



Sinfonia—an arresting musical mirror of life in the sixties.

The Magic Theater of Luciano Berio

by Donal Henahan

GOD IS A SHOUT in the street, says Joyce's Stephen Dedalus to the opaque Mr. Deasy in *Ulysses*, thus anticipating what has become, half a century later, the twentieth-century artist's flight from the Sublime and his almost desperate embrace of the Commonplace as the true source and fountain of creative insight. No living composer more enthusiastically or more imaginatively follows Joyce in this elevation of the prosaic than Luciano Berio, and no Berio work demonstrates its validity better than his four-movement *Sinfonia*, a twenty-six-minute masterpiece that was foreshadowed a decade ago by the forty-four-year-old Italian's *Omaggio à Joyce*. The new piece, composed in 1968 and performed and recorded last October by the New York Philharmonic with the composer conducting, is a startlingly lovely thing, a large-scale success that gathers together and sums up most of the problematical musical ideas current in the Sixties: reuse of the past, collage, duplication and repetition, simultaneity, antiserialism, fragmentation, theatricality, and—Joyce would approve—deification of what musicians once called mere noise.

With his usual keen eye for the potentialities in mingling classical and popular strains in music, Berio

wrote his *Sinfonia* with the talents of the Swingle Singers in mind, and gives them a bit of swinging *solfège* to deliver in their patented style. Mostly, however, the voices are put to deeper, more thoughtful uses, interweaving quotes from Claude Levi-Strauss' *Le Cru et le cuit* in movement one; inventions on the name of Dr. Martin Luther King in the second movement; and in the astonishing third, chunks from Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*, *trouvé* prose and slogans borrowed from Harvard students, bits of Joyce, graffiti from the May 1968 Paris insurrection, and the *pensées* of Berio himself. For a genuinely *Finnegan's Wake*-ish finale, there is a coda that stirs all previous elements into one murky mélange of words and ineffable noises. There is, certainly, nothing in this that many a modern composer has not tried before—think only of Ives, or Cage, or Stockhausen. But, as Schoenberg asked in his Zennish way, "A Chinese poet speaks Chinese, but what does he say?" What Berio has said in his *Sinfonia* is that old rigid separations—sounds versus music, poetry versus prose, and so on—are dead and should be buried.

By all odds, the most compelling movement of the four (which are prodigally spread across both sides of

Berio *Continued*

one disc) is the third, an extraordinarily allusive pastiche whose musical base is the Scherzo of Mahler's *Resurrection* Symphony. One hears also, however, echoes of *Façade*, Bach, Richard Strauss, and many others (Berio names Debussy, Ives, Schoenberg, Ravel, Berlioz, Brahms, Berg, Beethoven, Wagner, Stockhausen, Stravinsky, Boulez, Vinko Globokar, Pousseur, Hindemith, and himself among those quoted). Mirrors within mirrors, boxes within boxes: what could be more Mahlerian and Joycean than such wholesale quotation? The effect is strangely touching, as in the best of Mahler itself, and illustrates Berio's continuing attachment to an older humanistic mode of thinking as well as his search for the newest sonic techniques. As always in Berio's scores, there is a stage implied in *Sinfonia*, and not merely the one inhabited by the orchestra and the Swingle Singers. We are present at a vaudeville show about the past becoming the now, a Magic Theater in which, as voices point out, "the unexpected is always upon us, in our rooms, in the streets, at the door, on a stage. . ."

What *Sinfonia* most powerfully suggests in this expertly played and brilliantly recorded performance, is the tone and quality of life in 1969, its complications, its flux, its dizzying changes, its chance encounters, its raw, uncontrollable surges. Most importantly, Berio manages to bring a sense of momentary order to the expanding universe he puts before us in sound. But that order, if it can be called that, is the imposed, tentatively accepted order of the theater, the penny show. "Well, well, so there *is* an audience," comments the ironic voice in movement three. "It's a public show. You buy your seat and you wait for it—perhaps it's free, a free show. You take your seat and you wait for it to begin. Or perhaps it's compulsory, a compulsory show. You wait for the compulsory show to begin. You can barely hear it—that's the show. . . . Waiting, waiting, that is the show, waiting for something to begin." The hand is Berio's, but the voice is Beckett's, reaffirming his faith in Godot.

So, throughout the movement, while Mahler's Scherzo rolls and waltzes forward, the admonition is heard: "Keep going! Keep going!" We are the show, and words, however hollow and ultimately meaningless, are all we have. The Word was made flesh, and dwells amongst us. Keep talking, keep talking, Berio advises us, or shout like a god if you can. For, as the voice says, "If the noise would stop, there would be nothing more to say."

After the exultations and Epiphanies of the roiling third movement, the fourth, just two minutes and fifty-eight seconds long, brings us up short. In the third, words, sentences, and whole paragraphs of fun and philosophy can be easily picked out of the aural melee, but the finale is dense, mystifying, often barely heard. There is a solemnity, a depression about it that might be compared to the elegiac endings of the Mahler Ninth or Third symphonies, compressed into a quick sob.

Throughout *Sinfonia*, Berio's incredible command of English prosody and his knowledge of the expressive possibilities of the human voice are continually evident. And it is human voices and humanly bowed and blown and banged instruments that carry the message. Except for amplification of voices, Berio's now-familiar preoccupation with electronic sound is absent from the score. Perhaps he is telling us that, even though it is late, God may still be a shout in the street, and not a computer-generated whimper.

BERIO: Sinfonia. The Swingle Singers; New York Philharmonic, Luciano Berio, cond. Columbia MS 7268, \$5.98.

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by Harris Goldsmith



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