

“KEEP GOING”

MOTIVATION AND QUOTATION IN LUCIANO BERIO’S SINFONIA

In 1969, Italian composer Luciano Berio composed a brilliant and unique symphony unlike any that had come before it: *Sinfonia*. The deceptively simple title belies the structure Berio uses for the work, as each movement could conceivably stand alone as an individual piece rather than requiring the other movements to portray the overall themes and message. In Berio’s *Sinfonia*, the third movement, *In ruhig fliessender Bewegung*, is exceptionally unique in its form and complexity, and is based upon two principle inspirations. The third movement of Gustav Mahler’s Second Symphony, *Resurrection*, serves as the musical “backbone” for the work, as it steadily moves throughout with Berio’s own additions added on top. The text, sung by the eight vocalists, comes predominately from Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnamable*, the third novel in his *Trilogy*.

While this movement’s extended complexity is hardly a new topic of discussion among musical scholars, it is easy to become overwhelmed and even over-curious about the technical and theoretical analyses of the piece when studying a work as monumental and grandiose as this movement (Hicks 207). This extreme interest, however, is not unwarranted: in the course of a single movement, Berio musically “quotes” over twenty of the greatest composers and works of music, spanning from Baroque to contemporary composition. Each of these works serves as additional commentary on Berio’s complexly woven message and demonstrates his recognition and respect for influences. However, while each musical quotation is essential in understanding the overall message, being too

involved in the analytical aspect of this work leads to academic ignorance in interpreting this movement. Leading Berio scholar David Osmond-Smith delves into the complexity of *In ruhig* in his essay *Playing on Words: A Guide to Luciano Berio's Sinfonia* and establishes a definitive catalog of each work Berio quotes. While this catalog is an extraordinary asset to any Berio study and the analysis is extremely sophisticated, Osmond-Smith fails to fully develop a solid interpretation of this movement. Rather than analyzing and interpreting each quoted work, this essay instead aims to determine Berio's message through his main inspirations and discuss how different quotations enhance the dilemma he presents.

The first question that comes to an active listener of this movement is a curiosity as to why Berio would choose to derive a majority of a work from other composers. Berio gives us a perspective on why he might do this in his 1980 interview with musicologist Rosanna Dalmonte. When discussing the importance of recognizing and discussing other composers and their works, Berio replied that “a musical work always has an impalpable zone with which we can only come to grips through the mediating influence of works that we have already assimilated” (Osmond-Smith 17-18). Berio believed in the absolute necessity of musical influence in order to accurately understand a body of work. He uses this movement of *Sinfonia* to take this idea to the extreme through the quotations from Mahler and Beckett and the immense catalog already discussed. . Berio uses the musical quotations, generally recognizable pieces that sophisticated listeners are familiar with, to aid the audience in deciphering just what is going on in the twisting, complex subject matter being sung by the eight vocalists in relation to the stirring *scherzo* steadily moving underneath. Each quoted work hints at these themes and

provides extra support to Berio's overall message as expressed through the text. And yet, while this movement can be seen as a journey and study through musical history, to concentrate solely on Berio's masterful crafting of the music itself would be to completely miss the message Berio so carefully conveys. Berio wants the audience to recognize the pieces and internalize them, not be completely dominated by them. Perhaps this danger of missing Berio's message through his own looking to the past could be exactly what he intends to portray: Berio may want to warn of the danger of allowing influences to hinder an artist's creativity. Through this research, I have determined that this is just the beginning of Berio's dilemma; however, before we can accurately determine his message, brief attention must be given to his two principle inspirations: Gustav Mahler's scherzo movement and Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*. By investigating these two works individually and gaining a firm perspective on their meanings standing alone, we can accurately discuss how these works fit into Berio's ideas about quotation and begin to fully develop Berio's message.

Berio chose another work, the Mahler *scherzo*, to provide the backbone to his own composition. This work has its own complicated history that fits into Berio's theme of quotation. Before Mahler composed his second symphony, he wrote the song cycle *Wunderhorn* for voice and orchestra in early July 1893, including *Des Antonius von Padua Fischpredigt*. This work is a satire of humankind: St. Anthony preaches his sermon to the fish in a nearby brook upon finding his congregation empty. The fish enjoy the sermon, but soon return to their normal disposition without applying what has been impressed upon them. Mahler satirizes the church attendee who dismisses a sermon once they return to their everyday lives, begging the question of the relevance of St. Anthony

preaching at all if no one who listens to him really hears his message. The text expresses the futility of the human effort in making something creative; Mahler himself felt anxiety over the misunderstanding of his music and saw himself as a solitary, inspired figure (Hicks). A few months after completing the song cycle, Mahler took the theme from *Des Antonius* and used it as the scherzo movement in his “Resurrection” symphony (Book on Mahler). This ‘borrowing’ from himself is understandable, as the art song, expressing the futility of men and faith, serves as the basis for the tumultuous, dark movement before the symphony reaches salvation in the fourth and fifth movements. It is quite fitting that Berio would choose this composer to borrow from for his own work as Mahler has often “been scorned and celebrated for his eclecticism, rejection of “stylistic purity” and musical quotation.” (Hicks)

These same ideas of borrowing from other sources account for why Berio chose to use Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnamable* for the main text of this movement. In this final book of his *Trilogy*, the main character has entered a state of purgatory after his death and searches for his lost identity, thus becoming “unnamable.” In this tumultuous state, the character grasps for anything he can and finds his only means of existence is to keep going, and when he tries to speak for himself he can only quote other people (Adelman 27). The main character is lost without even so much as a name and continually struggles to comprehend why he is not understood. Despite the gap in between their creation, the Mahler and the Beckett have startling similarities: both are the manifestations of a lost artist struggling to be understood and both resort to quotation as a means of attempting to identify oneself and to be understood. The Mahler score and the Beckett text are both examples of works in which its creator looked to the past and drew on what came before

in order to create an original outpouring of artistic expression. Berio uses this movement to express what he feels is society's need to be 'saved' from its own desperation to look to the past in order to move forward. Becoming lost in the past will do nothing to move society forward; however, as demonstrated in this movement, society must instead acknowledge and appreciate its history and then build upon it from there. Berio believes that society will find its resurrection only in the rejuvenation of artistic creation and individual thought. Therefore, the true question presented in this movement is not *how* will society be saved, but rather *will* society be saved. Berio uses this movement as a commentary on modern society and how its inevitable self-destruction can only be avoided by re-establishing the importance of the artist and actively understanding and interpreting their intentions.

However, before diving into the movement, there is one additional important aspect of this piece to take into account: especially in terms of the spoken text, this movement does not move in an exactly chronological progression. As is the case for *the Unnamable*, in which the narrator finds himself in a purgatory similar to being trapped in a jar with incessant voices that have tricked into believing that what he says is his own, this movement is more like seeing glimpses of the action rather than every event as it unfolds (Hicks 209). Rather than approaching this movement as a journey with a plot, as is easily understandable to attempt with the addition of several voices that we naturally want to be characters in a story we cannot quite make out, the audience must instead assimilate these as a whole upon the movements completion and try to understand how the large number of pieces fit together. From the very first few measures, Berio shows us that this will not be a typical story, with a rising action and climax ending in a

comfortable conclusion. Instead, Berio begins the movement literally with a bang, as the orchestra and the voices announce the climax from Schoenberg's "Peripetie" from his work *Funf Orchesteruke*. Even the title itself cannot be interpreted straightforwardly: in Greek, it would mean a reversal of fortune, in German, the denouement of a plot and in French, an adventure. Rather than deciding which one of these meanings is correct, we must realize that they are all correct; Berio is clueing the audience in that this work will not move in typical linear fashion, despite being bound by the "time" of the music. Instead, the movement opens with the climax, an unexpected turn of events, leading the vocalists into an adventure. Throughout the course of the movement, however, several more climaxes occur in the orchestra, though we will later discuss how the ultimate climax occurs in a relatively static time musically. Also, as the movement continues, the vocalists instruct each other on how to act with musical instructions taken from the Mahler score, giving them a sense of direction without having to decide for themselves. The vocalists then state to each other what musical quotations are happening at that moment, however, for the rest of the movement the audience will have to discern for themselves the musical quotations.

In the following charts, examples are given for both sides of Berio's argument of whether or not society will save itself through an emphasis being placed back on the artist. Table 1 provides examples of Berio's belief that society will prevail in association to his sub-theme of the power of water.

TABLE 1: OPTIMISTIC WATER EXAMPLES

TIME	EXAMPLE	SIGNIFICANCE
	La Mer, III "Les Jeux des vagues"	Literally, 'the plays of the waves.' Indicates the calming motion of water and positive feelings towards the power of moving water

	Pastorale Symphony “Scene by a brook”	serenity in the midst of the confusion of the conflicting melodies and the ‘lost’ vocalists
	“And tomorrow we’ll read that Berio’s <i>Einrucke</i> ...altered the flow of the ocean currents.”	An indication of the power an artistic creation has- the ability to change something as enormous as tides
	“[words] will surely bring me to the surface some day.”	Through thought and expression, speaker will “rise” to the truth

In Table 2, examples of Berio’s general feelings of optimism are given.

TABLE 2: OPTIMISTIC GENERAL EXAMPLES

TIME	EXAMPLE	SIGNIFICANCE
	“nothing more restful than chamber music”	Hearing music, will bring an end to the tumultuous activity taking place around the speaker
	“this represents at least a thousand words I was not counting on; I may well be glad of them.”	Having something to say allows the speaker is to form an identity that has been lost
	“It’s compulsory, a compulsory show”	What happens is natural and out of our hands
	“Perhaps it is a recitation, that is the show, someone reciting passages, old favorites,”	Life may be nothing more than reciting things held to be true
	“we shall overcome the incessant noise, for as Henri says if this noise stop, there’s be nothing more to say”	without the noise they would have nothing to say and would therefore lose what fragments of an identity they are holding onto

	“Mein junges Leben hat ein End”	“My young life has reached an end,” society is moving into a new maturity rather than dying
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Many of these examples deal with a continuance of the familiar, such as the ocean’s tides, and compulsory behavior. Not all of these may be optimistic, however, when considering Berio’s feelings toward repetition. Spending most of his childhood and education under the oppressiveness of the Italian fascists, Berio pursued music because, since the subject was taught at home without interference from the government and in the documentary *Luciano Berio*, he states his disdain for his peers composing minimalism compositions as he felt minimalism to be fascist since most creative controls and decisions were left to some outside factor. Most likely, his same disdain for the simplicity of minimal music be applied to repetition of the common and familiar. The following examples in Table 3 outline why Berio feels that repetition amounts for part of the evil in question.

TABLE 3: PESSIMISM IN REPETITION

TIME	EXAMPLE	SIGNIFICANCE
Almost continual occurrence throughout movement	Continual Solfege	vocalists often resort to basic form of singing, solfege syllables, in response to the directional questions rather than being able to formulate a unique response to directional questions
	“It seems there are only repeated sounds, I am not deaf of that I am convinced, that is to say half-convinced...”	speaker loses his own ability to confidently assess himself
	“you are nothing but an	The speaker may have

	academic exercise!”	formed an identity based on repetition but in the end it amounts to nothing in turns of being an individual
	“Yes I feel the moment has come for us to look back... Yes I feel the moment has come for us to look back...”	the first baritone begins speaking this line, only to be mimicked by the second tenor while he is still speaking; demonstrates the second tenor’s inability to form a thought for himself
	“But I shall say my old lesson now, if I can remember it”	This example again shows how the speaker would rather simply repeat what they already know rather than formulate a new thought
	“Waiting, for something to begin, for there to be something else but you, for the power to rise, the courage to leave; picking your way through the crossed colors seeking the cause, losing it again, seeking it no longer.”	Waiting is repeated nothingness; as the speaker attempts to muster the power to stop this pattern of doing nothing, they fail and stop trying
	“I feel it round me, it enfolds me, it covers me, if only this voice would stop, I would listen.”	Spoken while a soprano sings a continual trill for several measures; speaker dominated by listening to the repeated sounds of the trill and cannot stop to listen to his own thoughts until the distraction ends

With these examples of the downside of repetition, Berio opens the door for the potential that society will not find its salvation and will be lost without an identity or artistic resurrection., as seen in the following tables.

TABLE 4: PESSIMISTIC WATER EXAMPLES

MEASURES	EXAMPLE	SIGNIFICANCE
	La Mer, III “Dialogue of the Wind and Sea”	a warning of an impending storm of the questions and dilemmas posed by the speakers; power of the storm will prevail

	Wozzeck's Drowning scene	water as a dangerous force aiding in the downfall of the character Wozzeck
	"Perhaps it is not a voice at all, perhaps, it's the air, ascending descending, flowing, eddying, seeking exit	The voice is no longer a voice, but rather empty air attempting to get out much like a flowing stream, but fails

TABLE 5: PESSIMISM IN GENERAL

EXAMPLES	MEASURES	SIGNIFICANCE
	Continual asking for directions	The speakers unable to decide to do on their own and instead ask for direction
	"We need to do something" "Why?"	The speakers barely even recognize the need for action
	"Hardly a resurrection"	Condescension toward the actions being taken
	"You never noticed you were waiting, waiting alone"	People too lost in the storm to notice their continual isolation
	"I am listening...well, I prefer that, I must say I prefer that."	Rather than making decisions and thus creating, the speaker would rather just listen to others
	"someone improvising, you can barely hear him"	The only person with the courage to do something original can barely be heard above the quotation
	"That is the show, waiting alone, in the restless air"	The show (life) is just the repetition of waiting
	"They don't know who they are either!"	The other speakers are just as lost as everyone else
	"I'd know if it was going to, to start again, it's late now, is still talking incessantly, any old thing, repetition after repetition, talking unceasingly to yourself"	Society is not going to "start again" but stay stuck in continual repetition
	"And after each group disintegration, the name of Majakowsky hangs in the clean air"	The subject that prevails after a disagreement is that of a radical who committed suicide after recognizing his inability to change society

Each side of the argument presents a convincing and compelling case for whether or not society will be saved from its impending downfall, however, it is difficult to determine which side Berio believes is correct. In order to come to a conclusion, we must look at the text spoken during the final musical climax:

Tenor 1: And when they ask, why all this, it is not easy to find an answer. For, when we find ourselves, face to face, now, here, and they remind us that all this can't stop the wars, can make the old younger or lower the price of bread.

Alto 1: Say it again, louder!

Tenor 1: It can't stop the wars, can't make the old younger, or lower the price of bread, can't erase solitude of dull the tread out side the door, we can only nod, yes, it's true, but no need to remind, to point, for all is with us, always, except at certain moments, here among these rows of balconies, in a crowd or out of it, perhaps waiting to enter, watching. And tomorrow we'll read that Berio's *Eindrucke* made tulips grow in my garden and altered the flow of the ocean currents. We must believe it's true. There must be something else. Otherwise, it would be quite hopeless. But it is quite hopeless. Unquestioning. But it can't go on. It, say it, not knowing what. It's getting late. Where now? When now? I have a present for you. Keep going, page after page. Keep going, going on, call that going, call that on.

This quotation is extraordinarily important to the overall movement because of one important change in the theme of quotation: this text does not come from Beckett's *Unnamable* but rather is an original passage written by Berio himself. As the first tenor begins his original soliloquy, he is interrupted by the first alto urging him on after recognizing the change from straight quotation to original thought. In this text, the tenor recognizes the unsolvable dichotomy of the two sides of the original argument, seeing the need for hope yet the hopelessness of the situation. The tenor even resorts back to asking for directions again but realizes what will get the individuals through, the 'present:' Keep going. Berio does not intend to fully express whether or not society will find its salvation, rather he wants this movement to act as a point of discussion for society in which they can continue the discussion and thus continue living.

This climax however, is not the ultimate point made by Berio. During the musically static section that follows this text, the first tenor speaks “But wait, he is barely moving now, almost still,” as the other vocalists resort back to the solfege found earlier in the work. It would seem that his outburst of original thought was not enough to change the monotony, repetition and waiting that pervades the movement until the most important moment in the entire symphony that immediately follows: the tenor asks “should I make my introductions?” At this point, as instructed in the score, the tenor introduces each of the eight vocalists performing the piece at that moment. This turns the movement around, as they are no longer unnamable, unidentifiable people wandering aimlessly and quoting whatever they can remember or hear. For the first time, the performers have names and thus, some form of an identity. After the introductions, the first tenor ends the movement with this text:

But now it's done, it's over, we've had our chance. There was even, for a second, hope of a resurrection, of almost....mein junges Leben hat ein End [my young life has reached its end]. We must collect our thoughts for the unexpected is always upon us, in our rooms, in the street, at the door, on a stage. Thank you, Mr. [conductor's name].

With this, we understand for the first time what Berio believes will happen to society. Rather than knowing for certain our fate, we must recognize the identity that comes along with the ability to think for oneself. Rather than needing a full resurrection, society instead needs to move from its ‘young life’ into a new, more mature stage by collecting its thoughts together. It is through the unexpected that surrounds us at all times and consistently presents new situations and thoughts that society will determine its fate: Berio wants this movement to serve as a wake-up call to the people of society to think for

themselves rather than allowing others to think for them and through this individuality will come freedom of thought.

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