

“DIFFÉRANCE” AND INTERTEXTUALITY IN THE THIRD MOVEMENT OF
LUCIANO BERIO'S *SINFONIA*

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Luciano Berio's *Sinfonia*, premiered in 1968, is probably the most interpreted and analysed postmodernist work in the last decades of the twentieth century. However, research and theoretical analysis of this work have rarely transcended the purely musical aspect of this work. Beyond an analysis of the composer's language and a meticulous description of the many literary and musical references which underlie its five movements, there are no studies, in my opinion, which deal with the work's complex discursivity from a broader and more flexible perspective using, for example, post-structuralist theories and more specifically, the concept of *diffrance* proposed by Jacques Derrida.

Firstly I shall open the study with the two principal references which constitute the third movement of the *Sinfonia*: the text of *The Unnamable* by Samuel Beckett and the *Scherzo* from Gustav Mahler's Second Symphony since, according to the composer, these sources are situated on the same semantic level: “Mahler is to the music of this third part of the *Sinfonia* what Beckett is to the text”¹. Secondly, I will explain how the numerous literary and musical quotes which are spread throughout Beckett's text and Mahler's scherzo produce new plays of meanings. Finally I will show how, through the notion of *diffrance*, the *Sinfonia* becomes a theoretical artefact and, therefore, an “alternative protocol of experience”.

¹ The original in French: “Mahler est à la musique de cette troisième partie de *Sinfonia* ce que Beckett est au texte”. IRCAM, Centre Pompidou. Brahms. “Luciano Berio (1995/2003)”. <http://brahms.ircam.fr/index.php?id=6881> (visited 2nd Mars 2012).

Beckett's text, unlike other texts used in the *Sinfonia*², is presented as a background which extends throughout the third movement. In this novel, renowned for its self-reflexive nature, the narrative voice struggles to rid itself from the narrated text. Over the course of a continuous drama, the end of which is uncertain, this voice defines itself as “two retinas placed one in front of the other” and as a “regression to the infinity of representation”³. *The Unnamable* belongs to a trilogy which maintains a great unity of discourse at the level of meta-language. In effect, there is a clear progression from the first two novels *Molloy* and *Malone Dies*, in which the narrator is simply a pretext to develop the drama which occurs at a syntactic and metalinguistic level, to *The Unnamable*, in which the notion itself of the narrator disappears, leaving the narrative voice completely vulnerable before its existential dilemma. Even from the very first paragraph of *Molloy*, the absurdity of the text is clear since at the level of the action, a temporal paradox originates as it is impossible for the narrator, who is sat in a room and is writing the pages which a man has gathered, to incorporate the objections made by this man into his “original beginning”:

[he] told me I'd begun all wrong, that I should have begun differently. He must be right. I began at the beginning, like an old ballocks, can you imagine that? Here's my beginning. Because they're keeping it apparently⁴.

As some writers point out, this beginning, that is, a paragraph of around 500 words, refers in reality to the following section, a second paragraph of no less than 40,000 words, and not to the beginning of the novel as could be thought on reading it for the first time. On the other hand and with greater vehemence than in the two preceding works, the narrative voice of *The Unnamable* tries to acquire its own meaning, without apparent success, as it will be an impossible task for it to rid itself or even become independent from the text. This could be perfectly understood in terms of a deferral of spatial-temporal meaning,

² Such as, for example, extracts from the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss' *The Raw and the Cooked*, French student slogans from May '68, German phrases, etc.

³ José Ángel García Landa, “Lenguaje y différence en El Innombrable de Beckett”.

http://www.unizar.es/departamentos/filologia_inglesa/garciala/publicaciones/differance.html (visited 2nd Mars 2012).

⁴ Alan Astro, *Understanding Samuel Beckett* (Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 1992), 52.

derived directly from Derrida's concept of *différance*. Besides, the term *aporia*⁵, employed by Beckett in the text of *The Unnamable*, complements this notion of deferral:

What am I to do (what shall I do, what should I do?) in my situation? How proceed? By aporia pure and simple? Or by affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered (or sooner or later)? (Generally speaking.) There must be other shifts. Otherwise it would be quite hopeless. But it is quite hopeless. (I should mention before going any further - any further on - that I say "aporia" without knowing what it means)⁶.

Before proceeding with the development of my arguments, I believe it necessary to speak a little more about Jacques Derrida's concept of *différance*, since its essence is of notable complexity. This term contains a double meaning which comes from the verb 'to defer' (from the latin *differre*) which means both, 'to defer' in temporal terms (to postpone), and, 'to differ' in spatial terms (to differentiate). This concept, traditionally applied to language use, comes, for the most part, from the Saussurean notion of difference between the signifier and the signified. In the same way, Saussure states that the arbitrariness of the sign and its differential character are inseparable. Derrida, however, uses this conclusion as a mere starting point and develops it asserting that

retaining at least the philosophy thinking if not the content sense of the demand formulated by Saussure, we will designate *différance* as the movement according to which language, or every code, every system of repetitions is, in general, constituted "historically" as a structure of differences. "It is constituted", "it is produced", "it is created", "movement", "historically", etc., must be understood beyond the metaphysical language in which they have been taken with all their implications⁷.

⁵ From a rhetorical point of view, the term *aporia* refers to the doubt expressed by a speaker before an audience about his position or about the manner in which he should proceed; however, from a philosophic point of view, the term is used when culminates in an impasse without solution with inconsistent premises as a starting point.

⁶ The Unnamable, <http://web.archive.org/web/20030806103203/http://www3.telus.net/public/klball/unnamable.htm> (visited 2nd Mars 2012).

⁷ Original in French: "Retenant au moins le schéma sinon le contenu de l'exigence formulée par Saussure, nous désignerons par *différance* le mouvement selon lequel la langue, ou tout code, tout système de renvois en général se constitue "historiquement" comme tissu de différences. "Se constitue", "se produit", "se crée", "mouvement", "historiquement", etc., devant être entendus au-delà de la langue métaphysique où ils sont pris avec toutes leurs

The movement to which Derrida refers is a movement which produces “differences of meaning” and is, essentially, elusive. *Différance* makes every element present appear effectively under the sign of presence. According to José Ángel García Landa, the concept of deferral makes up the base of the discourse in *The Unnamable*:

Metalanguage [is] the motor of the prose in *The Unnamable*. It is clear that the subject matter of unnamability, of necessary alienation from the self, finds in this textual generator, in meta-language, not only an instrument of expression, but also a structural parallel and a thematic reinforcement. The reflexivity of language and the reflexivity of the conscience have, above all, the same root: the differential constitution of reality, the presence of difference within the very notion of identity⁸.

In effect, it is at the level of meta-language and of the syntactic construction of the text where the simultaneous action between what is narrated and the action of the language can be observed. A semantic progression from outside the system of significations of language exists throughout this work. What the text “does” and what the text “says” is, at the same time, opposed in essence and a product of the deferring action of *différance*.

Parallel to Beckett's text, the scherzo from Mahler's Second Symphony is used as a sound background over which the numerous musical and literary references mentioned earlier are inserted. Furthermore, it should be pointed out that the original subtitle which appears in the Mahler score - *in ruhig fliessender Bewegung*⁹ - is textually quoted at the beginning of third movement of the *Sinfonia*. The composer justifies his choice of this scherzo maintaining that Mahler's work “seems to carry the weight of the whole history of music from the last two centuries¹⁰. ” However, and contrary to these arguments, we can establish a much more subtle justification at a semantic level: the inclusion of the scherzo and its

“implications”. Jacques Derrida, *La Différance*.

<http://www.jacquesderrida.com.ar/frances/differance.htm> (visited 2nd Mars 2012).

⁸ José Ángel García Landa, “Lenguaje y différence en El Innombrable de Beckett”.

http://www.unizar.es/departamentos/filologia_inglesa/garciala/publicaciones/differance.html (visited 2nd Mars 2012).

⁹ “calmly flowing”.

¹⁰ Original in French: “l'oeuvre semble porter le poids de toute l'histoire de la musique de ces deux derniers siècles”. “Luciano Berio (1995/2003)”. <http://brahms.ircam.fr/index.php?id=6881> (visited 2nd Mars 2012).

original subtitle generates a superimposition of closely related meanings. In effect, the third movement of Mahler's Symphony is inspired by the song of the *Knaben Wunderhorn* which refers to St. Anthony of Padua's sermon to the fishes. It is no coincidence that this subtitle, closely related to water, appears textually quoted in the third movement of the *Sinfonia*, since a large part of the texts chosen by Berio for the first movement belong to Brazilian myths about water, compiled in Claude Levy-Strauss' *Le cru et le cuit* (The Raw and the Cooked). Finally, the composer describes the presence of Mahler's scherzo in his *Sinfonia* as “a river which crosses a landscape which is constantly changing, and which sometimes disappears beneath the earth to later reappear with a totally different face¹¹”.

Therein an interesting but no less complex question arises: What happens when these two basic references, that is, Beckett and Mahler, are incorporated at the same time within the same context? Firstly, it is clear, although subtly, that the semantic charge of these two objects is re-conceptualised as they are mixed within a unique context. Here, the music does not accompany the text, as would happen, for example, in a traditional work for choir and orchestra, nor is the text subordinate to the music. Both elements are inherent and reinforce each other. Although it is certain that in the majority of cases in this work, the text is treated as a musical element (for example, the serial use of syllables and letters from Martin Luther King's name in the second movement) we must not forget that its semantic charge is kept intact, independently of the syntactic use which is granted to it. Again, we see how the notion of *différance* can be applied in order to understand the complex system of multiple meanings which the third movement of the *Sinfonia* acquires when two elements with strong semantic charges are inserted into its structural base.

As a complement (and supplement) to Beckett's text and the music of Mahler, Berio includes a wide variety of literary and musical quotes which range from small fragments in German, texts from songs, slogans from “May '68”, extracts from Levy-Strauss's *Le cru et le cuit*, named notes, groans,

¹¹ Original in French: “...une rivière traversant un paysage constamment changeant, disparaissant parfois sous terre pour ressortir dans un décor totalement différent”.

vocalisations, etc., to complete bars from the works of Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Mahler, Debussy, Ravel, Strauss, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Berg, Stockhausen, Boulez and even from Berio himself¹². According to the composer, the texts used can be perceived to variable degrees are not always employed for their immediate intelligibility, since the insertion of musical references responds to a very precise compositional technique:

Precisely, as the degree of perception of the text, which varies throughout the work, is integrated in its musical structure, the fact of “not understanding clearly” must be seen as essential to the nature of the work itself...The different musical quotes are always integrated with the harmonic structure of Mahler's scherzo. They both signal and comment on the events and transformations. They therefore illustrate a harmonic process and they do not constitute a “collage”. Furthermore, these quotes from famous musicians, as they play out over each other, are transformed and suddenly acquire a new meaning, as so happens to familiar objects or faces placed under a light or within an unusual context¹³.

These references thus respond to a wish on the composer's part to conceptually transform his work. It is not a “collage” made up of numerous musical and literary quotes which are juxtaposed and superimposed on Beckett's text and Mahler's music, but rather an “intervention” of language, in the best postmodernist style, based on a precise manipulation of syntactic, melodic and harmonic elements which are integrated in a natural way. However, the use of musical references is by no means a new concept¹⁴.

¹² I have not included all the references in the piece in this study since it has been a subject already well documented. However, for more information I recommend the follow publications: David Osmond-Smith, Playing on Words: A Guide to Luciano Berio's Sinfonia (London: Royal Musical Association, 1987) and Peter Altmann, *Sinfonia von Luciano Berio: Eine analytische Studie* (Viena: Universal Edition, 1977).

¹³ Original in French: C'est précisément parce que le degré de perception du texte, variable au cours de l'œuvre, s'intègre à la structure musicale que le fait de «ne pas entendre clairement» doit être compris comme essentiel à la nature même de l'œuvre [...] Les différentes citations musicales sont toujours intégrées à la structure harmonique du scherzo de Mahler. Elles signalent et commentent les événements et les transformations. Elles illustrent donc un procédé harmonique et ne constituent pas un «collage». En outre, ces citations de musiciens célèbres agissent les unes sur les autres et se transformant, acquièrent soudain une signification nouvelle, comme le font ces objets ou ces visages familiers placés sous une lumière ou dans un contexte inhabituels. Translation by the author. “Luciano Berio (1995/2003)”. <http://brahms.ircam.fr/index.php?id=6881> (visited 2nd Mars 2012).

¹⁴ Peter Bruckholder, Andreas Giger, Felix Cox and David Birchler, from the Indiana University, have compiled a comprehensive bibliography on the subject of quotation in music in a database titled “Musical Borrowing”:

Examples of musical quotes have been found in the medieval period and famous composers have used this resource to compose their works, some in a structural manner (variations on a theme), others taking advantage of semantic context (the Bach's chorale *Es ist genug* which is quoted Berg's "Concerto for violin and orchestra") and the majority use both resources (the *Dies Irae* in Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* which is both a melodic-structuring element and an element with extramusical semantic charge).

The de-contextualisation of the quotes, which are unfolded throughout the third movement of the *Sinfonia*, from the inclusion of four simple chords from the Bach's first Brandenburg Concerto, to various bars from Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, re-conceptualise the original meaning of these "objects" as they are inserted into a different context. In effect, hearing a musical extract in its original context (in this case, the work which contains it) can be seen as an act of naturalization in so far as its meaning is observed from within its own language (harmonic structure and rhythm, for example).

When the same extract is superimposed, in this case, onto Mahler's *scherzo*, which is, for its part, an integral part of Berio's work, we no longer here its harmonic language or its melodic structure, but its semantic function within a new context. So we ask ourselves: what is that object doing there? What is its function? We observe it from outside, like a strange event.

It is here that the notion of *différance* appears again as a resource which can theoretically justify the audible result of the cited object. On being inserted into a context "other" to itself (and I use the term with some reservations), at least two semantic charges co-exist simultaneously: that which belongs to the cited object and that which is produced as a result of the new context (I say "at least" because the object can contain multiple meanings, depending on its complexity). However, thanks to the differential concept of "temporisation", from a Derridean point of view, the object's meaning is once again naturalised in the present and what was strange at first is replaced with a new meaning.

The references included in Berio's *Sinfonia* carry numerous implicit semantic charges which become complex as they interact with their context and with the other literary and musical references. Not only does the composer include Beckett's text in the *Sinfonia* by virtue of its theoretical implications, but he also uses the text to create a new meaning which could entail a semantic re-conceptualisation of the *Sinfonia* itself. Beckett's text therefore carries out a double function: it is, at the same time, a theoretical object and a theorising object. In the same way, the musical quotations, although they carry out a musical function when they are inserted at key points in the harmonic structure of Mahler's scherzo, cannot draw attention to themselves since, in the majority of cases, a cacophony is created from the juxtaposition of opposing harmonic languages. Furthermore, it is no coincidence that the contrasting medium over which these references are superimposed should be a short scherzo with an essentially regular tonal and rhythmic structure. We may ask ourselves what would be the result if, instead of a tonal work, Berio had employed an atonal piece with a complex rhythmic structure as sound background.

On the other hand, a large part of the text of the *Sinfonia* makes reference to the audience, the conductor and the soloists, that is, to the present time of the performance. It is this very “étant-présent”, as Derrida would call it that ends up elusive in the substitution of the sign for the thing that is represented: it is the polysemous nature of the deferral, in time and space, of the plurality of differences of meaning which are made tangible each time the work is performed. We thus see how this framework, composed of multiple meanings, produces an effect similar to that which we could appreciate from the analysis of the text of *The Unnamable* since, in both cases, the language points to itself. To attach a definitive meaning to the *Sinfonia* in time is an impossible task since the new meanings which are constantly being created will accumulate with each new performance.

So how can one go on? By aporia, as the voice in *The Unnamable* exclaims? The *Sinfonia* is inscribed within a historic context which breaks with the established modernist proposal in atonal serialism developed at the beginning of the twentieth century from the Second Viennese School. Within a creative

impulse itself, and together with composers such as John Corigliano¹⁵, Steve Reich, John Cage and Philip Glass, Berio uses the superimposition of anachronistic musical styles which co-exist in the same work and create a hybrid language opposed to preceding aesthetic proposals. The radical style in which Berio confronts the language of his predecessors (whose slogan was to break with all former schemes from their most profound bases) converts the *Sinfonia* into a new, “alternative protocol of experience”.

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¹⁵ This composer is known for his work *The Ghost of Versailles*, (1992), in which he mixes musical styles from the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries.