

CESEM – FCSH / Universidade Nova de Lisboa - CULTURGEST

Simposio Internacional Luigi Nono, Lisboa Portugal

23 de novembro de 2010.

Conference: The Presence of Orpheus in Das Atmende Klarsein

Michelle Agnes Magalhães & Fernando Iazzetta

At first, the aspect that most draws one's attention in *Das atmende Klarsein*, composed between Nineteen Eighty and Nineteen Eighty Three, for the flute, choir and live electronics, is the alternation of two apparently contrasting and uneven universes represented by their long sections in which choir and flute alternate. The crystalline character of the choir that mostly sings in piano, the purity of the white voices, and the predominance of the perfect intervals contrasts with the first intervention of the flute in which we hear sonorities of unstable pitch, among them multiphonics, key strokes, several kinds of pizzicato, tremolo, and noisy sounds. It is not just the sonorities that uphold this contrast, which we can also note in what is referred to as the sonority and harmonic material, the electronic processing and the unfolding of the choral and flute parts throughout the work.

The harmonic pattern in the choir parts does not undergo substantial changes. Recurrent in Nono's later works, these harmonies are also present in the enigmatic scale. From the beginning of *Das Atmende Klarsein*, when the choir intervenes for the first time in the piece, we find two harmonies, certainly derived from a single harmony that emerges from the combination of perfect fourth or fifth intervals followed by a semitone.

1

NACH SPÄTEM GEWITTER... DAS

♩ = 30

S. ca. 2'' ca. 3'' ca. 4'' ca. 2'' ca. 3'' ca. 3'' ca. 5''

NACHSPÄ - - TE - - M*) GE - - I - TTE - - R E - - DA - - S**)

C. ca. 2'' ca. 3'' ca. 4'' ca. 2'' ca. 3'' ca. 3'' ca. 5''

NACHSPÄ - - TE - - M*) - WI - - TTE - - DA - - S**)

T. ca. 2'' ca. 4'' ca. 5''

pp > ppp NA - CH pp > ppp - AS**)

B.

Input 3,4 L 1,2 L 4,5

Input 5,6 L 1,2 L 4,5

ATMENDE KLARSEIN

attacca flauto basso

S. ca. 3'' ca. 4'' ca. 2'' ca. 2''

ppp > pp > ppp ppp e finire

A - KLAR: SE - I - - N -

C. ca. 3'' ca. 2'' ca. 4'' ca. 2''

ppp > pp > ppp pp > ppp e finire

A - NDE KLAR: SE - I - - N -

T. ca. 3'' ca. 2'' ca. 2'' ca. 4'' ca. 2''

ppp pp > ppp pp > ppp e finire

A - NDE KLAR: SEI - - N -

B. ca. 3'' ca. 2'' ca. 4'' ca. 2''

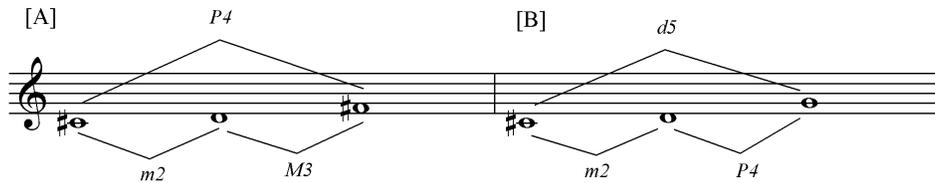
ppp pp > ppp pp > ppp e finire

A - TME - - NDE KLAR: SEI - - N -

lungheissima ***

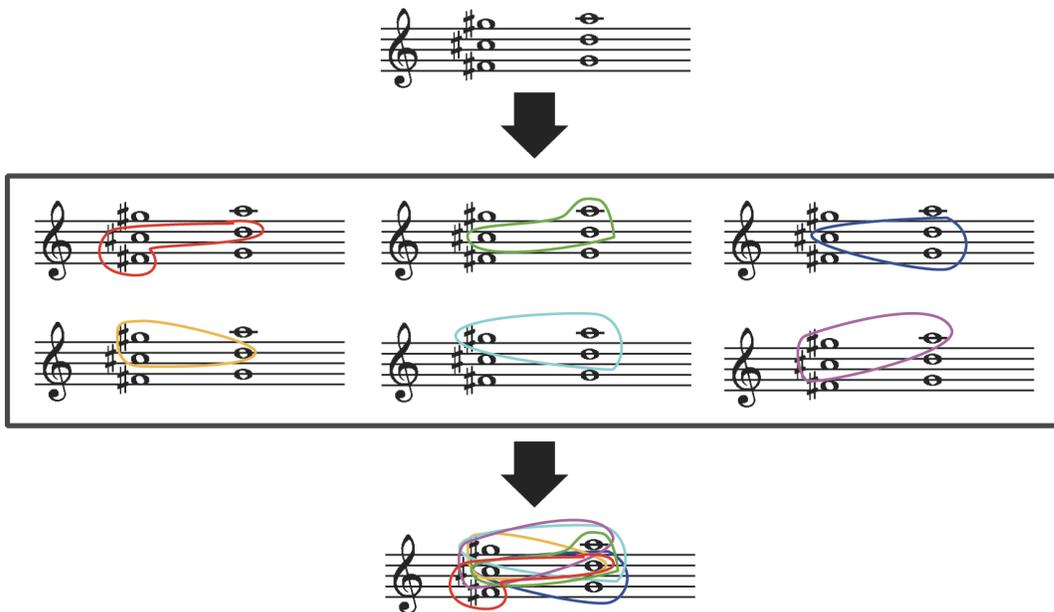
Example 1 - Das atemde Klarsein, mesures 1-7: harmonic intervals

From this combination we find two interval matrices that serve as a base for the composition of the choral parts, the first, that we call “A” can be described, in the most concise way, as a succession of minor second and major third, and the second “B,” equally in its most concise way, consists of a minor second followed by a perfect fourth.



Example 2 – Matrices A and B

We could also understand these harmonies as originating from two harmonic blocks formed by fifths, whose combinations would form the matrices A and B:



Example 3 – Harmonic blocks of fifths

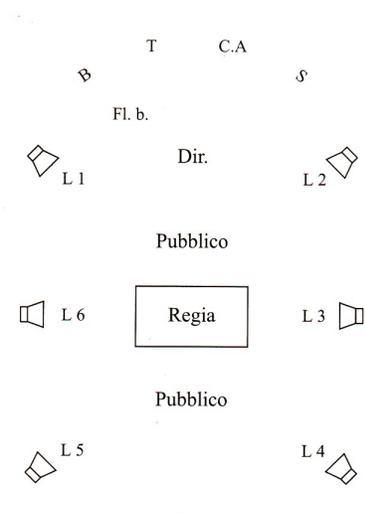
Thus, the motifs A and B would result from the combination of two harmonic regions constituted by blocks of fifths, establishing a third region, which represents the limit between the two blocks.

We can then note, how the repetitions of the harmonic pattern organize the choral sections, taken up again in every choral part with slight differences. It is as if each harmony were “a mirror of all the others where the same material subsists, and where the plurality of meanings is born precisely from the unity of the harmonic relationships,” in the words of the French musicologist Laurent Feneyrou¹.

While the profile of the choral sections sound ecstatic and continuous, the flute sections contrast amongst themselves and explore an extensive range of the instrument's timbres. The musician André Richard, based on his conversations with the composer, associates the choral texture of *Das atmende Klarsein* with the nostalgia of the past, that contrasts with the ever new possibilities experimented by the bass flute². The electronic processing also accents the contrasts. In the beginning, for example, the choir is amplified by speakers in the front and back of the room, varying its intensity according to the indications in the score, while in the first appearance of the flute, its amplification begins to move clockwise and counter-clockwise around the 6 speakers through the *halaphon*.

¹ FENEYROU, Laurent. *Il Canto Sospeso de Luigi Nono*. Paris : Michel de Maule, 2002, p. 67.

² RICHARD, André. *DVD didattico – Das atmende Klarsein*, Associazione Archivio Luigi Nono, 2006.

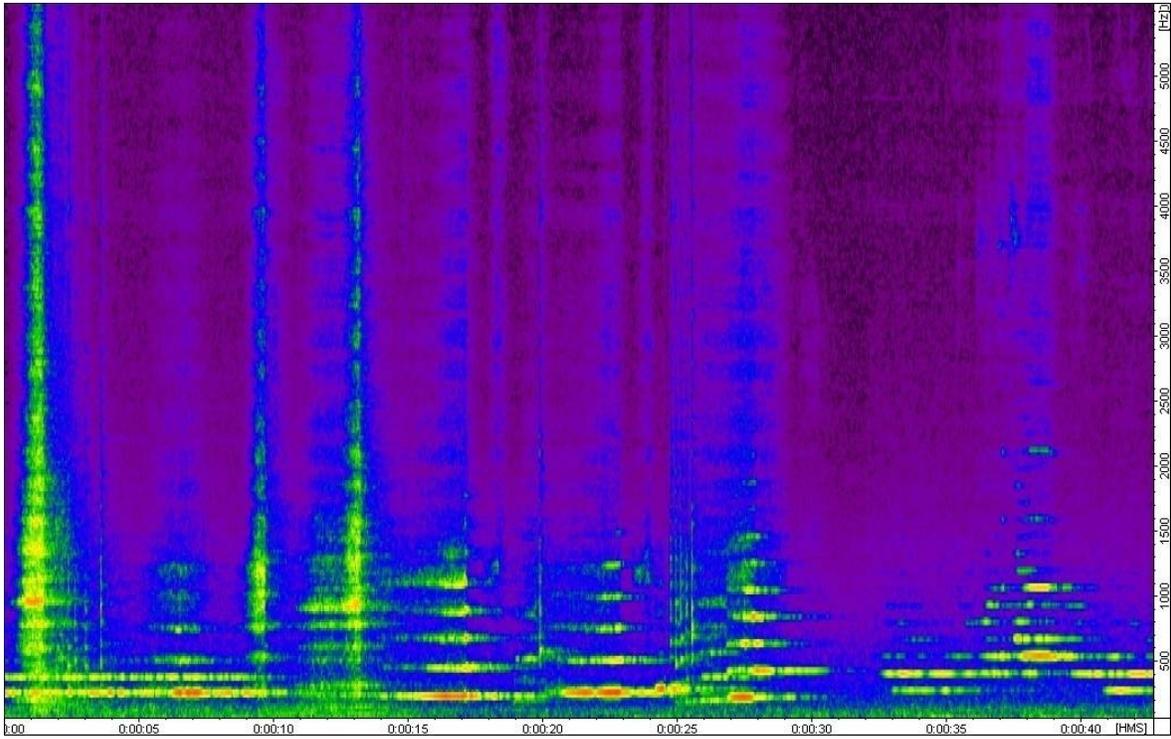


Example 4 – Das atmede Klarsein arrangement

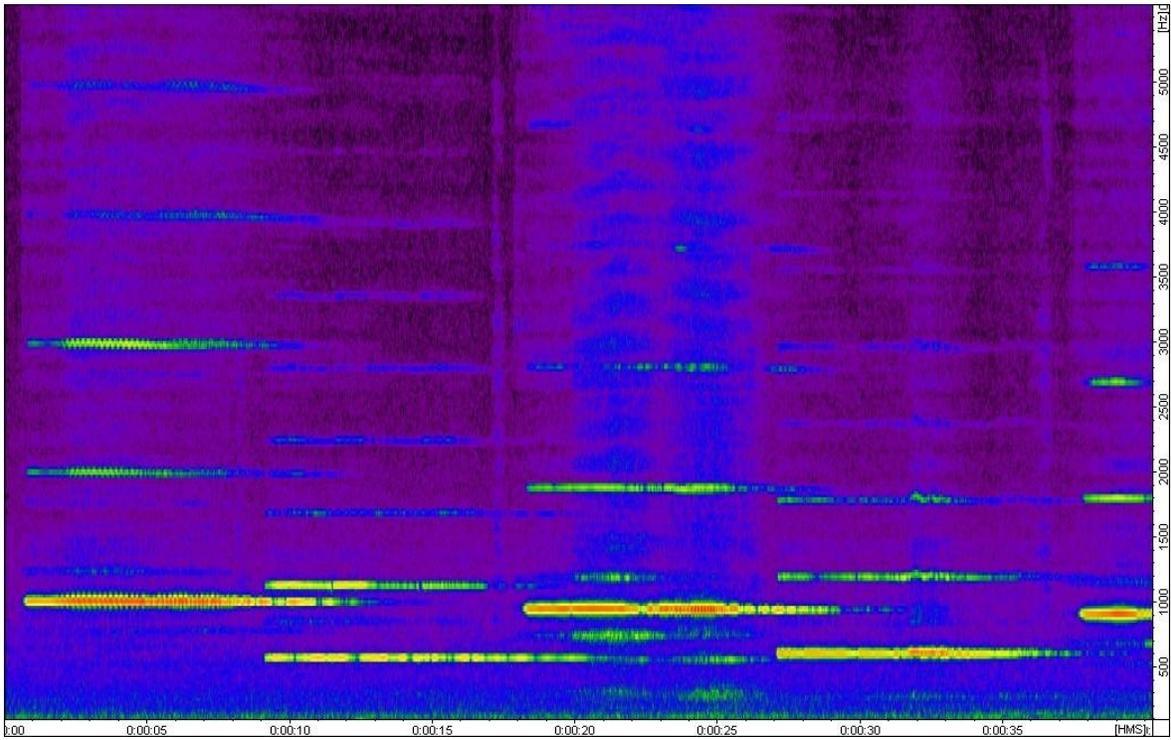
The musician Alvis Vidolin speaks of an important implication of the live electronics in *Das atmede Klarsein*, which is the inversion of dynamic perspective in the relationship between the voices and the flute³. In other words, the choir of twelve singers sings with very little intensity, while the bass flute effectively performs large dynamic contrasts resounding with more intensity than the vocal group.

Throughout the piece, the voice interventions become longer and longer, and the flute sections get shorter and shorter, except for the final section. In its second and third appearance, the flute's timbre universe becomes more uniform, contracting not just in what refers to the duration of the parts as well as in relation to the harmonic spectrum. Unlike the choral parts that resound similarly, the flute brings new elements and diverse sonorities in every appearance. In order to illustrate this process, we can accompany the following sonograms.

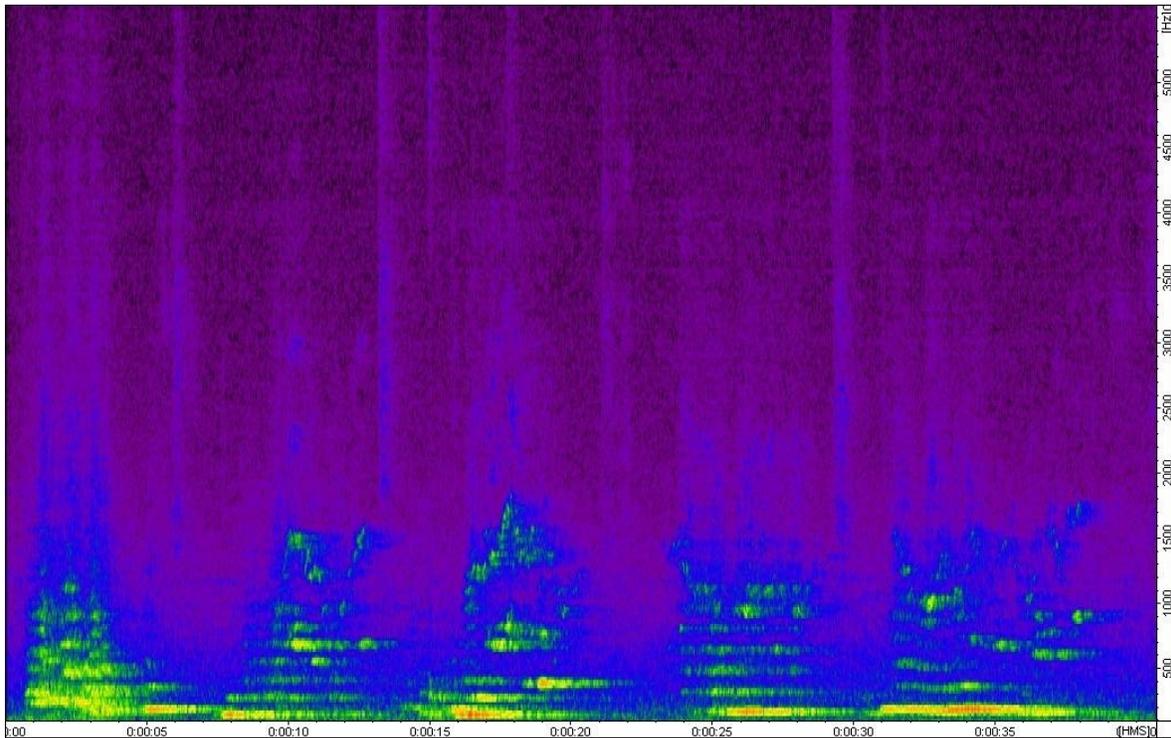
³ VIDOLIN, A. "Il suono mobile" in DOATI, R. (org.) *Con Luigi Nono* Venezia, Milano: La Biennale di Venezia/Ricordi, 1993, p.42.



Sonogram 1: the flute plays for the first time, in a varied range of sonorities, articulations, and intensities. Its sound is made spatial in clockwise and counter-clockwise movement, varying the speed.



Sonogram 2: Second flute intervention. Continuous sonorities thanks to the delay that at times provokes beats, and at times acts as a second voice in oblique movement. Dynamics in piano predominate, and the melodic material reminds of *allintervalreihe*, a series used by Nono in the Nineteen Sixties.



Sonogram 3: Third flute intervention, besides the dynamics in pianissimo, the range of the flute that is used is restricted to the low register. The sound is "phantasmagoric" and faded. This section is even shorter than the previous one.

At the last section of the piece, the flute resumes the sonorities from the beginning and the flautist must improvise freely according to the material presented in the first section, over the tape prepared by Nono based on Roberto Fabbriciani's improvisations.

Clearly we can find subtle elements that bring closer apparently contracting sections in which flute and choir alternate. We can mention, for example, that the first notes played by the flute consist of the last notes sung by the choir, in reverse order. One may consider the breath, so present in the flute parts, as a residual element of the human voice.

But what makes *Das atmende Klarsein* more than a succession of apparently disconnected parts of the flute and the choir? Doubtless there is a subtle binding that supports the internal coherence of the piece, which unfortunately we cannot detail in this brief talk. But, there is also a reference that we would like to approach, that is present in the text compiled by Massimo Cacciari and that assures an important coherence between music and the sung text. It is the reference to Orpheus, present in the Orphic fragments, which together with the fragments from the Duino Elegies by Rilke compose the piece.

The Orphic Lamellas are leaves that were placed over the body of initiates in Orphism after dying, and they brought indications that should have been followed in order to break the cycle of successive reincarnations. For that, the soul should drink from the lake of the memory, and not from the waters of forgetting (the River Lethe). Orpheus, he who traveled and returned from the world of the dead, is considered the founder of the Orphic doctrine, taken up in the sixth century B.C., and instructed its followers in a series of precepts, among them vegetarianism.

Orphism believed that man had a divine origin, and thus, an immortal nature. In the Orphic conceptions, men rise from the ashes of the Titans. The Titans were incited by the jealous Hera to devour, in a banquet, the child-god Dionysus – bastard son of Zeus. Right at this moment, the Titans were burned by Zeus' lightning bolt and, therefore, mixed in with the Titans' ashes were the ashes of the pieces of Dionysus devoured by his murderers. In this way, the origin of man is connected both to the gods and to the Titans. "I am son of

Earth (Gaia) and starlit Sky (Uranus)”, say some of the lamellas. In the immortality of the soul resides the inheritance of the gods, in the perishable body, the legacy of the titans. The material body also brings the mark of the corruption and the guilt by the dismemberment of Dionysus’ body – child god who suffered passion. Thus, the Orphic ascetic has for its objective the purification of this tainting by means of a pure lifestyle that is full of privations, which include abstinence from all types of meat, since the act of murdering a living being alludes to the criminal party of the Titans. The fulfillment of the Orphic doctrines brings the initiates to escape “from common luck, from finitude, and from death” and to take part in the primordial unity, plenitude, and totality.

The refusal of the sacrifice in the Greek city, where animals were sacrificed in honor of the gods, was a subversive act. This meant not taking part in the parties and political acts, placing oneself at the edge of the world and the events of the city that were organized in a long sacrificial calendar. The Orphics lived, in this way, as dissidents, carrying out a marginalized, mortified life that would allow them access to the true life after death.

Just like the Orphic lamellas, the *Sonnets to Orpheus* by Rilke highlight the unspoken presence of the Orphic myth in *Das atemde Klarsein*. The classicizing impulse of Rilke’s poetry, in its return to Ancient Greece and in the adoption of the sonnet form, encounters an interesting equivalence in Nono’s choral writing, in its predominance of perfect unison, fourth, and fifth intervals. Orpheus is he who performs the passage par excellence, that is, the passage between the living world and that of the dead, he who conciliates the two non-reconcilable opposites, and who reveals the mysterious power of music to men. It was Orpheus who provided the magic words to disarm Persephone, present in the Lamellas and also in the text of *Das atemde Klarsein* (“I am son of the earth and the starlit sky”). It is Orpheus who thus possesses the keys for the transposition of the

neighboring regions, represented by life and death. Therefore, the structural universe of *Das atmende Klarsein* can be understood as a translation of the experience of the limits. In the literary imaginary, the limitrophe experience par excellence is represented by death, the limit itself.

From the association of the twofold nature and the exploration of the limit region, of the threshold between life and death, arises in literature countless manifestations of the figure of the double. As the French writer Michel Guiomar says, it is the Double, counterpart, soul, shadow, mirror image, antagonistic and reciprocal beings, characters for substitution, for transference, for lending, double beings, masked figures”.⁴ In music, still according to Guiomar, the double is manifested in the structures of duplication by means of the processes of repetition, imitation, inversion, and retrogradation, to which we could also add the possibilities of sound duplication, with the auxiliary of electronic equipment (in the case of *Das atmende Klarsein*, amplification, delay, and harmonizer).

The musicologist and composer Michel Chion makes a brief commentary regarding the question of duplication in which he refers to the amplified sound: “When we listen to a speaker at a conference whose voice is amplified, it’s as if it were an image, at the same time ‘reflected’ in several points, and in fact, the original and the image fuse”⁵.

The amplification of the choir and instruments happens in *Das atmende Klarsein* at every part of the piece. However, the employment of the electronic devices in fact results in a double of sonority, heard only in the final section, when the flute dialogues with the tape, where Fabbriani’s flute is heard. It is at this moment that the “shadow” resulting from the amplification, from the delay and the harmonizer together with the sonority of the bass

⁴ GUIOMAR, Michel. *Principes d’une esthétique de la mort*. Paris : José Corti, 1988, p. 286.

⁵ CHION, Michel. *Le son*. Paris: Nathan, 1998, p. 89.

flute, unleashes, and gains autonomy in relation to the instrument. This happens because the recording no longer depends on the flautist being heard, the flautist must interact with his “double” that resounds by means of the speakers.

It is also noteworthy that at this moment the magnetic tape is spatialized in the six speakers with the auxiliary of the *halaphon*, moving circularly and with varying speed, while the live flute is amplified by means of the speakers in the front of the room. Making a poetic, rather imaginative parallel, the relationship between the flute and the speakers is similar to what happens in Chamisso’s novel: in this, Peter Schlemihl’s shadow does not just become autonomous, as much as he takes everything from the main character. The double, in effect, is traditionally presented, in modern western literature, as a rival of the duplicate, or rather, as he who steals all of one’s belongings.

Still in the field of existent duplications on all sides in *Das atmende Klarsein*, we also find, in the beginning of the first flute section, the reverse duplication of the end of the first choral part. The double, like a mirrored image, can also be considered the inverse identical, or rather, in musical composition terms, as a retrogradation. In many literary works, the double is also connected to the idea of a mirroring of the past.

Lastly, we can mention a final relationship with the experience of the limit in *Das atmende Klarsein*, when situating it at the threshold between the profane and the sacred. Much of the piece’s appreciation refers to the religious garb of its choral parts. In our interpretation, the totality of the piece attains a “third way”, that of the limit between the world of the profane and the sacred. From the sacred world, the piece recovers the collective voice, opposing it to the soloist instrument. The speakers, just like the *cori spezzati*, according to Nono’s reading, are always set up high, never down low. The sounds coming from up high could have a religious or mystical connotation, if not for the specific

use and the way which the composer utilizes the electronic resources, meaning not creating an illusory veil, or a mystical dazzlement. Nono does not obscure the origins of the sonorities processed by the devices, and the materiality of the sounds of the bass flute is also used in the sense of avoiding the “enchantment” by the pure voices.

In other words, Nono does not fetishize or mystify his music – on the contrary, he seeks to expose the conditions of its production. Besides this, the tension that results from the clash of the elements in opposition and of the interlacing of the electronic processing to the core of the musical structures, it brings us in the opposite direction of a religious contemplation. Lastly, the final section of the flute finishes by affirming, definitely, the result of this clash towards freedom and the expression of the individual. In the last section of the piece, making a free and symbolic approximation, the regime of the myth is closed, opening for the possibility of historical intervention.