LUCIANO BERIO
Sinfonia for Eight Voices and Orchestra
BORN: October 24, 1925, in Oneglia (now Imperia), Italy
DIED: May 27, 2003, in Rome
WORK COMPOSED: 1968–70
WORLD PREMIERE: (Final version) New York, on October 8, 1970. Leonard Bernstein conducted the New York Philharmonic Orchestra and the Swingle Singers.

As we gain clearer perspective on the musical landscape of high modernism, reached in the 1950s, ’60s and early ’70s, certain composers have emerged as the major figures of the period, and certain compositions as outstanding achievements. Among the former is Luciano Berio, and among the latter his Sinfonia.

The major Italian composer of the post-World War II period, Berio stood in the vanguard of European music throughout the second half of the 20th century. He was one of the first musicians to create significant pieces using electronically generated sounds, and during the late 1950s, in Milan, he directed the Studio di Fonologia, one of the world’s first electronic music studios. Subsequently, he returned to writing for conventional instruments and voice, but he now used them in decidedly unconventional ways.

Berio also explored relationships between verbal texts and music. This interest extended beyond just setting words to music. Rather, it included the use of language as compositional material, the music inherent in spoken words: their rhythm, inflection, different sorts of articulation and other sonic properties. Moreover, Berio’s artistic outlook was deeply influenced by some of the major modern writers, including James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, E. E. Cummings, Umberto Eco and Italo Calvino. Their work suggested to him, among other things, a playful aesthetic that revels in ambiguity, multiple meanings, fractured syntax and stream-of-consciousness.

Berio’s innovative approach to instrumental and vocal sounds, as well as his innovative use of spoken language, coalesced in Sinfonia. The work was written in several stages during 1968 and 1969. It began with a musical tribute to Martin Luther King, Jr., composed in the wake of his assassination, in April 1968. This eventually became the second of four movements that formed an initial version of Sinfonia. Berio added a fifth movement in 1969, thereby creating a five-part design in an arch-like shape. The first and last movements are similar in character, texture and material, as are the second and fourth movements. The third movement, the most substantial portion of the composition, forms the capstone.

Words, either sung or spoken, are an integral part of the musical fabric in all five movements. That they are often unintelligible — they sound in several languages, usually consist of fragmentary phrases or syllables, and frequently are masked by orchestral music — is very much by design. What meaning may be gleaned from them is allusive at best and often swept away in the next moment.

The third movement, in every way the heart of the composition, is built on the scherzo movement of Gustav Mahler’s Second Symphony, which serves as the basis for an extraordinary musical collage. Over and around this symphonic movement, Berio layers an array of instrumental and spoken quotations, the profusion of these interpolations sometimes obscuring the Mahlerian background. “If I were asked to explain the presence of Mahler’s scherzo in
Sinfonia,” Berio observed, “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 Mahler scherzo, the succession of musical quotations and the spoken-word fragments combine to create a dizzying, and quite exhilarating, stream-of-consciousness experience.

What to Listen For
Berio establishes the effect of hearing but not quite understanding spoken words in the opening movement, whose text comes chiefly from a treatise by the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss. Beginning and ending with amorphous clouds of sound, this initial portion of the piece evolves into a complex and active fantasy, with a brilliant percussion toccata at its center.

The second movement, “O King,” is the composer’s tribute to the slain civil rights leader. It reduces his name to elemental sounds that gradually expand until, in the final moments, we hear clearly “Martin Luther King.”

In addition to the scherzo from Mahler’s Second Symphony, the third movement includes fragmentary quotations from Debussy’s La mer, Strauss’ Der Rosenkavalier, Beethoven’s “Pastoral” Symphony and many other works. To these Berio has added a welter of spoken-word fragments, drawn mainly from Samuel Beckett’s 1953 monologue The Unnameable. This is, among other things, the source for the injunction “Keep going!,” heard repeatedly throughout the movement.

In the fourth movement, Berio begins a process of retracing his steps. The textures and harmonic complexion of the music are close to those of “O King,” while the text is syllables drawn from phrases heard in earlier movements. This process continues in the finale, where larger fragments of text from the initial movement are set amid virtuoso instrumental writing that also recalls the opening portion of the composition.

Scored for piccolo, 3 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, clarinet in E-flat, 3 clarinets in B-flat, alto saxophone, tenor saxophone, 2 bassoons and contrabassoon; 4 horns, 4 trumpets, 3 trombones and bass tuba; timpani and percussion; harp, electric harpsichord, piano and electric organ; 24 violins in three groups, 8 violas, 8 cellos and 8 double basses.

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