example. War becomes dinner table conversation, a subset of good manners.

*Are there pieces of music you know of which explore the idea of productive forces?*

Not many, but I'm encouraged by the few there are. I was extremely impressed by Chaya Czernowin's opera "Pnima... Ins Innere," in which the story of the Holocaust is introduced

into, and reproduced inside, a child's mind. The story is changed in the child's mind, of course, but the child's mind is also changed. All of this was depicted by sound, without text. There were sounds which called up the idea of haunting memories, such as the trembling of a branch with dry leaves. Once one enters the space of haunting memories, one opens oneself to a great many historical / political evocations. It was fascinating to see and hear how these sounds went about producing evocations in the developing language of the child, who didn't have the memories himself.

*But that's another piece about the Second World War.*

No, it's a piece about now *and* then. We witness not a consolidated historical meaning, but an *alteration* in historical meaning as it crosses generations.

*Ah, a perspective shift.*

Yes.

*Let's go back to Boulez. Compared to Nono's work, the work of the other Darmstadt composers doesn't seem to have a political component.*

It's interesting that other composers (for example Boulez) may have never specifically stated which aspects of society they wished to negate, but nonetheless showed enthusiasm for the project of negating society in general. Boulez's "Structures for Piano" can be heard as a kind of curiosity, a fortunate by-product of some somewhat distracted tinkering in the mechanics of music, or it can be heard as a particularly insistent negation of historical trends in music (and rhetorical ideas concomitant with those trends) over the centuries leading up to World War Two. The second hearing, of course, requires a great deal more urgent participation on the part of the listener, and as such is likely to yield a much more interesting result. Boulez is surely smart enough to have realized that.

*Do you mean to suggest that pure self-interest — "if you listen to my piece as if it's political,*

*it'll sound better!" — was Boulez's only reason for adopting a stance that in some ways paralleled Nono's?*

No. The impulse to take European cultural institutions to task by exploding music (and figuratively “burning down the opera houses”) was not misguided, and I doubt it was disingenuous. But it couldn't sustain itself for very long without a more specific agenda for what to negate and what to posit. Boulez's music quickly lost its negative character, whereas Nono, by seeking out new ways to maintain the tension between negating and positing, continued to find new forces to play off of each other, disrupting familiar categories of listening, both in his least overtly political and (perhaps more surprisingly) in his most overtly and didactically political works. Already by the late 1950's Nono was issuing snarling criticisms of Boulez's music, warning his students that the purpose of Boulez's music (and Stockhausen's) was to decorate the dinner tables of the bourgeoisie, and it was hard to imagine that these two composers had ever seen eye to eye on any aesthetic (or political) matter.

Also, Boulez has never made an issue, political or otherwise, of his homosexuality, and I can't help but wonder what effect it had on his politics. It's all very well for macho heterosexuals like Nono to support the Cuban revolution, but Boulez must have felt a bit left out of all that.

*What do you mean?*

Well, there's a Communist Party line that says homosexuality is one of the evils of decadent Capitalism (I hasten to add that not all Communists believe this, that I don't know if Nono believed it, and that it isn't true). That idea is behind the imprisonment of gay men in Castro's Cuba. You can't really burn down the opera house if the people outside the opera house are going to throw you in jail.

*Point taken, but I'm not sure where you're going with it.*

Listen, I'm convinced that more composers would support progressive causes if there was some sort of reciprocity involved. We talk as if the composer is able to bring the full force of his / her

creativity to bear on whichever issue the composer chooses to address, but in fact composers are a pretty nervous, beleaguered group of people. Without some measure of support from the left, leftist music isn't going to get written and certainly not performed.

*What about pieces of music that quote songs of political struggle?*

Let me cite two such pieces. One is Rzewski's hour-long set of piano variations on "The People United Will Never Be Defeated." Just by telling you the title, the form, and how long the piece is, I've told you the entire political program of the work (except that it also includes quotes of Brecht and Eisler's "Solidarity Song" in the middle) — I don't dislike the piece, but politically I would argue that its message is essentially the same as the original song's. The other is by Rolf Riehm: "KlageTrauerSehnsucht" (1977) for two guitars. This song is dedicated to the Chilean folksinger Victor Jara who was murdered by the Pinochet regime in the early 1970's. In Riehm's piece, tiny fragments of Andean guitar music disappear into a fragile texture of shadowy extended guitar techniques. If one knows the story of Victor Jara and has heard his music, then Riehm's piece makes sense as a political lamentation; if one does not know the story or the music, the piece is an interesting and often beautiful sound. But again, listening to Victor Jara's music now delivers essentially the same political message.

The problem with these two pieces from the 1970's by an American and a European is that the political / musical message they contain already existed in the source materials, songs by two Chilean composers from the 1970's (both of whom had conservatory training and the sponsorship of the Allende government). But I don't want to charge Rzewski and Riehm with cultural imperialism; I just want to suggest that they made a mistake by choosing source materials which already said everything they wanted to say. Thus their pieces ended up as elaborations of their own creative energies rather than of any political problem. They freeze a piece of history, but don't intervene in it.

Compare that with Helmut Lachenmann's recent practice of including children's songs and stories in his pieces. Lachenmann has only rarely used political materials in his music, but his music is always about transformation of historical materials. Lachenmann's piece "Tanzsuite

mit Deutschlandlied" (1980) features children's songs (such as "Ach, du lieber Augustine") strewn across a desiccated landscape of brittle, repeating dance rhythms (a Gigue, a Tarantella, a Siciliano, etc.), culminating in quotes of the Nazi National Anthem, "Deutschland, Deutschland über Alles." In his program notes to the piece, Lachenmann writes of the "comfort zones" which references to childhood call forth: "home, religious ties, holidays, tradition..." This music, with its children's songs and old-fashioned rhythms, is meant to take us back — but back where? Lachenmann was born in 1935 — his childhood coincides precisely with the Nazi period. The inclusion of the "Deutschlandlied" should not be heard as a "snarl" at present day reality, but as an invitation to return to the "idyllic" time of childhood and confront what truly happened then. This invitation sounds psychological, but in the case of the music Lachenmann wrote, it's also a cultural process.

Notice that Lachenmann chooses to quote songs which already have a history of multiple stages. "Ach, du lieber Augustine" is famously quoted in the second movement of Schoenberg's second string quartet — so to audiences familiar with that piece, as most of Lachenmann's audience certainly would be, the children's song has a double history, located not only in the "idyllic" realm of childhood but also at one of the most famous crisis points in the history of concert music: the collapse of tonality. If this music "takes us back," the ride back is not a smooth one, as the words of the song ("everything's gone") take on jarring connotations which only seem more jarring because of the presumed "innocence" of their source. Similarly, the "Deutschlandlied" melody comes from Haydn's "Kaiserquartett" — its adoption as a Nazi anthem is a tragedy of musical meaning indelibly marred. The violence it represents is haunted by the shadow of virtues it once represented, and vice versa — there is no uncomplicated time this piece can take us back to anymore.

Lachenmann's opera, Das Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern, takes these ideas one step further. Of course, the story is a children's story, and the main character is a child, but the grimness of the story, at least for me, problematizes the journey "back" to one's childhood reverie in the same way the songs described above do. The gestures, tones, and mannerisms of the story do evoke childhood, but the content reveals that the childhood I've been taken back to isn't *my* childhood — it's a childhood older than mine, which I may explore with a "childlike"

intensity paired with another, less frequently invoked attribute of children: a distrust and skepticism of the strange (adult) world that produced this severe and frightening story. Das Mädchen is not just a children's story but a story from another, harsher period, perhaps a period in which children regularly did freeze to death on European city streets, and one can only remember (or imagine) that time with discomfort. And of course, once this criticism has been leveled at the past, the present cannot quite escape it either — maybe the past simply took greater care to acknowledge its suffering children in stories than we do today. (I was not read this story as a child, perhaps because stories this sad were no longer considered “appropriate for children.”)

The story is complicated still further by its interpolation with texts written by Gudrun Ensslin, a famous arsonist. Are we going back to childhood now? To the 1970's (my childhood)? The “children” of May 1968? Interestingly, Lachenmann sets the Ensslin texts as a whisper with a fixed pulse, suggesting that outsiders do not have access to the lush pitches and rhythms, tailored for “human expression,” of the operatic tradition.

Other references abound in the opera: quotes from Leonardo da Vinci, great orchestral masterworks like “The Rite of Spring” etc., and “Silent Night.” Lachenmann is not subtle in his use of “Silent Night,” a song which refers to the holiday atmosphere it inhabits, but which also can be used to represent to the commercialization of that atmosphere. As trombones blare fragments of Silent Night amidst bursts of static and pop songs from commercial radio, the holiday landscape through which the homeless child wanders becomes all the more tragic: everyone with a home seems to be locked inside it with their televisions, and “Silent Night” has become a thundering racket.

Finally, the opera inserts a long solo for shô, a Japanese mouth organ used in traditional Japanese court music of the 1100's. Here we see Lachenmann taking the idea of historical reference and memory to an extreme: outside of itself. The story of the girl with the matches takes us back to childhood; the insertion of Gudrun Ensslin takes us back to 1977; the insertion of the orchestral masterworks takes us to the beginning of the 20th century (the heyday of great cultural institutions and the peak of the “Western Orchestral Tradition”); the

insertion of Da Vinci takes us back to the Renaissance (the dawn of science and literature). Now the shô offers to take us somewhere we can't really go. I hear it as an acknowledgment that we've reached the limits (historically, and in memory) of what our culture can say about the story at this point. The shô asks us to reach beyond our memory — and if this is impossible, that says something about the cultural constraints upon our memory and ourselves, imposed, partly, by the stories we heard as children.

*A change of perspective is called for.*

Exactly. Many changes of perspective have already taken place throughout the opera, but the final stroke invites us to find a yet broader perspective.

*It seems to me you're suggesting that in place of criticizing society for its destructive force, we need to look critically at some of the things society has produced; for example, Silent Night has been damaged by commercialization, but Silent Night has also been built into something more powerful than it was, something that can inflict damage on others.*

Yes. That's a good example because it indicates that the idea of destructive force won't disappear altogether — it will be understood in terms of the damage it inflicts, not just in terms of its own awestrking might. That's a change of perspective too.

*But the main thing you seem to be suggesting is that history isn't fixed; its elements can be collaged together in new ways to create new understandings and perspectives.*

Correct, and we are a part of history; we belong in that collage. It is our own un-fixedness that ultimately makes change possible.

*So you believe that music can lead to political change?*

Oh my. This had better be your last question.

*Yes.*

Okay. First: there's something about the word "believe" that isn't quite right. I seem to myself to be committed to political change, but that commitment isn't based on a prediction of success. It isn't a "bet" that it will happen. I say I am committed because I notice things in my behavior which don't fluctuate in tandem with the odds, which fluctuate all the time. Some people believe in change but need stasis; they imagine a better world, but arrange their lives in accordance with the current one, thus harnessing their very lives as the energy by which the current world is reproduced. I seem to need change. I can't explain it any other way.

I don't think change is "led to." The possibility of change is always present, right here and right at this moment. Music can remind us of that. It can help us to recognize the possibility in places where we don't see it. It can do so negatively — in the sense that rather than painting a picture of change, music might paint a picture in which change would *fit*. Maybe our world doesn't need to be "shaken up," but rather aerated. Maybe we need music to slow us down, to hold us in one place for long enough that we see change.

Music may even help us learn how to use the possibility of change at some point. People often ask whether Nono's music ever changed the life of a single Vietnamese soldier or Chilean farmer or Black Panther party member. Did it? Could it have? If it could, *shouldn't* it have? I sometimes suspect that in some way, music is teaching everyone how to make that happen.

*Didn't it change yours?*

Yes, it changed mine. Maybe that's what I mean.