

Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

Sinfonia for Eight Voices and Orchestra

Luciano Berio

One is accustomed to lauding music for its timeless qualities, but many fine works are time-bound as well as timeless; they are “period pieces” in their evocation of a certain historical moment. For Luciano Berio’s *Sinfonia*, that moment was the tumultuous late 1960s and the place was New York City. Well, Hoboken, actually; he had moved there in 1967 and was teaching composition and analysis at The Juilliard School and directing the Juilliard Ensemble, which he had founded as a forum for exploring and performing contemporary music.

The opening movement of *Sinfonia* is based on snippets of French texts from the Structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. Berio was fascinated by intellectual currents being developed outside the field of music and was particularly attuned to cutting-edge thinking in literature and linguistics — which, by nature of the ideas prevalent at that time, led him into the domains of anthropology, sociology, and psychology. Riding the tide of intellectual currents from the 1950s through the 1970s guided Berio through the dominant realm of Structuralism (which emphasized the commonality of profound archetypes at the expense of surface dissimilarities) to the reactions of the post-Structuralists and Deconstructionists, who reveled in the ambiguity of texts and ideas, and in the belief that the perception of an object or expression is not at all objective, but rather is uniquely informed by what the perceiver brings to the table. This leads to the threshold of Postmodernism, and in many ways Berio’s may seem the most significant musical voice of the Postmodern movement, even if it is largely devoid of the

cynicism and enervated irony that would become pervasive in much Postmodern art.

In 1967 Berio had composed a short piece titled *O King*, for mezzo-soprano and five instruments. Its text consists of a deconstruction of the sounds in the name of Martin Luther King, Jr. Considerably altered and expanded for orchestral forces, *O King* became the second movement of *Sinfonia*; its meaning had changed profoundly in the interstice, since external events would transform it from a vital paean in 1967 into what listeners a year later would necessarily interpret as a memorial, following King’s assassination.

The prolonged middle movement is by far the most discussed section of *Sinfonia*. Its heading, *In ruhig fliessender Bewegung* (*In*

IN SHORT

Born: October 24, 1925, in Oneglia, Italy

Died: May 27, 2003, in Rome

Work composed: 1968, on commission from the New York Philharmonic for the Orchestra’s 125th anniversary, drawing on his 1967 composition *O King*; expanded with a fifth movement in 1969; dedicated to Leonard Bernstein

World premiere: original four-movement version, October 10, 1968, by the New York Philharmonic, the composer as conductor, with the Swingle Singers; five-movement version premiered at the 1969 Donaueschingen Festival by the Southwest German Radio Symphony Orchestra, Ernest Bour, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: February 2, 2008, Lorin Maazel, conductor, with Synergy Vocals

Estimated duration: ca. 35 minutes

quietly flowing motion), is lifted directly from the middle movement — again, the third of five — of Mahler’s Symphony No. 2, *Resurrection*. But Berio’s borrowing is not limited to Mahler’s heading; indeed, he appropriates Mahler’s entire movement, which serves as a scaffolding that Berio then decorates with an abundance of other borrowings from a diversity of composers, many of whom Berio iden-

tifies in his commentary about the piece. This is a profound rumination on the Mahler original, which generates for Berio an overlay that corresponds with his fantastic image of music history from Bach to Stockhausen. He explained in an interview:

I’d had it in mind for a long time to explore from the inside a piece of music from the

In the Composer’s Words

Luciano Berio wrote this program note to accompany performances of *Sinfonia*:

The title is not meant to suggest any analogy with the classical symphonic form. It is intended purely etymologically: the simultaneous sound of various parts, here eight voices and instruments. Or it may be taken in a more general sense as the interplay of a variety of things, situations, and meanings. Indeed, the musical development of *Sinfonia* is constantly and strongly conditioned by the search for balance, even identity between voices and instruments; between the spoken or the sung word and the sound structure as a whole. This is why the perception and intelligibility of the text are never taken as read, but on the contrary are integrally related to the composition. Thus, the various degrees of intelligibility of the text, along with the hearer’s experience of almost failing to understand, must be seen as essential to the very nature of the musical process.

The text of the first part is made up of a series of extremely short extracts from Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *Le cru et le cuit*, and one or two other sources. In these passages, Lévi-Strauss analyses the structure and symbolism of Brazilian myths of the origin of water, or other similarly structured myths.

The second part of *Sinfonia* is a tribute to the memory of Martin Luther King. The eight voices simply send back and forth to each other the sounds that make up the name of the black martyr, until they at last state his name clearly and intelligibly. The main text of the third part is made up of fragments from Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnamable*, which in turn generate a large number of references and quotations from day-to-day life.

The text of the fourth part mimes rather than enunciates verbal fragments drawn from the preceding parts (with, at the beginning, a brief reference of Mahler’s Second Symphony).

Finally, the text of the fifth part takes up, develops, and complements the texts of the earlier parts, and above all gives these fragments narrative substance (being drawn from *Le cru et le cuit*), whereas in the first part they were presented merely as poetic images.

The third part of *Sinfonia* calls for more detailed comment, since it is perhaps the most experimental work I have ever written. The piece is a tribute to Gustav Mahler (whose work seems to carry all the weight of the last two centuries of musical history) and, in particular, to the third movement of



Berio, in the 1970s

past: a creative exploration that was at the same time an analysis, a commentary, and an extension of the original. This follows from my principle that, for a composer, the best way to analyze and comment upon a piece is to do something using materials from that piece. ... I finally opted for Mahler not only because his music proliferates spontaneously, but also because it allowed

me to extend, transform, and comment on all of its aspects: including that of orchestration. And using Mahler was also a tribute to Leonard Bernstein, who has done so much for his music.

As Berio notes in his commentary (below), a Mahler quotation also serves as a connector to the fourth movement, although the

his Second Symphony (*Resurrection*). Mahler bears the same relation to the whole of the music of this part as Beckett does to the text. The result is a kind of “voyage to Cythera” that reaches its climax just before the third movement [the Scherzo] of the Second Symphony. This movement is treated as a generative source, from which are derived a great number of musical figures ranging from Bach to Schönberg, Brahms to Stravinsky, Berg to Webern, Boulez, Pousseur, myself, and others. The various musical characters, constantly integrated in the flow of Mahler’s discourse, are combined together and transformed as they go.

In this way these familiar objects and faces, set in a new perspective, context and light, unexpectedly take on a new meaning. The combination and unification of musical characters that are foreign to each other is probably the main driving force behind this third part of *Sinfonia*, a meditation on a Mahlerian “objet trouvé.” If I were asked to explain the presence of Mahler’s Scherzo in *Sinfonia*, the image that would naturally spring to mind would be that of a river running through a constantly changing landscape, disappearing from time to time underground, only to emerge later totally transformed. Its course is at times perfectly apparent, at others hard to perceive, sometimes it takes on a totally recognizable form, at others it is made up of a multitude of tiny details lost in the surrounding forest of musical presences.

The first four parts of *Sinfonia* are obviously very different one from the other. The task of the fifth and last part is to delete these differences and bring to light and develop the latent unity of the preceding four parts. In fact the development that began in the first part reaches its conclusion here, and it is here that all the other parts of the work flow together, either as fragments (third and fourth parts) or as a whole (the second).

Thus the fifth part may be considered to be the veritable analysis of *Sinfonia*, but carried out through the language and medium of the composition itself.

Sinfonia, composed for the 125th anniversary of the New York Philharmonic is dedicated to Leonard Bernstein.



Cover for the New York Philharmonic recording of *Sinfonia*

At the Time

The year in which *Sinfonia* was composed — 1968 — was tumultuous from start to finish:



From top: riot police on the streets of Baltimore; Robert F. Kennedy on the campaign trail; posters promoting Martin Luther King, Jr.'s appearance in Memphis on the day he was killed in that city

- The Prague Spring, a Czech reform movement that promised liberalized politics behind the Iron Curtain, was crushed through a Soviet crackdown.
- North Korea seized the USS *Pueblo*, an American military ship whose crew was detained for 11 months — and the ship itself to this day: a dangerous international incident.
- The Vietnam War was spiraling: its events of 1968 included the Tet Offensive, the Battle of Saigon, the My Lai Massacre, and the photograph of the execution of a Viet Cong prisoner by a police chief became an icon of its era.
- President B. Lyndon Johnson narrowly defeated his anti-war opponent, Eugene McCarthy, in the Democratic primaries and then withdrew from the Presidential race, paving the way for Republican Richard M. Nixon's victory in the November elections.
- Racial conflict erupted in many cities — Madison, Wisconsin; Chapel Hill, North Carolina; Oakland, California; and Cleveland, Ohio.
- Political protest overtook Chicago during the Democratic National Convention.
- Students at the French universities in and around Paris and at Columbia University in New York lay siege to their campuses.

Yet, even among these momentous events two stand out in the collective consciousness: the assassinations of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., on April 4, 1968, and of Presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy on June 6. Mark Kurlansky's book *1968: The Year That Rocked the World* does not have an exaggeration for a title.

Berio's Borrowings

Trying to keep up with the swirl of musical quotations in the third movement of Berio's *Sinfonia*? Here are some of the more recognizable allusions, apart from the ongoing reference to Mahler's Second Symphony:

- Schoenberg's *Five Pieces for Orchestra*, fourth movement
- Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* (the famous *idée fixe*)
- Ravel's *La valse*
- Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* ("Dance of the Earth" section)
- Stravinsky's *Agon* (Double Pas de Quatre)
- Richard Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier* (the famous waltz)
- Berg's *Wozzeck* (Act Three)
- Beethoven's *Symphony No. 6, Pastoral* (from the "Scene by the Brook")
- Debussy's *La Mer* (second movement)
- Boulez's *Pli selon pli*

borrowed material is greatly condensed and

conflated, as one comes to expect of this piece. It was with this gentle, sustained music that *Sinfonia* ended when it was premiered in 1968, but perhaps three months after the premiere, Berio added a fifth movement that is infused with references from the earlier movements — a true finale that, in retrospect, must have seemed sorely needed.

Instrumentation: three flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, three clarinets and E-flat clarinet, alto and tenor saxophones, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, four trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, orchestra bells, three tam-tams (high, medium, low), snare drum, bongos, marimba, sizzle cymbal, bass drum, tambourine, three wood blocks, frusta (slapstick or whip), guïro, sleigh bells, two triangles, vibraphone, cymbals, castanets, harp, piano, electric harpsichord, electric organ, and strings (24 violins divided into three sections, eight violas, eight cellos, and eight basses); also eight amplified singers.