Music/ theatre/ virtuosity
Berio, Berberian and Eco at the Studio di Fonologia

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In this paper, I examined the work Berio did involving language with Umberto Eco and Cathy Berberian at the studio di fonologia in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and the profound impact on his subsequent compositions outside the studio as he sought to translate musical ideas he had explored electronically to live situations, the result being a new virtuosity in his instrumental writing as a key element in the way that he brought ideas of music and theatre together, especially in the series of pieces entitled Sequenza.

'I hold a great respect for virtuosity even if this word may provoke derisive smiles and even conjure up the picture of an elegant and rather diaphanous man with agile fingers and an empty head'.

Luciano Berio, *Two Interviews* (1984) p.90

Virtuosity as a denigrated concept in early 20th century music; the rehabilitation of virtuosity in music after 1945 and Berio's particular interest in exploring the idea of virtuosity in the Sequenzas; the way in which this virtuosity contributes to a specifically theatrical music.

" My introduction to electronic music totally upset my relationship with musical materials…whereas instrumental composition is preceded in most cases by a linear development of thought…the fact that in electronic music one can try out directly various possible sound structures and manipulate these ad infinitum to obtain new musical images…puts the composer in a completely novel position."

(Maderna at Darmstadt, 1957 cited in Colombo-Taccani 1994)

The way working in electroacoustic studios changed the musical landscape for composers working directly with sound rather than via notation and performers' the increased importance of timbre in electroacoustic composition. When these ideas move back out of the studio and are presented to live performers, conventional notation has to be reinvented and performers have to be prepared to do things quite unlike anything they've been asked to do before, pushing technique towards virtuosity as a requirement of the composition.

> "the presence of Cathy Berberian and her voice which had become the 'tenth oscillator' of the studio"
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> Marino Zuccheri in De Benedictis "…at the Time of the Tubes…", 2000, p.184

One of the most distinctive and important areas of work in the studio de fonologia was the work that Berio and Maderna did with language and the human voice. This focus results from several separate elements coming together in fortuitous circumstances around 195, notably Maderna, Berio, Berberian and Eco all being together in one place.

Castelnuovo had a good intuition because one of the most important aspects of the Studio di Fonologia was the study of words and voice...I wanted to amplify, develop, transfer the verbal event onto different dimensions...even if not conventionally musical dimensions.

Berio (2000), p.226

the very name of the studio alludes to this agenda concerning language and the voice: fonologia, phonology, is the branch of linguistics that deals with systems of sound in a language and was suggested by an engineer at Italian Radio named Castelnuovo .
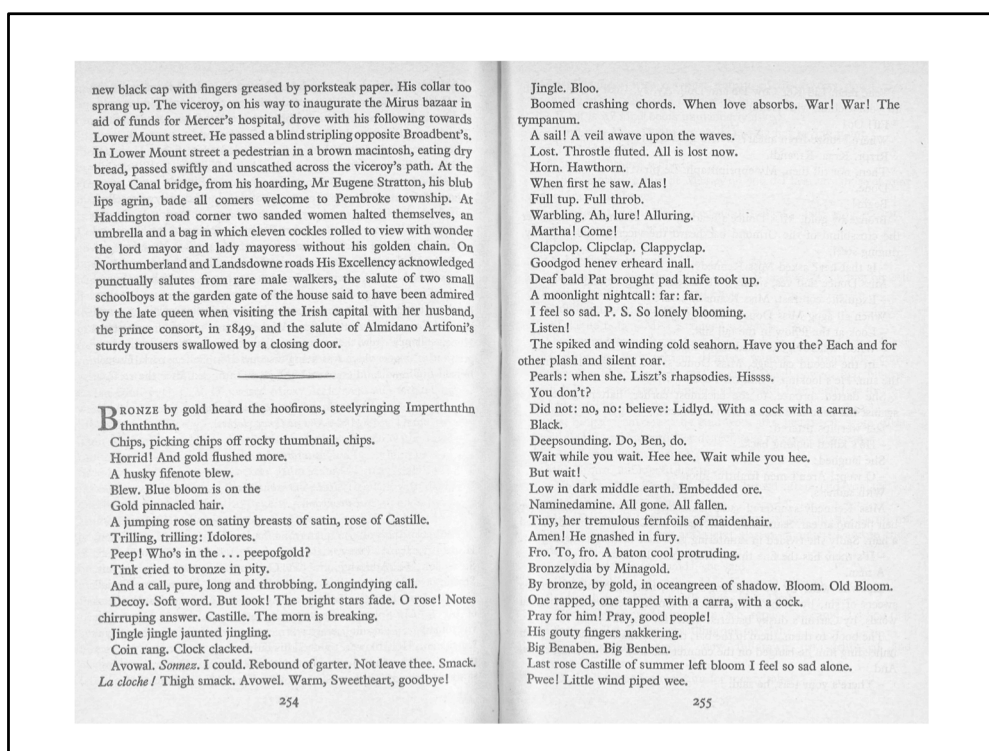
1957-61

Berio

- Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)
- Momenti
- Visage

Maderna

- Syntaxis
- Continuo
- Dimensioni II

A number of collaboratively created pieces came out of this project: the ones listed here are among the best known.

new black cap with fingers greased by porksteak paper. His collar too sprang up. The viceroy, on his way to inaugurate the Mirus bazaar in aid of funds for Mercer's hospital, drove with his following towards Lower Mount street. He passed a blind stripling opposite Broadbent's. In Lower Mount street a pedestrian in a brown macintosh, eating dry bread, passed swiftly and unscathed across the viceroy's path. At the Royal Canal bridge, from his hoarding, Mr Eugene Stratton, his blub lips agrin, bade all comers welcome to Pembroke township. At Haddington road corner two sanded women halted themselves, an umbrella and a bag in which eleven cockles rolled to view with wonder the lord mayor and lady mayoress without his golden chain. On Northumberland and Lansdowne roads His Excellency acknowledged punctually salutes from rare male walkers, the salute of two small schoolboys at the garden gate of the house said to have been admired by the late queen when visiting the Irish capital with her husband, the prince consort, in 1849, and the salute of Almidano Artifoni's sturdy trousers swallowed by a closing door.

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BRONZE by gold heard the hoofirons, steelyringing Imperthnthn thnthnthn.

Chips, picking chips off rocky thumbnail, chips.

Horrid! And gold flushed more.

A husky fifenote blew.

Blew. Blue bloom is on the

Gold pinnacled hair.

A jumping rose on satiny breasts of satin, rose of Castille.

Trilling, trilling: Idolores.

Peep! Who's in the . . . peepofgold?

Tink cried to bronze in pity.

And a call, pure, long and throbbing. Longindying call.

Decoy. Soft word. But look! The bright stars fade. O rose! Notes chirruping answer. Castille. The morn is breaking.

Jingle jingle jaunted jingling.

Coin rang. Clock clacked.

Avowal. *Sonnez.* I could. Rebound of garter. Not leave thee. Smack. *La cloche!* Thigh smack. Avowel. Warm, Sweetheart, goodbye!

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Jingle. Bloo.

Boomed crashing chords. When love absorbs. War! War! The tympanum.

A sail! A veil awave upon the waves.

Lost. Throstle fluted. All is lost now.

Horn. Hawthorn.

When first he saw. Alas!

Full tup. Full throb.

Warbling. Ah, lure! Alluring.

Martha! Come!

Clapclop. Clipclap. Clappyclap.

Goodgod henev erheard inall.

Deaf bald Pat brought pad knife took up.

A moonlight nightcall: far: far.

I feel so sad. P. S. So lonely blooming.

Listen!

The spiked and winding cold seahorn. Have you the? Each and for other plash and silent roar.

Pearls: when she. Liszt's rhapsodies. Hissss.

You don't?

Did not: no, no: believe: Lidlyd. With a cock with a carra.

Black.

Deepsounding. Do, Ben, do.

Wait while you wait. Hee hee. Wait while you hee.

But wait!

Low in dark middle earth. Embedded ore.

Naminedamine. All gone. All fallen.

Tiny, her tremulous fernfoils of maidenhair.

Amen! He gnashed in fury.

Fro. To, fro. A baton cool protruding.

Bronzelydia by Minagold.

By bronze, by gold, in oceangreen of shadow. Bloom. Old Bloom.

One rapped, one tapped with a carra, with a cock.

Pray for him! Pray, good people!

His gouty fingers nakkering.

Big Benaben. Big Benben.

Last rose Castille of summer left bloom I feel so sad alone.

Pwee! Little wind piped wee.

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Thema is a standalone composition by Berio extracted from a 40 minute radio documentary called *Omaggio a Joyce*. The narration of the documentary was initially written by Umberto Eco and expanded by the ethnomusicologist Roberto Leydi; and it has its origins in Eco grappling with James Joyce's novel, *Ulysses*. At the time, in the mid 50s, there was no Italian translation so he was working with the original English and the French translation; but the nature of Joyce's language continually threw up issues of translation in relation to onomatopoeia. At the time, Eco was working downstairs from the studio at Italian Radio and regularly ate with Berio and Berberian in the evenings; he read them passages of *Ulysses*, and they were particular struck by chapter 11, the Sirens chapter: each chapter has a set of associations – a character from the Ulysses myth, an organ of the body, an art form, a time of day – and here, we have the Sirens, the ear for the organ and music as the art: the chapter is written in a literary realization of a fugue where fugal entries become characters entering the Ormond bar in Dublin, where our Sirens are the barmaids. The chapter is littered with dozens of references to pieces of music and musical terminology; and the language itself is made musical by the onomatopoeic elaboration of words.

- **"the sound symbolism of vocal gestures and inflections, with their accompanying 'shadows of meaning' and associative tendencies"**

- Berio, "Many more voices", 1998, p4

Nicola Scaldafferi sees *Thema* as fundamental stage in the creative development of all three collaborators: Berio discovered a linguistically, phonologically inspired approach to working with language through onomatopoeia, deconstruction and reconstruction that continued throughout his career: he described Berberian and her voice as his "second studio di fonologia", as much a site of experimentation for him as the actual studio; and it was an extraordinarily important piece in Berberian realizing her vocal potential in experimental music; and likewise it was an important landmark for Eco in his fascination with language, as again explored in his 1993 work, *The Search for the Perfect Language*.

Visage in 1961 continues the project for Berio and Berberian, and here the latent theatre of *Thema* comes much more to the fore. This time, they dispensed with texts altogether: Berio asked Berberian to improvise a series of monologues each based on a repertoire of vocal gestures and phonetic material suggested by different linguistic models. Berio then builds an environment around the recordings of her improvisations using electronically generated sounds that she appears to interact with. The apparent protagonist is just as electronic, just as virtual as the environment she appears to occupy; and yet, we see her even though she there; and we understand isn't the drama even though there are no words. The success of his and Berberian's ability to achieve this sound symbolism is perhaps best seen in the fact that the piece was banned by Italian Radio for being pornographic – this, in a piece that has neither words nor visual images.

Sequenza III, page 1

The composition of Sequenza III is a culmination of two compositions from 1958: *Thema* and John Cage's *Aria* for female voice. *Aria* is a comic piece, a spoof of studio composition techniques apparently inspired (according to David Osmond Smith), by Cage - another regular meal time visitor at the Berio home – being entertained by Cathy Berberian's playful imitation of cut up and spliced together tape fragments. Sequenza III was in effect Berio's response to *Aria*. If *Aria* spoofs studio composition, the Sequenza draws on it even more specifically and complexly to create a piece that, almost 50 years later, is still absolutely the piece of extended vocal repertoire; and yet in essence, it does exactly the same as *Aria*, only applying studio cut-up and splice ideas in a much more rigorous way to create a dramatic abstract narrative.

Kutter's text

give me	a few words	for a woman
to sing	a truth	allowing us
to build a house	without worrying	before night comes

The text of Sequenza III is by Markus Kutter: it is popularly believed that Kutter may have cut up Berio's letter requesting a text and reassembled the fragments of it to create his 9 phrase poem. Berio then takes his linguistic, phonological approach and deconstructs this into phonemes (score examples); then overlays this with paralinguistic sounds,– laughter, sighs, gasps. The process of deconstruction effectively strips the linguistic meanings out of the words; Berio then replaces those linguistic ones with the paralinguistic ones created sonically by articulating the phonemes as a gasp, a sigh, as laughter.

Sung phrases

60"	a woman
1'50	give me a few words for a woman
3'50	to sing
4'20	a truth
6'10	to build a
6'20	a few words before
6'35	to sing before night
8'15	allowing before night comes
8'35	to sing

There is even a sense of conventional narrative embedded in this: the singer has to articulate the words to sing the truth which will build the house, before night comes, the coming of night apparently happening as that phrase is finally heard.

By borrowing so comprehensively from a desconstructive, onomatopoeic and linguistically inspired approach to text developed in the studio with Eco, Berio pushes vocal technique in this piece not to its limits but into completely new areas. You do not actually need to be singer to perform this piece at all because many of the techniques it requires were never, before 1966, techniques required of any singer.

Sequenza II for harp

"slapping, snapping and beating at the instrument, the harpist conveys vigour, speed, energy and a willingness to attack. The material is unkind to both instrument and performer"

Kirsty Whatley, "Rough Romance", 2007, p50

The studio di fonologia was an essential aspect of Berio's reinvention of virtuosity in his writing for live performers. With a vocalist performing, it is easy to see how this might be positioned theatrically; but like Visage, the dramatic aspects of this are largely sonic and abstract, not visual. The theatricality of it lies in virtuosity itself, is in the physical demands that the performance places on the performer. The 1960s, when this and 6 other of the 14 Sequenzas were written, is the era of physical theatre, of Peter Brook's Marat/ Sade, of Grotowski's Poor Theatre, the influence of which we can see in Berio's specifically theatrical works of the 1960s, *Passaggio*, *Laborintus II* and its withdrawn predecessor 'Esposizione' (1962–63). This theatre of musical action stemming from new musical demands is something that connects the Sequenzas as a group. The first Sequenza for flute written in 1958 is actually the least theatrical or virtuosic in this new sense, and reflects how relatively early it was written: it is much shorter than the others and uses very few new or extended techniques at all. But the Sequenzas of the 1960s onwards push the boundaries of the instrument's timbre and technique in quite radical ways so that the virtuosity itself becomes a theatrical element of the performance; and in the way that Berio called Berberian's voice his second studio di fonologia, the instrument in each piece becomes a studio, a site of sonic exploration.

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