

Introduction: Hearing Mahler

[T]he different degrees of understanding, even the experience of “not quite hearing” are to be regarded as essential to the nature of the musical process.

Luciano Berio – *Sinfonia* (author's note)

In the hundred or so years since the death of Gustav Mahler, perhaps no other musician has demonstrated a more nuanced understanding of the composer's songs and symphonies than Luciano Berio (1925–2003). From his self-proclaimed “analysis” of the Scherzo of Mahler's Second Symphony in the third movement of *Sinfonia* (1968–69) to his richly orchestrated transcriptions of two groups of early songs in *5 frühe Lieder* (1986) and *6 frühe Lieder* (1987), Berio's critical engagement with Mahler's music offers a significant contribution to our understanding of its latent theatricality, as well as its deeply fractured teleology. But it is Berio's uncanny knack to listen anew to these works that is particularly deserving of further reflection. For as we will see, it is a gift that emerges in the context of his “commentaries” on Mahler's works as a rather specific compositional strategy. By drawing our attention to their cracks and fractures, theatrical excesses, and above all their obsession with thresholds, Berio opens our jaded twenty-first-century ears to Mahler's bold reinvention of the symphony, a genre that by the end of the nineteenth century had all but exhausted itself.

Using Berio's attentive ears as a point of departure, this introduction provides a brief exploration of the third movement of *Sinfonia*, the composer's most extensive reworking of Mahler's music. For it is in the context of this movement that the modern listener is invited to revisit some of the most radical aspects of Mahler's larger symphonic project. Whereas the most common interpretive approaches in the existing literature on *Sinfonia* focus on the virtuosic handling of the heterogeneous material that is brought into dialogue with Mahler's Scherzo, what has received less attention is the crucial relationship between continuity and discontinuity that Berio uncovers in his “analysis” of the movement. Indeed, Berio's elaborate commentary ultimately sheds new light on Mahler's unique attitude towards the presentation and ordering of musical events. And in doing so, it also forces us to reconsider the way in which the presumed

narrative arc of Mahler's symphonic works has shaped our own encounter with this music.

During the course of these brief introductory remarks, I hope to emphasize the particulars of Berio's auditory imagination or, to put it more simply, the way in which Berio listens to Mahler's music. Of particular interest with respect to the third movement of *Sinfonia* ("In ruhig fliessender Bewegung") is the way in which Berio draws attention to the cracks in the façade of Mahler's Scherzo, cracks that in the original movement have been largely papered over by the seductive thread of its omnipresent *perpetuum mobile*. Indeed, the third movement of *Sinfonia* ultimately reveals Berio's profound understanding of the inherent contradictions that haunt Mahler's Scherzo: between its relentless trajectory and its frequent breaks and fractures. Nowhere does this emerge more clearly than when Berio foregrounds the significant but rarely discussed moments of discontinuity that characterize the original Scherzo. In what follows, I focus my attention on two aspects of Berio's commentary: his treatment of the brief transitional passage that precedes the movement's first Trio and its reprise, and the more elaborate reworking of the Scherzo's threefold reprise (focusing on its transformation from a largely intact reframing of the original statement to a ghostly outline). Finally, and by way of conclusion, I show that Berio's attention to the Scherzo's fractured surface extends well beyond its most significant structural divisions.

Before coming to a more detailed assessment of these passages, it is worth considering what might have drawn Berio to Mahler's music in the first place. This obvious attraction can be attributed, at least in part, to Berio's sympathy for Mahler's own engagement with the musical past, a sentiment reflected in his admiring description of Brahms and Mahler who made "metaphorical trips to the library, to take stock of its endless shelves."¹ We know that as a consequence of such journeys, Mahler also embarked on a series of more literal exercises: namely, the retouching, transcription, and often wholesale re-imagining of the works of his predecessors. Whereas it was the music of Weber, Schumann, Beethoven, and Bach that most occupied Mahler's attention, Berio by contrast was attracted to a more eclectic range of composers: Mozart, Purcell, Boccherini, Brahms, and Schubert. But it is from the perspective of this shared heritage of literal and metaphorical excursions that Berio recognized the extent to which Mahler's music, like his own, is inhabited by other music. Yet it is also important to bear in mind that for Berio the

¹ Luciano Berio, *Remembering the Future* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 9.

“embittered, jostling expressive ‘objects’ that populate Mahler’s world . . . are significant examples of commentary and assimilation as an indirect form of transcription.”²

Copying and transcription

Whereas the roots of this shared interest in the musical past lie in the act of transcribing the works of others, around the time Berio was completing *Sinfonia* he had also begun to explore the limits of transcription in relation to his own compositions. As he observes in connection with his own series of works that he titled *Chemins*, the incorporation of previously composed solo lines from the *Sequenzas* was not to be considered transcription in the strictest sense since these lines did not undergo any modification. Instead, these works offered something more substantial: “an exposition and an amplification of what is implicit, hidden so to speak, in that solo part.”³ In *Chemins I*, based on his *Sequenza II* for solo harp, Berio draws attention to the way in which the interaction of material gives rise to new ways of hearing. Indeed, for Berio, there is “a differentiated repartee between the soloist and the added instrumental forces (an orchestra and two additional harps), and between the multiple perspectives of listening imposed by these new forces on the original solo *Sequenza*.”⁴ This process is taken further in *Chemins IV* where “a dialogue between a pre-existing musical text and the otherness of an added text are . . . developed through multiple forms of interaction, from the most unanimous to the most conflictual and estranged.”⁵ In many respects, what Berio attempted in the third movement of *Sinfonia* is rooted in these ongoing explorations of transcription in its many forms.

Given that Berio’s attitude towards transcription was shaped by his own compositional priorities it raises the question as to the value he saw in transcribing the music of others. In Berio’s view, a transcription needed to accomplish at least one of two things: produce an analysis of the work in question or draw attention to what is latent in its musical fabric. With respect to the latter, we have already seen that in his *Chemins* Berio had elevated this rather specific analytical goal to a compositional principle. But if this strategy is also evident in Berio’s later transcriptions of Mahler’s early songs, there his motivation was also rather more straightforward: namely, he wished to “bring to light the undercurrents of the original piano

² Ibid., 39. ³ Ibid., 42. ⁴ Ibid. ⁵ Ibid., 44

part: Wagner, Brahms, the mature Mahler, and the modes of orchestration that came after him.”⁶

As for the notion that a transcription might be motivated by analytical considerations, we know that Berio admired the transcriptions of Anton Webern in part because he believed that in Webern's conception “transcription *became* a form of analysis.”⁷ Thus, it is not surprising to learn that Berio regarded *Sinfonia* as the “best and deepest possible analysis [he] could make” of Mahler's Scherzo.⁸ Yet it is also worth remembering that for Berio, this project was far more than an analytical exercise. As is evident in *Rendering* (1988–90), a work he described late in life as an “act of love for Schubert,” Berio's engagement with the musical past almost always emerges as a creative act that holds deeply personal significance.⁹

Continuity

If the notion of transcription provides a useful point of entry for coming to terms with Berio's interest in Mahler, the most revealing perspective remains the aforementioned tension between continuity and discontinuity that characterizes so much of Mahler's music. Yet most accounts of *Sinfonia* have tended to emphasize the former, a quality widely presumed to be inherent in the Scherzo on which it is based. Indeed, Berio himself often referred to his treatment of Mahler's Scherzo by drawing on metaphors that emphasize the original movement's perpetual motion and apparent forward sweep. In the author's note, for example, he describes the movement as a “kind of *voyage to Cythera* made on board the Scherzo of Mahler's Second Symphony.”¹⁰ Yet as Berio knows, voyages are almost always marked by detours and disruptions.¹¹ Indeed, his use of an entirely different group of metaphors elsewhere in his own accounts of the movement suggests a reluctance to identify any straightforward trajectory in the music. Take, for instance, the metaphor of the skeleton, which according to Berio “often re-emerges fully fleshed out, then

⁶ Ibid., 41. ⁷ Ibid., 39. Emphasis added. ⁸ Ibid., 40. ⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Luciano Berio, *Sinfonia*, author's note, accessed 26 February 2014, <http://www.lucianoberio.org/node/1494?1683069894=1>. Emphasis in original

¹¹ David Metzger has observed in connection with Berio's reference to Cythera that this “mythical island of pleasure seems well beyond the horizon.” David Metzger, “The Promise of the Past: Rochberg, Berio, and Stockhausen,” in *Quotation and Cultural Meaning in Twentieth-Century Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 133.

disappears, then comes back again.”¹² Although this skeleton is “accompanied throughout by the ‘history of music,’” the metaphor itself is both ahistorical and atemporal.¹³

With respect to the perceived continuity of Berio's movement, an additional element that bears consideration is the text of Samuel Beckett's novel *The Unnamable*, which runs in tandem with Mahler's Scherzo: “two equals that run side by side in their new musical environment.”¹⁴ Indeed, Beckett's text “offers another type of *perpetuum mobile*, though one in which the ‘ceaseless flow’ of words goes nowhere.”¹⁵ When taken together, then, the conflicting impulses of this double *perpetuum mobile* suggest how deeply the apparent continuity of Mahler's Scherzo has been compromised in Berio's reworking of the movement. From this perspective the significance of Beckett's text is undeniable. Indeed, it is partly in response to the “gradual dissolution of traditional narration and character” in *The Unnamable* that Mahler's Scherzo disintegrates as the movement progresses.¹⁶ This in turn raises the question as to whether there is something inherent in the original Scherzo that points to the possibility of such disintegration. But if we are to take seriously Berio's claim that the third movement of his *Sinfonia* offers an analysis of Mahler's Scherzo, we are now compelled to ask what precisely his analytical project tells us about this music.

Discontinuity

In Mahler's original Scherzo, the imminent arrival of the passage that has traditionally been designated Trio I is signalled by a sweeping chromatic collapse (five before 32). The sudden move to F major is jarring, an effect that is further amplified by a radical shift of texture and timbre. Berio's treatment of this passage also sets the stage for his subsequent refashioning of the movement's key structural articulations. While he retains the original chromatic collapse – indeed, he shines a spotlight on this gesture – the start of the Trio itself is largely obscured (E to six after E). And by obscuring its arrival, Berio entirely neutralizes the original movement's sudden change of key. As for the reprise of Trio I, Mahler's Scherzo only intensifies the original chromatic collapse

¹² Luciano Berio, *Two Interviews*, ed. Rossana Dalmonte and Bálint András Vargas (New York: Marion Boyars, 1985), 107.

¹³ Ibid. Another prominent metaphor used by Berio that falls into this category is that of a “container.” Berio, *Sinfonia*, author's note.

¹⁴ Metzger, “The Promise of the Past,” 131. ¹⁵ Ibid., 132. ¹⁶ Ibid., 133.

(five before 47). At the analogous point in the third movement of *Sinfonia*, Berio too retains this collapse while undercutting the expected arrival of the Trio (V to six after V). Although he retains the first measure of the timpani part, by stripping away the supporting double basses all that remains is a distant echo of the Trio's original starting point. Whereas Berio's "analysis" emphasizes the Trio's status as a distinct entity, by obscuring its start, he draws attention to a structural seam that marks a moment of discontinuity in the original movement. It is surely not coincidental that at precisely this point "Mahler's text goes underground asserting its existence only by occasional fragments."¹⁷ While much remains to be said about how this "text" resurfaces, it is the treatment of the initial Scherzo material that offers the most telling evidence of Berio's remarkable sensitivity to the original Scherzo's delicately fractured surface.

Whereas Berio treats Trio I and its reprise in rather similar ways, for the three Scherzo reprises, the outline of the original Trio becomes increasingly opaque as the movement progresses. In Mahler's Second Symphony, the first Scherzo reprise is preceded by a gentle disruption that is marked by a sudden increase in dynamic level (at 34). Berio retains both the disruptive gesture and the reprise proper, but he sharply alters the timbre of the *perpetuum mobile* figure by assigning the running sixteenth-note pattern to the eight singers, who intone the solfège syllables of the main melodic line in a hushed whisper (eight before H). In the original Scherzo, the second reprise is signalled by a violent one-measure chromatic descent (one before 44). While Berio retains this disruptive gesture (one before S), the reprise itself is reduced to a fragmentary outline that is almost entirely overshadowed by the prominent quotation of the "drowning music" from Alban Berg's *Wozzeck*. Whereas Mahler's third and final reprise is similar to the second (one before 54), Berio treats it quite differently. In addition to omitting entirely the short chromatic descent, he erases virtually every trace of Mahler's reprise (at FF).

If Berio's subtle treatment of these crucial structural divisions opens our ears to the Scherzo's formal fractures, his exploration of Mahler's own self-borrowing draws attention to an entirely different kind of discontinuity. The moment in question occurs at precisely the point in the original Scherzo where Mahler ceases to draw on the song material on which the movement is based (eleven before 34). At the parallel moment

¹⁷ David Osmond-Smith, *Playing on Words: A Guide to Luciano Berio's Sinfonia* (London: Royal Musical Association, 1985), 60.

in the third movement of *Sinfonia*, Berio momentarily suspends the music's relentless forward drive, creating a barely audible tear in the music's sonic fabric. And by doing so, he accomplishes something extraordinary: the highlighting of a seam that in the context of the original movement is meant to be inaudible. Whereas Mahler necessarily disguises the move from his orchestral elaboration of the original song to a freely composed continuation derived from the same material, Berio instead draws this shift to the listener's attention. Through what we can only assume was his careful study of "Des Antonius von Padua Fischpredigt" – the Wunderhorn song on which the movement is based – Berio thus reveals a hidden aspect of Mahler's own compositional process.

Writing about Berio's remarkable engagement with Mahler's Scherzo, David Metzger has observed, "with its beams and hinges shattered, the Scherzo falls apart, becoming a broken and sputtering *perpetuum mobile*."¹⁸ Yet we might also think of Berio's "analysis" as providing us with a new way to hear the fractures that are so deeply embedded in Mahler's original Scherzo. If Berio's decades-old claim that this work represents his "most experimental music" today seems overstated, what remains clear is that his deep engagement with the musical fabric of Mahler's symphonic landscapes still has the potential to open our ears to music that we thought we knew so well.¹⁹

Landscape/mobility/theatricality

Berio's "analysis" of the Scherzo of Mahler's Second Symphony serves as a useful point of departure for what follows: namely, an account of Mahler's symphonic writing that explores his provocative reinvention of the genre at the turn of the twentieth century. Among other things I aim to shed light on a seldom discussed aspect of Mahler's musical language: the unique and often radical approach to the presentation and ordering of musical events. Through a sustained engagement with several key works – including the First, Third, Sixth, and Seventh Symphonies, as well as *Das Lied von der Erde* – I identify a fundamental and largely unacknowledged tension between the music's episodic structure and its often-noted narrative impulse. Over the course of the book, I elaborate a framework in which

¹⁸ Metzger, "The Promise of the Past," 134. ¹⁹ Berio, *Sinfonia*, author's note.

the origins of Mahler's fractured teleology are considered in terms of the composer's ongoing dialogue with nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century musical and aesthetic traditions. To this end, I appeal to an explicitly interdisciplinary model that draws on three broad categories: landscape, mobility, and theatricality. Each category serves as a flexible thematic anchor around which Mahler's decisive contribution to the Austro-German symphony emerges in light of the immediate cultural context of the Austrian *fin de siècle*.

Landscape

Whereas the importance of landscape has often been acknowledged in connection with Mahler's works, it remains underexplored as an interpretive category. I argue that the established view of the composer's deep attachment to the Austrian countryside, for example, needs to be reformulated in terms of the larger transformation that it underwent during his lifetime. In this connection, I consider the ways in which this landscape emerged at the end of the nineteenth century as one of the principal sites of modernity. Drawing on representations of landscape in painting and early film, I show the extent to which new modes of perception – shaped above all by the railroad – transformed Mahler into a new kind of spectator of the environments in which he lived and worked. Against the backdrop of emerging notions of tourism and leisure culture, I also consider the extent to which Mahler's ambivalent relationship to this development is reflected in the musical fabric of his symphonies.

Mobility

If the idea of landscape offers a familiar backdrop for a renewed engagement with Mahler's music, the category of mobility offers an entirely new conceptual framework, one in which the place of these works within the context of late-Habsburg culture can be more fully explored. Given Mahler's peripatetic existence, the very notion of mobility also offers an attractive metaphor for coming to terms with the composer's position as an emblematic figure of both transatlantic and metropolitan modernism. I also consider the broader implications of this idea with respect to the works themselves, particularly in terms of Mahler's frequent use of mobile spatial deployment in which offstage instruments provocatively map out imagined spaces that lie beyond the confines of the orchestral platform.

Theatricality

Similarly, the notion of theatricality offers a new framework in which Mahler's works can be understood more clearly as products of the metropolitan culture in which they were produced. My primary aim is to explore the intersection between ideas of theatricality as embedded in the political and cultural fabric of the Austrian *fin de siècle*, and my larger claim that Mahler revitalizes the symphony as a genre by giving it a theatrical form. Finally, I consider the ways in which the gradual refining of the spatial dimension in Mahler's symphonies can be tied to a broader move in his symphonies from an overt to an interiorized theatricality.

Chapter 1, "The expansion of symphonic space," explores the treatment of space in *Das klagende Lied* and the First Symphony from the perspective of Mahler's experience as a conductor of opera. I consider the theatrically located offstage utterances in these works in the light of passages from Beethoven's *Fidelio* (Act II, scene 2) and Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* (Act II, scene 2), as well as against the backdrop of Mahler's controversial attempt to assign the *Alla marcia* section from the Finale of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony to an offstage orchestra. By considering in turn the relationship of Mahler's treatment of offstage space to the larger formal structure of the First Symphony as a whole – specifically as it relates to the moment of "breakthrough" in the first and last movements – I suggest that Mahler ultimately re-establishes the vitality of the symphony at the intersection of the waning symphonic tradition and the immediacy of operatic convention.

Chapter 2, "Distant music," considers Mahler's more general interest in the idea of distant sound and argues that the ongoing fascination with Mahler's use of offstage space has overshadowed a closely related and far less commonly discussed manifestation of "music from afar." As a careful study of Mahler's scores and sketches reveals, his earliest compositions already embrace the possibility that distant music can emerge from the stage itself. By establishing a category of music that sounds "as if" from the distance (*wie aus der Ferne*), I argue that Mahler articulates a notion of imagined distance that is closely tied to the numerous paratextual annotations that emerge as a central feature of these early works. The implications of Mahler's carefully differentiated conceptions of distant music are particularly evident in the first and third movements of the Third Symphony where the intersection of real and imagined distance results in the creation of an entirely new kind of symphonic landscape.

In Chapter 3, “Alpine journeys,” I challenge the conventionally accepted view that the celebrated cowbell episode in the Sixth Symphony evokes qualities of solitude and contemplation. By considering the cowbells themselves as a kind of aural disturbance within an already cluttered and oppressive musical landscape, I suggest that they function not as signifiers of “world-weary isolation” and the “solitude of nature high above,” but rather as ironic souvenirs of the *fin-de-siècle* Austrian institution of the *Sommerfrische*. By reconstructing one of Mahler’s many solitary excursions, in the Eastern Alps, I argue that the composer emerges not as a *promeneur solitaire* in the Romantic mould, but rather as an active inhabitant of a landscape that has been transformed into one of the most important sites of urban culture.

In Chapter 4, “Symphonic panoramas,” I argue that Mahler’s relationship to the Austrian countryside was determined as much by the traditional practices of walking and hiking as it was by the technologies that afforded him such ready access to this rapidly changing landscape. Specifically, I show how the peripatetic Mahler was transformed by the railway into an entirely new kind of spectator of the landscapes through which he so regularly travelled. I suggest that the breathtaking panoramas he experienced from the perspective of the railway carriage offer a powerful metaphor for coming to terms with the kaleidoscopic unfolding of musical events that characterizes parts of the Seventh Symphony. In this connection, I appeal to the early cinematic panoramas created by the Lumière brothers as a way of providing new insight into notions of continuity and discontinuity, as well as the tension between the idyllic and the quotidian in what remains the composer’s most contested symphonic conception.

Finally, Chapter 5, “The wanderer,” explores Mahler’s relationship to the figure of the wanderer and considers the idea of walking as a mode of resistance and affirmation. Drawing on the work of Massimo Cacciari, I reveal the ways in which the composer’s preoccupation with the broader themes of landscape and mobility are both refined and intensified in *Das Lied von der Erde*. This takes on particular significance in the work’s closing movement, “Der Abschied” (The Farewell), where the movement’s two grand tableaux interiorize the more overt theatricality of his earlier symphonies. Here I also discuss the implications of Mahler’s practice of walking as it relates to the concept of “late style” in the composer’s last works.