

2. MUSIC AS AN AGENT OF SOCIAL CHANGE: AN INSPIRING WORK BY LUIGI NONO

Rossella Marisi²

Abstract: While in the 19th century conservatories were seen as ivory towers, distant from social and economic matters, today the theory termed *Socially Engaged Music (SEM)*, analogous to the already established theory of *Socially Engaged Art (SEA)*, proposes to modernize the mission of these institutions to serve the aspirations and needs of the society in which they operate. This article outlines the key aspects of SEA and SEM and identifies Luigi Nono's work *La fabbrica illuminata* as an enlightening example of music focused on social issues.

Key words: activism, art for art's sake, commitment, Nono, Socially Engaged Art

1. Introduction

In the 19th century, various musical institutions were founded in Europe or reorganized following the model of the Parisian *Conservatoire National de Musique*, whose structure and educational paths had been reformed in 1795 (Bjørnar, 2022). Aligning with the artistic theories in vogue at the time, conservatories were structured as places to study and reflect on music, separated from the society in which they were situated. Currently, this concept no longer suits new artistic and educational theories, which instead propose that conservatories establish a closer connection with society at large. In this article, Sections 2 and 3 compare the role conservatories had in the 19th century with the one they have (or could have) today; Section 4 highlights the main principles of Socially Engaged Art and Music; Section 5 presents Luigi Nono's *La fabbrica illuminata* as an example of socially engaged music; and Section 6 proposes some conclusive reflections.

2. Can conservatories be considered as ivory towers?

Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven are included in the syllabi of conservatories and universities all over the world, and are therefore still performed nowadays, although many might consider their works emblems of an elitist culture. Indeed, both music concerts and visual arts events are often addressed to economic and cultural elites: they may require a ticket and be held within specific locations, such as concert halls, galleries, and museums. Most importantly, participants in such events are aware of having an artistic experience together with others sharing their same interests, knowledge, and values. This basically one-way communication, where information is transmitted from the musical piece or visual art object to the customer without any expectation of response, entails that music and visual arts are considered as objects to be contemplated. The lack of interaction in turn contributes to retaining some fixity in the aesthetic taste of consumers, whose preferences, as explained by Bourdieu, are linked to their status (Bourdieu, 1984). Since a higher status in society allows people to attend the best schools and universities, it is very likely that the lessons taught in this kind of educational institutions contribute to upholding the socio-political status quo.

² Professor PhD., Conservatorio "Luisa D'Annunzio", Pescara, Italy, email: rossellamarisi@hotmail.it, ID ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7641-8134>

Therefore, it is maybe no coincidence that conservatories tend to be conservative institutions (Tregear, 2014), as their very name suggests. However, the Italian term *conservatorio* (from the Latin verb *conservare*, meaning preserve) alluded to 16th century welfare institutions where orphans were housed and received musical education (Celano, 1692; Di Giacomo, 1924; Di Giacomo, 1928). Yet in the 19th century conservatories played a normative role in shaping canon formation and solidifying performance standards and aesthetic values (Goehr, 2008). Nowadays the term ‘conservatory’ could also be seen as referring to a commitment, indeed deeply felt by these institutions’ professors and students, to preserve and defend illustrious traditions (Tregear, Johansen, Jørgensen, Sloboda, Tulse, and Wistreich, 2016), keeping their core values unchanged (Campbell, Myers and Sarath, 2014).

This caused conservatories, like universities, to be considered as ivory towers, producing knowledge far from engagement with social and commercial concerns (Shapin, 2012), maintaining an elitist academic isolation (Tregear, Johansen, Jørgensen, Sloboda, Tulse, and Wistreich, 2016). This isolation can be linked to an aesthetic theory developed in the 19th century, which can be summarized in the saying *l’art pour l’art* (art for art’s sake).

The writer Benjamin Constant (1767-1830) put this motto in his diary on 11 February 1804, the philosopher Victor Cousin (1792-1865) mentioned it in his lessons held in the Paris faculty of letters in 1818, and the novelist and art critic Théophile Gautier’s (1811–1872) included it in the preface of his novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (Gautier, 1835-1836). *The concept of art for art’s sake* was linked with the movement of Aestheticism, a movement born in England in the late 19th century in the domain of *visual arts, and applied also to poetry, drama, and music*.

However, in today’s context, such way of thinking is no longer considered suitable (Elliott, 2012): it can therefore be argued that, if the concept of making music for music’s sake is outdated, it is time for conservatories and universities to create a more integrated approach to the communities they serve and to these groups’ aspirations and needs (Rodin, 2007). To achieve this goal, musical professional practice should bring together artistic, ethical, and socially responsible aspects (Gielen 2009), stimulating young professionals to look beyond their training (Bennett, 2008), and transcend previous professional boundaries (Westerlund and Karlsen, 2017).

3. The conservatories’ new role in broadening their students’ social awareness

Conservatories can contribute to these goals, offering their students learning experiences that guide them to become more sensitive to context (Ellsworth, 2005), perceiving the social responsibility *of their future profession* and actions (Minnameier, 2014), and sharing the notion that at the core of professionalism there is the idea of commitment to ethical values (Carr, 2014; Westerlund, 2019).

This outlines a new conservatory-community partnership framework, in which musical institutions establish relationships i) as usual, with theaters, concert halls, and concert societies, in order to propose the staging of concerts and operas performed by students and alumni; but also ii) with non-profit organizations, such

as schools, public clinics and hospitals, nursing homes, factories, labor unions, churches, museums, and research institutes, in order to offer different kinds of musical experiences, from concerts to musical activities concerning spiritual upliftment, music education, music therapy and music psychology research (Kenny, 2014).

In this way both musicians and non-musicians can grasp a deeper understanding of the potential that music can provide to societies, being a lens through which listeners can examine and interpret themselves and the world they live in: as the artist and educator Pablo Helguera (1971-) put it, reflecting on art in general: “knowledge of art does not end in knowing the artwork but is a tool for understanding the world” (Helguera, 2011: 80).

4. Socially Engaged Art and Music

It is interesting to contemplate whether this notion of art and music emerged relatively recently, between the 20th and the 21st century.

4.1 Socially Engaged Art

As early as in the 18th century some thinkers, such as Denis Diderot (1713-1784) and Johann Georg Sulzer (1720-1779), and visual artists, such as Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825), affirmed that there was a strong need for socially useful art (Egbert, 1970). In 1825 Claude-Henri Saint-Simon (1760-1825) asserted that artists, meaning with this term painters, musicians, and poets, could take a lively and decisive action in society, thanks to the immediate and rapid power of the arts. Art could therefore exercise a positive influence over society, taking a leading role in stimulating mankind to progress (Saint-Simon, 1825).

Also Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-1865) ascribed special relevance to the social utility of art. His last book, which was nearly completed when he died, shows already in its title *Du principe de l'art et de sa destination sociale* (The principle of art and its *social destination*) that its content is entirely devoted to the social importance of art (Proudhon, 1865). Auguste Comte (1798-1857) as well supported the notion that the artist's work should be socially useful: provoking thought, it could play a major role in society and accelerate widespread progress (Comte, 1875).

However, the followers of Aestheticism, the art movement which flourished in the late 19th century, gained prominence: they argued that the aim of art should be only the pursuit of beauty, setting aside social and moral commitment (Matsuoka, 2003). In the early twentieth century the historical avant-garde, which included movements such as Dada and Constructivism, combated elitism, and tried to overcome the borders and constraints of traditional art practice, revolutionizing architecture, sculpture, and painting, and introducing new ways of living (Parker, 1982; Avishai, 2014).

A similar approach was taken forward in the 1960s, when countercultural movements supported cultural democracy as opposed to the ‘official culture’, which was perceived as elitist and exclusive (Jeffers, 2017). Among the basic principles of counterculture were: i) the belief in the coexistence of several cultural traditions, none of which should be considered as higher than another; and ii) the conviction

that not just talented, but also common *people can create art*, ceasing to be passive receivers of someone else's artworks (Shishkova, 2019).

Socially Engaged Art (SEA), a form of art centered around social issues, emerged in the 1960s from these premises. The term SEA is one of the terms that designate activities created by and with members of the relevant community (Cleveland, 2011): among the various expressions that indicate this art practice there are 'community art', 'collaborative art' and 'activist art' (Wilson, 2018).

The key characteristics and aspects of SEA are: community involvement, activism and advocacy, interdisciplinary approach, public engagement, long-term commitment, social commentary, collaboration and dialogue, and ethical considerations. Socially engaged artists often commit to projects over an extended period, working directly with communities or specific groups of people, and collaborating with activists and policymakers to raise awareness about pressing social problems and advocate for change. Artists committed to SEA take into consideration the ethical implications of their work, including issues related to representation, consent, and the impact of their work on the communities involved. Their projects encourage critical thinking through audience participation and engagement, and are informed by various disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, and urban planning (Garrido Castellano, 2021).

The literature on SEA is very large: among the most relevant contributions there is that by Helguera, who pointed out that, while all kinds of art invite social interaction, in SEA the very process of creating the artwork is social (Helguera, 2011). Other thinkers further amplified this concept: Fraser observed that SEA "affects the public sphere in a deep and meaningful way" (Fraser, 2015: 7) fostering the identification of social problems, and Bishop argued that providing opportunities to boost creativity on a vast scale has the power to promote effective social change (Bishop, 2012).

4.2 Socially Engaged Music

Like SEA, Socially Engaged Music (SEM) also envisages using interdisciplinarity and collaboration, presenting *different repertoires* based on specific themes, and holding events and activities not just in theaters and concert halls, but also in a wider variety of locations, to serve large sectors of society (Berger and Luckmann, 1991). From the perspective of SEM, musicians should i) enlarge their activities beyond the strictly musical domain; ii) share their musical competences with the local community; iii) be aware of and deeply understand social issues of both, their community and the broader society (Wani and Nadeem, 2016); and iv) work in the musical field promoting social cohesion and driving social change (Grant, 2019).

These goals can be achieved taking active part in music projects resonating with the listeners and focused on specific social issues: the aim of socially engaged musicians is not only to cause aesthetic reactions within the audience, but also to elicit an emotional, mobilizing response (Qutab, 2016), in this way challenging uniformity and the standardization of culture. Luigi Nono's work *La fabbrica illuminata* (The illuminated factory) can be considered as an example of SEM. The next Section discusses this work.

5. Luigi Nono's *La fabbrica illuminata*

In May 1964, the Radiotelevisione Italiana, the *Italian state*-owned public service broadcaster, invited the avant-garde composer Luigi Nono (1924-1990) to write a piece which should be performed at the Prix Italia, the world's oldest broadcasting contest. The event would be held in Genoa in September that year.

In the same month, a big strike took place in Cornigliano, near Genoa: over 40,000 participants denounced the dangerous working conditions in the steelworks, asking for a better working environment and a higher pay. Being aware of the importance of this strike and its motivations, Nono agreed with his collaborators, the playwright and writer Giuliano Scabia and the sound engineer Marino Zuccheri, that the music piece they were to write should bear witness to the steel laborers' working conditions. With this aim they recorded different sounds of the steelwork: among them were the roar of the blast-furnace, the hellish noise of the molten iron casting, and the cries of the workers doing their job. The piece *La fabbrica illuminata* centers on the dehumanization suffered by the steelworkers while doing their dangerous and low-paid job: already in the first bars the soprano performs a high and somewhat scary motif setting to music the shivering expression "the factory of death".

This piece can be considered as an example of Nono's wish to combine musical technique and activism "to such an extent that his creative work represented both in equal measure" (Durazzi, 2009: 451). He was convinced that, for a piece to give a living testimony of a living society, its musical language should be an advanced one, and forms and traditions embedded within cultural and social institutions should be overhauled (De Benedictis, 2011).

Indeed, it can be said that in this work Nono broke new musical ground by mixing solo sections sung by a female voice with choral sections and sounds recorded on a magnetic tape: this is in fact the first of his works in which the magnetic tape has a central and innovative role (Pestalozza, 1994). At the same time, *La fabbrica illuminata* is representative of Nono's fervent commitment: as the composer argued, "a music piece, like a painting, a poem, or a book, cannot ignite a revolution. However, like paintings or books, music can reflect the bleak societal state and, if its technical quality matches its ideological depth, it can play a pivotal role in promoting social awareness" (Nono, 1969: 200).

He also recalled that, having listened to the piece after its completion, the steelworkers realized that until that moment they had been doing their job in the factory without being aware of the acoustic conditions under which they were working. The listening to *La fabbrica illuminata* improved their awareness, so they started to consider whether there might be a way to change their working conditions, and broadened their cultural horizons, developing a deep interest in art music (Nono, 1969). All these aspects make this work one of the most poignant examples of SEM.

6. Conclusive remarks

As highlighted in the previous Section, Nono included in his work real sounds recorded in the steelwork, in this way denouncing a widespread example of working conditions that exploit laborers, constituting a form of social oppression. Taking inspiration from the example of Nono's *La fabbrica illuminata*, conservatories

could express their commitment to society, rethinking the ‘social contract’ between these institutions and society at large (Tregear 2014).

Indeed, by maintaining only a traditional approach, conservatories can risk offering events perceived as no more than a pleasant distraction from everyday life, and addressed to a privileged audience of connoisseurs. Consequently, an initial step conservatories can take is educating future audiences together with future performers, encouraging good listening as an agent of social change. By organizing musical events and activities in non-traditional venues, conservatories can simultaneously achieve two positive outcomes: i) providing an effective response to pressing social concerns, and ii) creating opportunities for the professional development of students who are sensitive to social justice causes and interested in SEM.

Conservatory professors and students can therefore embrace the new approach while preserving their longstanding commitment to musical excellence. With this combination of values, both professional musicians and those in training become formidable agents against cultural consumerism and the commodification of culture. This in turn positions conservatories as ideal hubs for combating conformity and cultural homogenization.

References

1. Avishai Tamar, (2014), *Shock and Aura: Benjamin on Dada*, in “Benjamin-Studien”, vol. 3, 107-132
2. Bennett Dawn Elizabeth, (2008), *Understanding the Classical Music Profession: The Past, the Present and Strategies for the Future*, Ashgate, Aldershot
3. Berger Peter L. and Thomas Luckmann, (1991), *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Penguin, London
4. Bishop Claire, (2012), *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Verso, London - New York
5. Bjørnar Utne-Reitan, (2022), *Music Theory Pedagogy in the Nineteenth Century: Comparing Traditions of Three European Conservatories*, in “Journal of Music Theory”, 66 (1), 63–91
6. Bourdieu Pierre, (1984), *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London
7. Campbell Patricia Shehan, Myers David, and Sarath Ed, (2014), *Transforming Music study from its foundations: A manifesto for progressive change in the undergraduate preparation of music majors*, <https://www.music.org/pdf/pubs/tfumm/TFUMM.pdf>, accessed on 29.09.2023
8. Carr David, (2014), *Professionalism, Profession and Professional Conduct: Towards a Basic Logical and Ethical Geography*. In: Stephen Billett, Christian Harteis and Hans Gruber (eds), *International Handbook of Research in Professional and Practice-based Learning*, Springer, Dordrecht, 5-27
9. Celano Carlo, (1692), *Notitie del bello dell’antico e del curioso della città di Napoli per i signori forastieri date dal canonico Carlo Celano napoletano, divise in dieci giornate, in ogn’una delle quali s’assegnano le strade per dove hassi a caminare, dedicate alla santità di nostro signor papa Innocentio Duodecimo*, Giacomo Raillard, Napoli

10. Cleveland William, (2011), *Arts-based Community Development: Mapping the Terrain*, https://www.lacountyarts.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/civic_engagement_arts_based_community_develop_bcleveland_paper1_key.pdf, accessed on 29.09.2023
11. Comte Auguste, (1875), *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*, 2 vols., Trubner & Co., London
12. De Benedictis Angela Ida, (2011), *Introduzione*. In: Angela Ida De Benedictis (ed), *Presenza storica di Luigi Nono*, Libreria Musicale Italiana, Lucca, xi-xxii
13. Di Giacomo Salvatore, (1924), *I quattro antichi Conservatorii di musica di Napoli. Il Conservatorio di Sant'Onofrio a Capuana e quello di Santa Maria della Pietà dei Turchini*, Remo Sandron, Palermo
14. Di Giacomo Salvatore, (1928), *I quattro antichi Conservatorii di musica di Napoli. Il Conservatorio dei Poveri di Gesù Cristo e quello di Santa Maria di Loreto*, Remo Sandron, Palermo
15. Durazzi Bruce, (2009), *Luigi Nono's Canti di vita e d'amore: Musical Dialectics and the Opposition of Present and Future*, in "The Journal of Musicology", 26 (4), 451-480
16. Egbert Donald D., (1970), *The idea of Avant-Garde in art and politics*, in "Leonardo", vol. 3, 75-86
17. Elliott David J., (2012), *Another perspective: Music education as/for artistic citizenship*, in "Music Educators Journal", 99(1), 21-27
18. Ellsworth Elizabeth, (2005), *Places of Learning: Media, Architecture, Pedagogy*, Routledge, New York - London
19. Fraser Giles, (2015), *The arts are much more than simply money-making 'creative industries'*, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2015/may/01/arts-are-much-more-than-simply-money-making-creative-industries>, accessed on 29.09.2023
20. Garrido Castellano Carlos, (2021), *Art activism for an anticolonial future*, State University of New York Press, Albany
21. Gautier Théophile, (1835-1836), *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, double amour. E. Renduel, Paris, 2 vols.
22. Gielen Pascal, (2009), *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude: Global Art, Memory and Post-Fordism*, Valiz, Amsterdam
23. Goehr Lydia, (2008), *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*, Oxford University Press, Oxford
24. Grant Catherine, (2019), *What does it mean for a musician to be socially engaged? How undergraduate music students perceive their possible social roles as musicians*, in "Music Education Research", 21(4), 387-398
25. Helguera Pablo, (2011), *Education for socially engaged art: A materials and techniques handbook*, Jorge Pinto Books, New York
26. Jeffers Alison, (2017), *Introduction*. In: Alison Jeffers and Gerri Moriarty (eds), *Culture, Democracy and the Right to Make Art*, Bloomsbury, London, 1-31
27. Kenny Ailbhe, (2014), *Practice Through Partnership: Examining the Theoretical Framework and Development of a 'Community of Musical Practice'*, in "International Journal of Music Education", 32 (4), 396-408
28. Matsuoka Mitsuharu, (2003), *Aestheticism and Social Anxiety in the Picture of Dorian Gray*, in "Journal of Aesthetic Education", 23, 77-98

29. Minnameier Gerhard, (2014). *Moral Aspects of Professions and Professional Practice*. In: Stephen Billett, Christian Harteis and Hans Gruber (eds), *International Handbook of Research in Professional and Practice-based Learning*, Springer, Dordrecht, 57–77
30. Nono Luigi, (1969), *Gespräch mit Hansjörg Pauli*. In: Jürg Stenzl (ed), (1975), *Luigi Nono: Texte - Studien zu seiner Musik*, Atlantis, Zürich, 198-209
31. Parker Carolyn, (1982), *The Russian Avant-Garde*, Vintage CRB, vol. I, No. 3
32. Pestalozza Luigi, (1994), *La musica elettronica di Luigi Nono*, <https://romaeuropa.net/archivio/festival/anno-1994/omaggio-a-nono/> accessed on 29.09.2023
33. Proudhon Pierre Joseph, (1865), *De princip de l'art et de sa destination sociale*, Garnier frères, Paris
34. Qutab Marina, (2016), *Human Creativity as a Vehicle for Societal Change: Can Social Action Through Art and Music Drive Positive Societal Change in Jordan?*, https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/2475, accessed on 29.09.2023
35. Rodin Judith, (2007), *The University and Urban Revival: Out of the Ivory Tower and into the Streets*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia
36. Saint-Simon Claude-Henri de, (1825), *Opinions littéraires, philosophiques et industrielles*, Galerie de Bossange père, Paris
37. Shapin Steven, (2012), *The Ivory Tower: the history of a figure of speech and its cultural uses*, in “The British Journal for the History of Science”, 45 (1), 1-27
38. Shishkova Vassilka, (2019), *Cultural democracy in practice* https://www.ietm.org/en/system/files/publications/cultural_democracy_in_practice_0.pdf, accessed on 29.09.2023
39. Tregear Peter, (2014), *Enlightenment or Entitlement: Rethinking Tertiary Music Education*, Currency House, Sidney
40. Tregear Peter, Geir Johansen, Harald Jørgensen, John Sloboda, Helena Tulve, and Richard Wistreich, (2016), *Conservatoires in society: Institutional challenges and possibilities for change*, in “Arts and Humanities in Higher Education”, 15/3–4, 276–292
41. Westerlund Heidi and Sidsel Karlsen, (2017), *Knowledge Production Beyond Local and National Blindspots: Remediating Professional Ocularcentrism of Diversity in Music Teacher Education*, in “Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education”, 16 (3), 78–107
42. Westerlund Heidi, (2019), *The Return of Moral Questions: Expanding Social Epistemology in Music Education*, in “Music Education Research”, 21(5), 503–516
43. Wilson M., (2018), *Applied Experiments in Political Imagination*. In: E. Turney (ed), *Learning in Public: Trans European Collaborations in Socially Engaged Art*, Create and Live Art Development Agency, Dublin, 28-39
44. Wani Tariq Ahmad and N. A. Nadeem, (2016), *Social awareness among higher education teachers*, in “International Journal of Scientific Research and Education”, 4 (2), 4914-4919