



The “Prometeo” musical space

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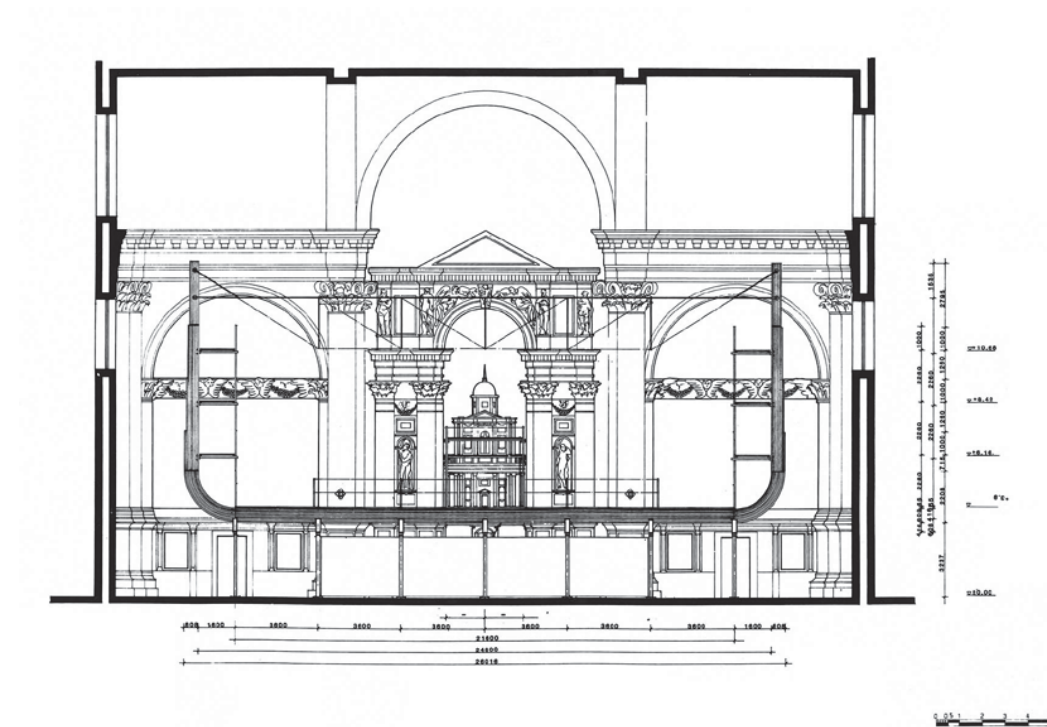
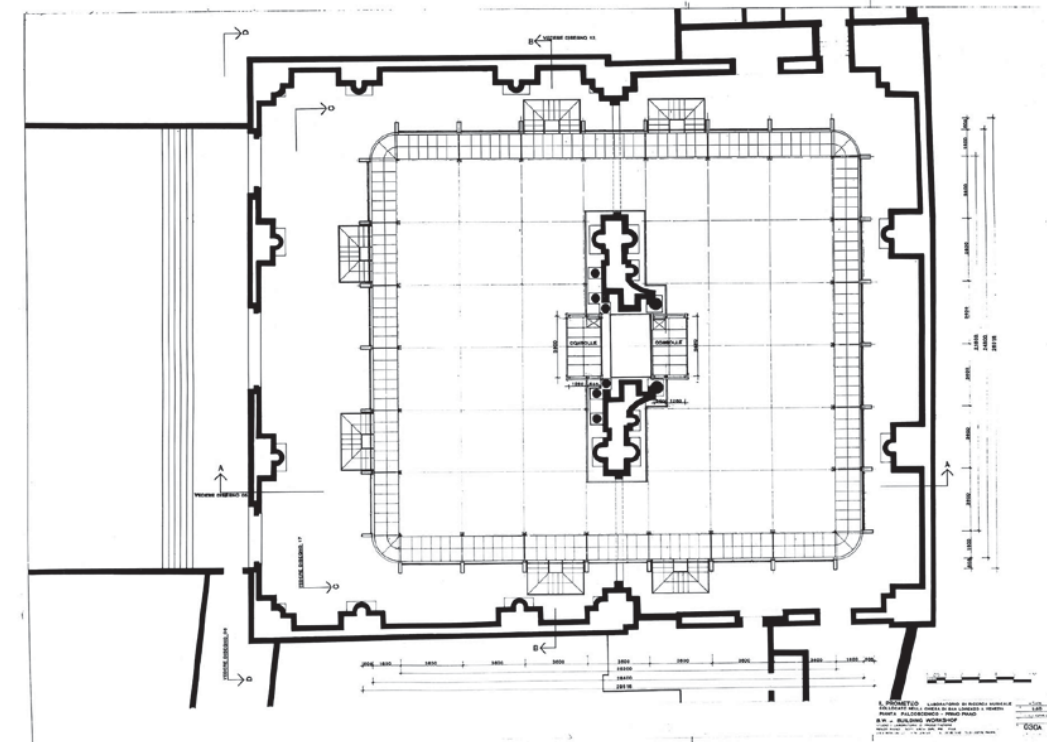
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Music, “the most immaterial architecture that exists”, is an unending source of interest and sphere of engagement for Renzo Piano. Through the decades he has developed fruitful friendships with musicians, composers and conductors, ranging from Salvatore Accardo to Maurizio Pollini, Pierre Boulez, Luciano Berio, Luigi Nono and Claudio Abbado. The lightness of sound, the meditated alternation of voids and solids composed by notes and silences, and the severe partition of the pentagram essential to musical creativity have always fascinated the Genoese architect (who played the B flat trumpet in youth), accompanying and inspiring many of his projects.

The opportunity to explore the ties between architecture and music in the heart of an architectural project came from Luigi Nono (1924-1990). Early in 1984 he asked Piano to design a “musical space” for Prometeo. Nono had been working on the composition for some years and it would premiere in September of that year in the church of San Lorenzo Venice, performed by the orchestra of Milan’s La Scala Opera House conducted by Claudio Abbado.

Photo 1_Luigi Nono, Massimo Cacciari and Renzo Piano observing the stages of the assembly of the musical space for Prometeo.

Photos 2 e 3_Plan and Section of the stage machinery in the church of San Lorenzo in Venice.

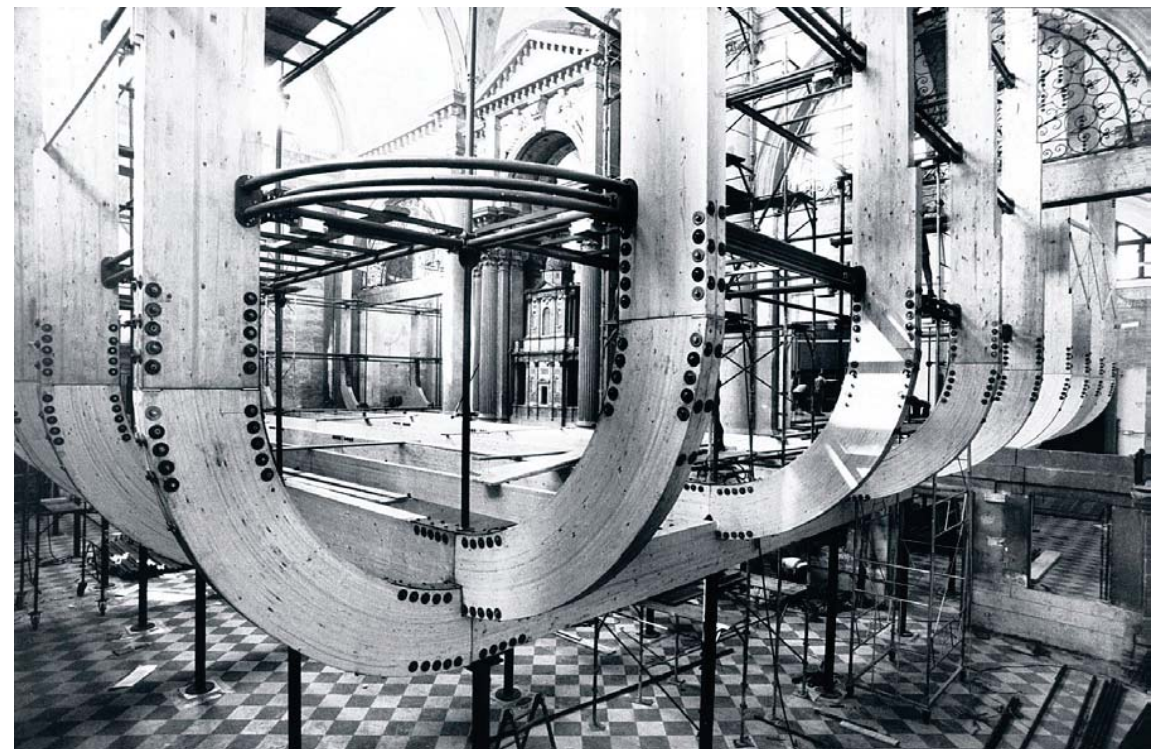


Nono did not imagine a stage set as conventionally understood as the setting of his opera. Rather he thought in terms of a flexible architectural envelope, well suited to an innovative and experimental musical composition conceived as a sequence of “sounds in movement”, dramatizing a text assembled by Massimo Cacciari with passages from authors ancient and modern ranging from Aeschylus to Walter Benjamin. The stage machinery had to be lightweight, so that it could be dismantled and reassembled easily, since it would accompany performances as the work traveled to various cities in Italy and Europe.

In designing the musical space for Prometeo, Piano drew on his experiences building boats as well as his interest in the working of the sound boxes of stringed instruments. In those months he was working on a small boat built out of laminated wood. Likewise, for the stage machinery of Prometeo, laminated wood proved to be the ideal construction material: by its intrinsic acoustic qualities, the lightness of the components and their suppleness when assembled yet combined with sufficient strength.

Photo 4_Laminated wood elements.

Photo 5_The laminated wood structure during the assembly.



Piano imagined a square shell with a base of 25 meters per side raised off the floor, with lattice beams bending at 90 degrees that turn into pillars so that the whole forms a veritable sound box. These pillars supported a lighter metal framework shaping three tiers of galleries.

The architectural space was intended to bring out the musical experimentalism of Prometeo. Piano also decided to invert the traditional theatrical structure consisting of stalls, orchestra pit and stage, placing the audience rather than the orchestra or singers at the center of the space, with the musicians placed laterally in the tiered galleries and free to move about while performing the music. During the execution of Prometeo they had to ascend and descend along the inflected ramps of the galleries, changing position inside the wooden ark while Abbado conducted them remotely amid a series of video monitors.

Photo 6_The musical space
in the nave of the church of
San Lorenzo.



Hence this “musical space” was not a definitive and unchangeable structure, but a flexible palimpsest, capable of entering into harmony with the acoustic qualities of the buildings in which it was assembled. The side panels were composed of a series of thinner wooden panels, both flat and curved, that could be installed or removed to sustain or dampen the reverberation of the sound.

After Prometo premiered in the church of San Lorenzo, the ark was dismantled and reassembled a few months later in the former Ansaldo factory in Milan for a further series of performances. Though the wooden ark did not accompany the tour of Prometo in the following years, the experiments with laminated wood in this project soon proved useful in the construction of IBM’s traveling pavilion (1982-1986) and several other projects in the following decades, from the Jean Marie Tjibaou Cultural Center (1995-1998) to the Auditorium in the Park at L’Aquila (2009-2012).

Photos 7 and 8_The musicians taking their places for rehearsals in the three tiers of galleries, where they were conducted remotely by Claudio Abbado via monitors.

Photo 9_Spectators at the center of the musical space, a few minutes before the performance of “Prometeo”.

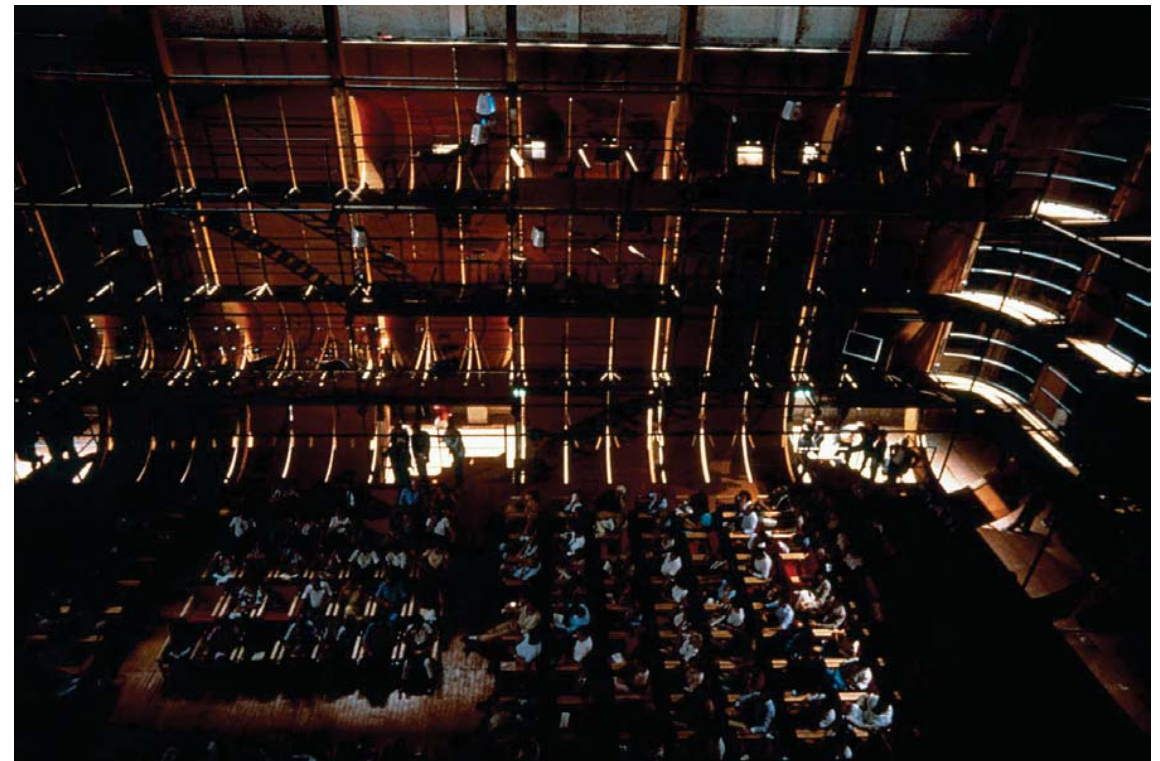


PHOTO CREDITS

Photo 1, cover_Luigi Nono, Massimo Cacciari and Renzo Piano observing the stages of the assembly of the musical space for *Prometeo*, 1984.

Prometeo Musical Space, 1983/1984
Archivio Fondazione Renzo Piano, Pro__024
Autore: Ishida, Shunji; © Fondazione Renzo Piano

Photo 2, pag. 3_Plan and Section of the stage machinery in the church of San Lorenzo in Venice, 1984.

Prometeo Musical Space, 1983/1984
Archivio Fondazione Renzo Piano, Pro__102
Autore: S. Ishida/RPBW © Fondazione Renzo Piano

Photo 3, pag. 3_Plan and Section of the stage machinery in the church of San Lorenzo in Venice, 1984.

Prometeo Musical Space, 1983/1984
Archivio Fondazione Renzo Piano, Pro__103
Autore: S. Ishida/RPBW © Fondazione Renzo Piano

Photo 4, pag. 5_Laminated wood elements, 1984.

Prometeo Musical Space, 1983/1984
Archivio Fondazione Renzo Piano, Pro__026
Autore: Berengo Gardin, Gianni © Berengo Gardin, Gianni

Photo 5, pag. 5_The laminated wood structure during the assembly, 1984.

Prometeo Musical Space, 1983/1984
Archivio Fondazione Renzo Piano, Pro__057
Autore: Berengo Gardin, Gianni © Berengo Gardin, Gianni

Photo 6, pag. 7_The musical space in the nave of the church of San Lorenzo, 1984.

Prometeo Musical Space, 1983/1984
Archivio Fondazione Renzo Piano, Pro__013
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Photo 7, pag. 9_The musicians taking their places for rehearsals in the three tiers of galleries, where they were conducted remotely by Claudio Abbado via monitors, 1984.

Prometeo Musical Space, 1983/1984
Archivio Fondazione Renzo Piano, Pro__018
Autore: Berengo Gardin, Gianni © Berengo Gardin, Gianni

Photo 8, pag. 9_The musicians taking their places for rehearsals in the three tiers of galleries, where they were conducted remotely by Claudio Abbado via monitors, 1984.

Prometeo Musical Space, 1983/1984
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Photo 9, pag. 9_Gli spettatori al centro dello spazio musicale, pochi minuti prima dell'esecuzione del "Prometeo", 1984.

Prometeo Musical Space, 1983/1984
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CREDITS

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