Cambridge Opera Journal, **15,** 1, 83–106 © 2003 Cambridge University Press
DOI: 10.1017/S0954586702000836

Prospero's isle and the sirens' rock

ARMAN SCHWARTZ

Abstract: Luciano Berio's *Un re in ascolto* is based on a complex web of sources – writings by Calvino, Barthes, Kafka, Auden, Shakespeare and others – themselves intricately interrelated through games of citation and revision. Linking all these texts is a scene in which a male artist is confronted by a voice outside of his control. This scene is re-enacted – unexpectedly – at the climax of Berio's work. In this new context the unruly voice sounds like a revenant from a form long presumed dead: pure opera and absolute madness.

In Kafka's diaries for the year 1911, between theatre notes and family gossip, we find the following entry:

I want to write, with a constant trembling on my forehead. I sit in my room in the very headquarters of the uproar of the entire house. I hear all the doors close, because of their noise only the footsteps of those running between them are spared me, I hear even the slamming of the oven door in the kitchen . . . The house door is unlatched and screeches as though from a catarrhal throat, then opens wider with the brief singing of a woman's voice and closes with a dull manly jerk that sounds most inconsiderate. My father is gone, now begins the more delicate, more distracted, more hopeless noise led by the voices of the two canaries. I had already thought of it before, but with the canaries it comes back to me again, that I might open the door a narrow crack, crawl into the next room like a snake and in that way, on the floor, beg my sisters and their governess for quiet.[1]

Kafka imagines himself here as helpless before an anarchic world of sound: uncontrollable, it passes through his study walls and prevents writing. This sound has no one locus, contrasting with the study's fixed interior, and no single form, yet Kafka's figures for it together suggest a monstrous image of female song. The diseased throat, the woman singing, the delicate, distracted voices of the two canaries, and at the end of this sonic chain, seemingly in control of it, the author's sisters. No 'manly' slamming of the door can deter such racket. Kafka himself can only mimic sound's power to trespass space and transgress form: contorting himself into a snake, dragging his body across the passage through which its voices glide. This scene recalls the ending of 'The Metamorphosis', when Gregor Samsa is lured out of his study, and to his death, by the sound of his sister playing the violin. But one is also reminded of the high-pitched noise, 'the echo of voices singing at an infinite distance', that emanates from the all-powerful, because eternally absent, Castle.[2]

[1] Franz Kafka, *The Diaries: 1910–1923*, ed. Max Brod (New York, 1976), 104. This essay has profited greatly from conversations about various drafts with Katherine Bergeron, David Levin, Roger Parker and Mary Ann Smart, and from the comments of my readers at this journal. Berthold Hoeckner was an invaluable interlocutor as I was formulating the project. I am also indebted to the staff of the Paul Sacher Stiftung.

[2] Kafka, *The Castle*, trans. Willa and Edmund Muir (New York, 1954), 27. For further discussion of sound in Kafka, see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis, 1986), 4–6.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586703000831 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Just as it haunts his writing, this scene will resurface in the works of a number of Kafka's more notable readers. Roland Barthes cited it in his 1976 essay 'Listening'. Several years later, Italo Calvino brought both Barthes' essay and Kafka's diary entry to the attention of Luciano Berio, suggesting they might serve as the basis for an operatic collaboration.[3] Two works resulted: *Un re in ascolto* (*A King Listens*), a 'musical action in two parts' (1984), and a short story with the same title, which Calvino published the week the opera premiered. And so the penumbra of Kafka's private worries creeps across different media, and reaches towards the end of a century.

This is not, however, the way the story of the opera's origins is usually told. In the process of composition, Berio abandoned the plan of Calvino's original libretto, preserving only fragments from it, and recombining them with other texts, including Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, two later responses to that play (Auden's long poem *The Sea and the Mirror*, and an eighteenth-century singspiel libretto entitled *Die Geisterinsel*), and his own correspondence with Calvino. Just as the opera's original plan was obscured, so too was the relation between Calvino's tale and its sources: it was republished in a posthumous (and incomplete) collection of stories about the five senses.

Given this rhizomatic confusion, critics have in general been wary of asking what links Berio's and Calvino's texts to their literary sources, or to each other. One writer has recently described the pair of *Un re*'s as 'two works with few points in common but the same title'.[4] Similarly, David Osmond-Smith (Berio's most extensive commentator) warns: 'The temptation to play a sort of scholarly hide-and-seek is considerable. But it is potentially a false trail . . . Here, [Berio] takes as much as he needs from his various sources to give focus and edge to his ''musical action'' and no more'.[5] These views are encouraged by Berio's own statements on the historical position of his operas. 'Today music . . . can decide what in a text can be ''thrown away'' and what should instead acquire a dominant role: for example, what can be reduced to acoustic material and what can instead be highlighted along with its signifying chains'.[6]

In these comments Berio and Osmond-Smith rely on an entrenched modernist view of opera, portraying language (and by extension staging and performance) as a detriment to, or detritus of, pure music. This perspective is suspect, however,

[3] Two letters from Calvino to Berio about the project are reprinted in *Berio*, ed. Enzo Restagno (Turin, 1995), 135–41. My quotation of Kafka above follows the passage as it is quoted by Calvino in his letters.

[4] Calvino's story 'derivava dalla collaborazione con Berio, collaborazione che doveva sfociare in due lavori con pochi punti in commune, ma lo stesso titolo'. Frééderic Lefebvre, 'Un occhio in ascolto: Paesaggi sonori di Italo Calvino', *Musica/Realtà*, 67 (2002), 103.

[5] Osmond-Smith, *Berio* (Oxford, 1991), 117. Given the fruitfulness of Osmond-Smith's own attempts at this hide-and-seek elsewhere (in his analysis of Berio's *Sinfonia*, for example) this a priori rejection seems especially odd. See *Playing with Words: A Guide to Luciano Berio's Sinfonia* (London, 1985).

[6] Berio, 'Eco in ascolto', interview by Umberto Eco, in *Berio*, ed. Restagno (see n. 3), 55. For a more complex statement of this position, see Berio's lecture 'Of Sounds and Images', trans. Osmond-Smith, *this journal*, 9 (1997), 295–9.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586703000831 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and not just because of the usual objections to claims for musical autonomy and the posturing of the avant-garde. For one thing, Kafka's diary entry is an unlikely choice to give focus and edge to abstract music; if anything, it casts shadows on that very project, not only opposing sound and writing, but imagining the former as a dangerous and grotesque force. If Berio rejects the importance of words for the operatic text, Kafka worries about the power of song: one might wonder how the opera got written at all. Stranger still, the resultant piece seems not the radical attack on the form one might expect, but instead Berio's most traditional stage work. The title of an essay by Massimo Mila says it all: '*Un re in ascolto*: una vera opera'.[7]

Mila's contention is pointed, since Berio's earlier theatre pieces are indeed parodies of the institutions and conventions that the composer refers to as 'opera's inexorable and self-protective supermarket of the already done, already seen, and already heard'.[8] In *Passaggio* (1962), a group of actors stationed throughout the hall speak the imagined thoughts of the audience (fear of the poor, frustration with modern music, lust for the soprano); *Opera* (1970) combines Striggio's libretto for Monteverdi's *Orfeo* with a drama about the sinking of the *Titanic*; and *La vera storia* (1977–81) develops an elaborate commentary on the narratives of *Il trovatore*. Although *Un re* is set in an opera house, it lacks the bawdy, aggressive elements of its predecessors. In their place are grand (even beautiful) arias, sung by characters with names who move – for the first time – through something that could be called a plot.[9]

In an interview with the composer, Umberto Eco – an eloquent advocate of Berio's earlier projects – remarks on this apparent departure, and offers the rudiments of an explanation:

> I recall the first night of *Passaggio*. It was a memorable experience. The La Scala audience, who had booed *Wozzeck* a few years earlier, didn't understand what was happening, and was inclined to believe it was a revolutionary attack. We were delighted – all of us. But in the meantime something happened. The historical avant-garde exhausted its supply of provocation, not through its own defects, but by virtue of the public who immunized itself and would go to the theatre in order to be provoked. And so the only way to provoke it was not to provoke it anymore. The genres were reborn, although in ironic and critical versions. The novel began to tell stories again . . .[10]

Eco suggests that Berio, instead of abandoning his challenge to opera, has transferred his critique to a different site. It would be too easy to imagine that opera, like the novel, can provoke by simply 'telling stories again', but if the form has

[7] For Mila's essay, see *Berio*, ed. Restagno (see n. 3), 107–12.
[8] Berio, 'Of Sounds and Images' (see n. 6), 297.
[9] Another indication that *Un re in ascolto* marks a departure from Berio's earlier works is the number of productions it has received – far more than any of his previous theatre pieecs. In addition to its première performances at the Salzburg Festival, it has been staged by the major houses in Milan, London, Chicago, Frankfurt and Geneva.
[10] 'Eco in ascolto' (see n. 6), 58.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586703000831 Published online by Cambridge University Press

indeed been 'reborn' in *Un re*, one may well ask what elements of it are now heard through the filters of irony and critique.[11]

It is in response to this question that a reconsideration of the opera's sources becomes essential. By tracing a line that leads from Kafka through Barthes and Calvino and into Berio's opera, I suggest that the diary fragment functions for these later authors as a sort of blueprint, a sketch for a dramatic space in which the female voice can be simultaneously celebrated and ironized. It may thus be possible to answer Eco's question by saying that voice itself is reborn in *Un re in ascolto*. Opera sings again, in other words, and in this equivocation of song I locate both the work's tremendous power and its lasting provocation.

I

To reason thus is also to place *Un re* within the context of Marxist discussions about the place of opera within modernity, a discourse whose most complex node of articulation may be Adorno's 1955 essay 'Bourgeois Opera'. Revisiting the terms of the Weimar opera crisis, although decades after the end of the Republic, Adorno drew a connection between the continuing failure of modernist opera and the diminishing credibility of the operatic voice. A surprisingly affectionate farewell, the essay also speaks to more current debates about oppositions between plot and voice, radical staging, and the otherwordly powers of song.

'Bourgeois Opera' opens by suggesting that the Weimar crisis has been generalized and become permanent, that the form has arrived at an aesthetic 'standstill'.[12] Like Brecht before him, Adorno argued that opera must be characterized by its deep relationship to fantasy: it is 'the specifically bourgeois genre which, in the midst and with the means of a world bereft of magic, paradoxically endeavours to preserve the magical element of art'.[13] This magical element is invoked by all that is 'irrational' in operatic production, what Brecht had scathingly termed the genre's 'culinary' aspect.[14] These elements include opera's elaborate sets and extravagant costumes, but more importantly, its music. Operatic music, epitomized in the singing voice, is both

> The gilding of what already exists and the reflection of that which would be otherwise; the surrogate of the happiness which is refused to people, and the promise of true happiness. The gesture of dramatic characters singing covers up the fact that . . . they have as little reason to sing as they have opportunity. But in their song there resounds something of the hope for reconciliation with nature: *singing, the utopia of prosaic existence* is at the same time also the memory of the prelinguistic, undivided state of Creation.[15]

[11] And Berio himself notes that 'Every form of musical theatre played out within an opera house is also, inevitably, a parody'. 'Of Sounds and Images' (see n. 6), 298.
[12] Adorno, 'Bourgeois Opera', in *Opera Through Other Eyes*, trans. and ed. David J. Levin (Stanford, 1993), 25–43.
[13] 'Bourgeois Opera', 29. For Brecht's influential statements, see 'The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre', in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York, 1964), 33–42.
[14] For the culinary, see 'The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre', 35–7.
[15] Adorno, 'Bourgeois Opera' (see n. 12), 38–39. Emphasis mine.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586703000831 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The traditional conflict between words and music is reread as a conflict between an increasingly administered world and its fantasies of redemption. Operatic singing provides an illusory Arcadia while promising a distant utopia; Adorno heard it expressed most purely in the most stylized and least human of Wagner's roles: the coloratura forest bird in *Siegfried*.[16]

However – and here the crisis – this dialectic becomes increasingly difficult to sustain in the twentieth century. The rise of global state capitalism and increasingly impersonal forms of social domination have rendered anachronistic opera's hope for 'liberation, escape, and reconciliation'.[17] At the same time, the operatic tropes that could express these hopes have themselves become kitsch, sinking 'into the living-room treasure chests of the petite bourgeoisie, like Raphael's paintings, abused through innumerable reproductions'.[18] And so, Adorno argues, opera finds itself in an aesthetic endgame. Clinging to the old magic it does little more than recycle clichés. But rejecting the fantasy in favour of realistic stagings and speech-like intonations, it cuts itself off from its very essence.

Berg's unfinished *Lulu* as a telling symptom of the problem. Although Lulu's highly stylized coloratura looks back to 'the irretrievable phases of opera', her character has none of the innocence of Wagner's forest bird. Her voice represents both the operatic longing for a state of nature and 'the destructive nature with which [Berg's] opera reconciles'.[19] For Adorno, this simultaneous evocation and disavowal of the voice was the best to which modern opera could honestly aspire. He posed no solution to the paradox, preferring to preserve opera as a lingering relic of the old forms, and unrealized potentials, of the liberal bourgeoisie. Perhaps this explains why the nostalgic tone of 'Bourgeois Opera' is so far removed from the entirely pessimistic judgments on contemporary instrumental music in Adorno's essay 'The Aging of the New Music', written in the same year.[20]

The terms of this discourse persist, resurfacing in Boulez's notorious 1967 interview with *Der Spiegel*. Less willing than either Brecht or Adorno (themselves hardly compromising thinkers) to preserve opera's ties to its bourgeois history, Boulez demanded that entirely new opera houses be built before the production of avant-garde opera could begin, famously declaring that 'The most expensive solution would be to blow the [old] opera houses up. But don't you think that would

[16] Recent critics have questioned Adorno's (naïve?) faith in Wagner's songbird. See David J. Levin, *Richard Wagner, Fritz Lang, and the Nibelungen: The Dramaturgy of Disavowal* (Princeton, 1998), 158n.57; and Carolyn Abbate, *In Search of Opera* (Princeton, 2001), 124.

[17] 'Bourgeois Opera' (see n. 12), 41.

[18] *Ibid.*, 40. Adorno discusses the fetishization of the singer's voice in similar terms in his essay 'On The Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening', in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley, 2002), 295. 'If the moments of sensual pleasure in the idea, the voice, the instrument are made into fetishes and torn away from any functions which could give them meaning, they meet a response equally isolated, equally far from the meaning of the whole, and equally determined by success in the blind and irrational emotions which form the relationship to music into which those with no relationship enter.'

[19] 'Bourgeois Opera' (see n.12), 40.

[20] See 'The Aging of the New Music', in *Essays on Music* (see n.18), 181–202.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586703000831 Published online by Cambridge University Press

also be the most elegant?'[21] In a subsequent interview with the Earl of Harewood, Boulez described his frustration in Brecht's very terms: 'Even if one announces a modern opera, that is really a deception, because the word ''modern" must be dropped first if you are to join it to the word ''opera." . . . You must isolate completely the experimental or the new from the *Kulinarische Oper*'.[22] Yet Brecht and Adorno may have the last laugh after all, for it is perhaps this refusal to think the modern and the culinary together that has prevented Boulez from (even today) composing his first opera.

II

The tumult of late 1960s Paris also provoked less Hausmannian attempts to reconfigure operatic space. Barthes' writings sit uncomfortably within the context I have been describing, pointing towards the present freedom of individual fantasy instead of the promise of a revolutionary social formation.[23] This makes the question of the relation between Barthes' 'Ascolto' and *Un re in ascolto* especially intriguing, but it important to first establish the 1976 essay on its own terms. In opposition to Adorno, Barthes traces an optimistic narrative, describing three distinct types of listening and locating them within a trajectory that leads from the origins of language to an 'entirely modern', liberated, subjectivity.[24]

In its initial moment, listening is orientated towards *indexes*: transparent sounds like the wolf's cry or mother's voice that can be understood without language proper and either 'reveal danger or promise the satisfaction of need'.[25] The goal of this elementary form of listening is the protection of one's territory, and Barthes here refers to Kafka's anguish as his study is invaded by foreign voices. The second type of listening – listening to signs – begins when the infant stops waiting for the mother's voice and begins imitating it himself. From that moment on, sound *per se* ceases to carry clear meaning, becoming language. However, far from freeing the infant from his dependence on his environment, the introduction of language only initiates an increasingly complex relationship with the surrounding world. For, as Barthes writes,

> Listening is henceforth linked (in a thousand varied, indirect forms) to a hermeneutics: to listen is to adopt an attitude of decoding what is obscure, blurred, or mute, in order to make available to consciousness the 'underside' of meaning (what is experienced, postulated, intentionalized as hidden). The communication implied by this second listening is religious:

[21] 'Sprengt die Opernhäuser in die Luft!' *Der Spiegel*, 40 (1967): 166–74.
[22] Pierre Boulez, 'Whither Opera', interview by the Earl of Harewood, *Opera*, 20 (1969): 926.
[23] It should be noted that 'The Grain of the Voice' concludes with a suggestion that musical modernism was by no means inevitable: 'but it goes without saying that the mere consideration of the musical ''grain" could lead to another history of music than the one we know . . . if we were to succeed in refining a certain ''aesthetic" of musical enjoyment, we should doubtless attach less importance to the tremendous break in tonality which modernity had produced'. In *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1985), 277.
[24] Barthes, 'Listening', in *The Responsibility of Forms*, 245–6.
[25] *Ibid.*, 247.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586703000831 Published online by Cambridge University Press

it *ligatures* the listening subject to the hidden world of the gods, who, as everyone knows, speak a language of which only a few enigmatic fragments reach men, though it is vital – cruelly enough – for them to understand this language.[26]

The escape from the biological night is paid for with a loss of immediate access to the world and by the projection into a distinct subject position: the helpless infant becomes a subservient auditor, forced to interpret a given truth.

The third form of listening begins when the dual chambers of the confession booth are displaced by the ideally open, equal space of the psychoanalyst's office. Barthes, borrowing from Kristeva, terms the object of modern listening *signifiance*: this is what he elsewhere refers to as the obtuse, the *punctum*, and the grain of the voice. One stops listening to the signifieds of language and instead focuses on the special qualities of the signifier, 'not what is said or emitted, but who speaks, who emits'.[27] What one hears is the body of the speaker and, more than that, the speaker's unconscious: listening to it, finding oneself within it, all subject positions are abolished. This dangerous, emancipatory listening is always in conflict with listening of the second type. As Barthes concludes, the ear 'is finally like a little theatre on whose stage those two modern deities, one bad and one good, confront each other: power and desire'.[28] This theatre, and this confrontation, become the setting and the theme of Calvino's fable.

III

Calvino's story 'A King Listens' opens with self-consciously phallic pomp. 'The sceptre must be held in the right hand, erect', the nameless king instructs in the first sentence.[29] His authority, however, is less certain than it appears. The king is an insurgent dictator whose realm is threatened by rebel forces. His army may already be under the enemy's control and even the glory of the throne room is not what it seems: underneath the throne is hidden a stinking bedpan. This uncertain power is mirrored by the fragmented and unreliable second-person narration. Is this the king speaking to the reader? A former king berating a newer one? Or two halves of the king's unstable, dialogized ego, at war with each other? Alone in the throne room, the king resembles Kafka in his study. Like Kafka, his power is threatened by a world of sound outside his room, which he cannot control. *He* tries, however, and in the course of the story passes through Barthes' three stations of listening.

The king begins by listening to the indexes of the castle, the reliable sounds of the cooks in the kitchen and the troops outside. 'If the sounds are repeated in the customary order, at proper intervals, you can be reassured, your reign is in no danger'. At this point in the story, the king is no more than a scared animal, anxiously trying to defend his territory. However, he is aided by a vast network of spies, who process the castle's sounds through elaborate computer programs. The

[26] *Ibid.*, 249.
[27] *Ibid.*, 260.
[28] *Ibid.*
[29] Italo Calvino, 'A King Listens', in *Under the Jaguar Sun*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego, 1988), 31.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586703000831 Published online by Cambridge University Press

spies are a clever pun on Barthes' second type of listening – which, after all, he calls 'deciphering' – and the computer programs are an apt metaphor for the complexity and limitations of language. As the king describes it, 'What the spies' eavesdropping records, whether at your command or your enemies', is *the maximum that can be translated in the code formulas*, inserted into programs specifically devised to produce secret reports conforming to the official models'.[30]

The king despairs that this information is insufficient. 'What you want revealed is something quite different, the fear and hope that keep you awake, holding your breath, in the night: what your ears try to learn, about yourself, about your fate'.[31] At this moment the king latches on to the sound of a female voice, singing somewhere beyond his room. Now his 'desires find an object', but (he insists) it is not the song, 'which you must have heard all too many times, not that woman, whom you have never seen: you are attracted by that voice *as a voice*, as it offers itself in song'.[32] The king describes this voice in language almost identical to Barthes' essay 'The Grain of the Voice'. The king hears 'the throat, saliva, infancy, the patina of experienced life, the mind's intentions'.[33] Barthes listens to 'something which is directly the singer's body . . . the muscles, the membranes, the cartilage. . . .'[34]

Barthes concluded his essay with this realization, but it is here that Calvino's story properly begins. The king, against his better wisdom, leaves his chamber to search for the source of the voice. At last he finds it, singing in the palace dungeon. Only now it is singing in duet with another voice, a man's – the very ruler the king has usurped and imprisoned. He hears the voices 'going off together. It is useless for you to try to follow them: they are becoming a murmur, a whisper; they vanish'.[35] Abandoned, the king tries to make use of his other senses, looking and feeling for the first time in the story. But his rejection of hearing comes too late and, as the narration suddenly breaks off, we are left to contemplate a final, ambiguous sound: 'Somewhere, in the fold of the earth, the city is reawakening, with a slamming, a hammering, a creaking that grows louder. Now a noise, a rumble, a roar occupies all space, absorbs all sighs, calls, sobs. . .'.[36]

It would be possible to read this tale as a parable demonstrating Barthes' thesis: to listen to the voice, to participate in desire, we must try to let go of power. But to do so would be to miss the irony of Calvino's story. Barthes argues that the only way truly to understand a person is by listening to their voice; it reveals truths richer than those which language alone can convey. However, Calvino's king leaves the prison of spies and ciphers only to find himself in a more literal dungeon: the voice is linked, not to truth, but to deception. Calvino connects the king's fragmented self – suggested by the disorientating narrative voice, symbolized by the politically divided castle – to this voice he can never possess. For just as the voice demolishes

[30] *Ibid.*, 40. Emphasis mine.
[31] *Ibid.*
[32] *Ibid.*, 53. Emphasis mine.
[33] *Ibid.*, 54.
[34] Barthes, 'The Grain of the Voice', in *The Responsibility of Forms* (see n. 23), 270.
[35] Calvino, 'A King Listens' (see n. 29), 63.
[36] *Ibid.*, 64.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586703000831 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the king's realm, so too his quest to capture it must, by definition, fail. No body and no empire will contain it; it lurks always elsewhere.

IV

Calvino's story also points to another moral, subtler and more specifically operatic. Recall the final scene: in a crypt beneath a palace, two lovers are singing; their voices fade to silence. *Aïda*'s last act, in other words. 'A noise, a rumble, a roar occupies all space, absorbs all sighs, calls, sobs' – the sound of thunderous applause. The king has been tricked, abandoning his empire for the empty pleasures of grand opera. In this version, the problem is not the voice as such, but rather its theatrical representation. Opera may have nothing to do with Barthes' final stage: it is an impediment to real listening, and a dangerous (if symptomatic) distraction for monarchs. Diverting kings was, of course, exactly what opera was invented to do.[37]

This interpretation is especially intriguing because it helps explain the (otherwise obscure) relation between Calvino's story and *Un re in ascolto*'s other main intertext, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The narrative I have just outlined closely resembles a crucial scene in that play. In Act IV, Prospero stages a pageant to entertain Miranda and Ferdinand (his daughter and her suitor). The performance absorbs Prospero so thoroughly that he quickly forgets Caliban's 'foul conspiracy' to kill him and take over his island. When he remembers the impending plot, he cancels the spectacle abruptly: Miranda notes that, 'Never till this day/ Saw I him so distempered'. This scene reminds us that Prospero (like the nameless king) is an insurgent dictator, on the verge of losing control of his realm. Pageantry – whether in the form of airy spirits or vocal arias – distracts both despots from more pressing, worldly concerns.

The high stakes of fantasy are reiterated throughout Shakespeare's play. In the previous act, Caliban tells his fellow conspirators to 'Be not afeard: the isle is full of noises, / Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not'. He could be describing an opera house, and Stephano exclaims, 'This will prove a brave kingdom to me, where I shall have my music for nothing'. 'When Prospero is destroyed', is Caliban's response. Music is never free.

But these grim details are not the only echoes between the texts. After all, Berio chimes with Prospero. And, if the former writes operas for La Scala, the latter is the Duke of Milan. Even these puns darken, however, when we recall the play's most famous rejection of enchantment. Immediately after cancelling the pageant, Prospero explains himself to the young lovers:

> Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
> As I foretold you, were all spirits and
> Are melted into air, into thin air;
> And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,

[37] Calvino has also drawn less subtle connections between dictatorship and grand opera, describing Italian-Americans who 'learned that they could be proud of Giuseppe Verdi and then of Benito Mussolini'. See his 'Corrispondenze dagli Stati Uniti', in *Saggi, 1945–1985*, ed. Mario Barenghi, vol. II (Milan, 1995), 2613. Cited in Lefebvre, 'Un occhio in ascolto'(see n. 4), 113n.54.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586703000831 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> The cloud-capped tow'rs, the gorgeous palaces,
> The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
> Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
> And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
> Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
> As dreams are made on, and our little life
> Is rounded with a sleep.

Among well-known lines, one demands comment. 'The great globe itself' is commonly assumed to refer to Shakespeare's own theatre: placed alongside other dissolving things, it is one of many reminders that *The Tempest* was to be his last play. A fitting epigraph for an opera about the death of opera, but the related implication – that Berio associates *himself* with the failed and dying magician – should, and does, disturb us.

V

Un re in ascolto opens with a scene whose outlines are, by now, familiar. An old impresario named Prospero is sitting alone in his office, lost in thought. Outside his study, rehearsals for a bizarre opera, seemingly based on *The Tempest*, are underway. A chorus runs through its numbers, singers practice with a pianist, actors recite their lines, a director paces the stage offering suggestions, costumes are fitted, dancers warm up, clowns amuse themselves, live animals wander to and fro, mimes distribute letters to the cast, gunshots are fired, a magician saws a lady in two: intensifying, then retreating, only to multiply beyond all comprehension and fade away again, this circus continues from the beginning of *Un re* until the end. Meanwhile, Prospero wanders the stage, led by another mime. He argues with the director, listens to several women auditioning for a role, and sees a vision. At the end of the first act, he collapses. At the end of the second act, he dies.

As Kafka discovered, such confusion makes writing difficult. Without reducing this surface complexity – so overwhelming to anyone who has seen the work performed live – one might begin to make sense of it, as Barthes suggests, by listening. The preceding summary should have suggested that, from the beginning, the opera is full of on-stage performances: auditions, rehearsals, and the like. These on-stage songs have a clear motivation: Berio's characters are singers, and singing is what they do. But this obvious point itself demands an explanation. Adorno suggested that most operatic characters 'have as little reason to sing as they have opportunity', and that this apparent irrationality may suggest transcendence. And, in a celebrated analysis, Carolyn Abbate has argued that a radical dichotomy between self-conscious, phenomenal, performances and the majority of operatic music is central to the meaning of the form:

> We must generally assume, in short, that music is not produced by or within the stage-world, but emanates from other loci as secret commentaries for our ears alone, and that characters are generally unaware that they are singing . . . This assumption – one that, I would claim, constitutes a basic perceptual code in hearing and viewing opera – of course enables its own fabulous contradiction. Put another way, the assumption, as ground, allows as figure those

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586703000831 Published online by Cambridge University Press

moments . . . at which a character . . . appears to pass across the boundary between the phenomenal and the noumenal, and to hear beyond realistic song to that other music surrounding him.[38]

Operatic characters, deaf by convention, can transcend their condition in the rare moments when they begin to hear, usually in the context of on-stage performances; Romantic opera proposes both 'a boundary between material and transcendent worlds, and ways to bridge the two'.[39]

The sheer preponderance of phenomenal music in *Un re in ascolto* might thus be interpreted as a sort of alienation effect, denying 'one of the genre's most fundamental illusions'.[40] But if this inversion seems to build a critical distance between listener and work, it simultaneously brings the two into an uncomfortably close proximity. In the operas Abbate describes, the consciousness of listeners (allied, of course, with the authority of composers) and the deafness of characters is generally at odds: she celebrates those moments when characters appear to usurp some of the power normally denied them. In contrast, Berio's central figure – constantly listening to, and commenting on, the sounds around him – is in a situation parallel to that of the operatic spectator from the very beginning. As Prospero passes through another version of Barthes' narrative, the musical signs that articulate the stations of his journey place both him and the audience in increasingly complicated relations to the 'reality' of the stage-world. All the more distressing, then, that the final stage is no transcendent noumenal, but instead an acoustic image of Calvino's dungeon.

VI

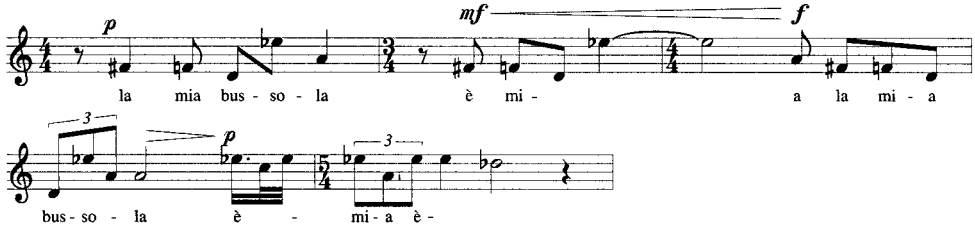
For most of *Un re in ascolto*, Prospero listens to the music around him, registering the normal sounds of the opera house where he has spent his life. Listening to phenomenal music is what I will identify as the first type of listening: everywhere present, it is explicitly thematized in the singers' three auditions. These singers are all operatic types: the mezzo's slow, deep lines recall standard writing for that voice, and the second soprano's melody is ornamented with characteristic coloratura flights. They are accompanied primarily by an on-stage piano (the rehearsal pianist is also a singing character in the opera) with the orchestra silent during the second audition and reduced to hushed murmurs during the first and third. This is the least mediated music in the opera: there is no question of why the women are singing, or where their music is coming from. I imagine Prospero listens to these auditions in much the same way that Calvino's king listens to the sounds of the imperial kitchen. The question is not what is being sung nor, in the king's case, cooked. Prospero hears these auditions as reliable indexes of the opera house: his world is still in order.

[38] Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, 1991), 119.
[39] Abbate, *In Search of Opera* (see n. 16), vii.
[40] Abbate, *Unsung Voices* (see n. 38), 119.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586703000831 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Ex. 1a: The 'è mia' theme in the first audition.



Ex. 1b: The 'è mia' theme in the second audition.

But other details work against this certainty. To begin with, for what role are these women auditioning? The words they sing are cobbled together from disparate lines in Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror*. Although each audition employs a somewhat different text, all three include a phrase that features the words '*è mia*' (or, less frequently, the masculine '*è mio*'): '*Il mio linguaggio è mio*' (my language is my own); '*La mia bussola è mia*' (my compass is my own); '*La mia coscienza è mia*' (my conscience is my own).[41] These declarations would be out of character for Miranda, Prospero's obedient daughter and the only woman in *The Tempest*. In Auden's poem they are spoken defiantly by Antonio, who mocks Prospero's magic, resisting his offer of reconciliation. A daughter's voice and a brother's jealous words – who is singing here?

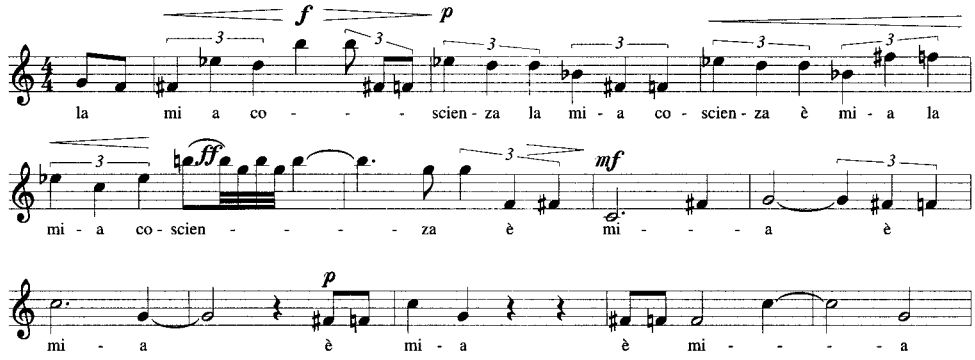
The music further complicates the matter. All three declarations are versions of the same, somewhat characterless, melodic theme. This theme is stated most simply in the first audition: a pattern of five notes that begins on F♯, moves down through F to D, leaps up a minor ninth to E♭, falls down a tritone to A, and circles around again. The pattern is allowed an extra repetition and a little tail in the second audition; the third audition treats it more freely and virtuosically, although maintaining the dyads F♯/F and E♭/D (see Ex. 1a, b and c). It would be difficult to assign this motive many semantic terms. More important than its specific affect, however, is its very *thematicity*: its identity as a self-contained, and easily recognizable, melodic unit, and its association with the words 'è mia'.[42]

This identity of the 'è mia' theme is marked in a number of ways. First, by its detachability: it is the only theme that occurs in all three auditions. Second, by its tendency towards repetition, across scenes but also within itself: the slightly mechanical, slightly excessive repetitions of the basic cell sound out of place amidst

[41] When passages in the libretto are translations of Auden's poem, my translations reflect the original English verse. For example, I use Auden's 'is my own' here instead of 'is mine', the more literal translation.

[42] Massimo Mila, although not having been able to consult the score of the opera, also points to the existence of this theme. See '*Un re in ascolto*: Una vera opera' (see n. 7), 112.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586703000831 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Ex. 1c: The 'è mia' theme in the third audition.

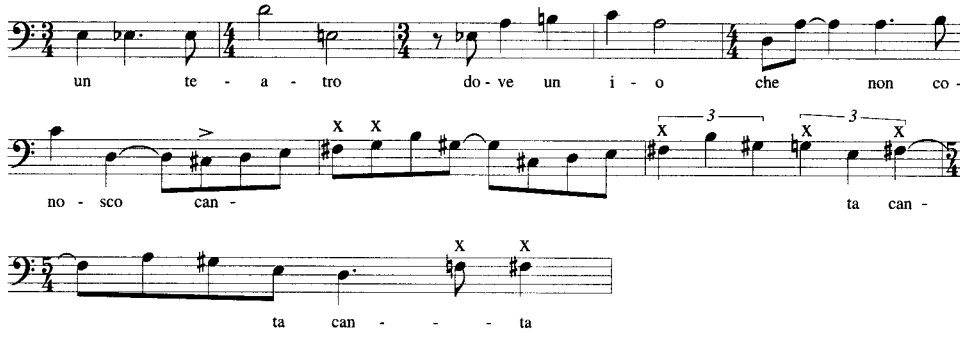
the auditions' otherwise freely developing melodic lines. Finally, and rather more abstractly, the pitch content of the theme sets it apart from the surrounding music. These auditions are constructed around a single octatonic collection.[43] Although no audition uses only the eight pitches in the collection, the four notes outside of it (D, F, A♭, B) appear in a limited number of contexts: they are used as passing and neighbour notes in highly ornamented passages, and they help articulate the climaxes and conclusions of phrases.[44] (Thus the second audition – the least ornamented of the three – is for long stretches strictly octatonic.) However, the 'è mia' theme makes free use of two of these foreclosed pitches (D and F). Indeed, all five pitches of the theme could be said to derive not from the primary set, but from a second octatonic collection, the one that has as few pitches as is possible in common with the original.

The theme, in other words, has a life of its own. The musical independence and the textual claims of autonomy enforce each other, of course, but in whose name are they being made? Are the three singers breaking character, chastising Prospero for listening a bit *too* closely? Or are we meant to imagine some unspecified antagonist in the on-stage spectacle? This very ambiguity, coupled with the repetitions of the theme, suggests a different interpretation: perhaps the 'è mia' theme represents a *single* voice, at odds with the surrounding music and developing independently of it. Once again, who is singing here?

[43] This would be Collection III in the classification developed by Pieter C. van den Toorn, who identifies the three unique octatonic collections as follows: Collection I contains the pitches E and F, Collection II contains the pitches F and F♯, and Collection III contains the pitches F♯ and G. See the chapter 'Petroushka (1911): An Introduction to the Octatonic Pitch Collection and its Deployment in Stravinsky's Music', in *The Music of Igor Stravinsky* (New Haven, 1983), 31–72.

[44] Typically, Berio controls the pitch content of the primary melodic line more strictly than that of the accompaniment. Although this claim could be demonstrated analytically, it is also suggested by the sketches for the opera (housed in the Paul Sacher Stiftung, Basel, Switzerland). The sketches for the auditions, and for the six arias, contain only drafts of the vocal lines. The instrumental accompaniments seem to have been added later. Thus, for the analytic component of my argument, I feel justified in limiting my comments to a discussion of these vocal lines. For a useful discussion of Berio's melodic techniques, in accord with this interpretation, see Osmond-Smith, 'Melody and Harmony', in *Berio* (see n. 5), 28–41.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586703000831 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Ex. 2: From Prospero's first aria.

VII

Another turn of the screw: this voice resurfaces in Prospero's music. Prospero's five central arias are constructed out of a single collection of pitches, which functions similarly to the octatonic set in the auditions, but is treated more strictly. This collection is what Osmond-Smith (the first to identify it) terms a pitch-field: an abstract and invariant series that determines both pitch – not simply pitch-class – and melodic contour. The three notes not included in the field (F, F♯ and G) appear very infrequently in the individual arias, if at all.[45] This is a remarkable obstinacy: nearly twenty minutes worth of music – all the important solo utterances of the opera's central character – are essentially reorderings of a single melodic line. Osmond-Smith calls these five arias 'the still centre of a turning musico-dramatic world'.[46] More evocatively, H. J. Herbort describes the music of the arias as

> encircled and encircling, circulating within itself and observing itself from a distance. This is precisely what Prospero does . . .: a static figure, he observes himself, moving around himself, around himself and his thoughts. There is no development in this character, no development in his musical characterization.[47]

Herbort's account of this stasis is compelling, but neither he nor Osmond-Smith notes one telling moment when Prospero's closed circle threatens to break apart. Halfway through his first aria, Prospero describes,

> Un teatro dove un io che non conosco canta.
> Canta la musica che non ricordo
> E che io adesso vorrei cantare.

[A theatre where an 'I' that I don't know sings. Sings music that I don't remember and that I now would like to sing.]

[45] Once again, the sketches support this interpretation. In the drafts for the vocal lines of the auditions, the notes F, F♯ and G are circled twice every time they are used. No other pitches are similarly marked.

[46] Osmond-Smith, *Berio* (see n. 5), 108.

[47] Quoted in Matthias Theodor Vogt, 'Listening as a Letter of Uriah: A Note on Berio's *Un re in ascolto* (1984) on the Occasion of the Opera's First Performance in London (9 February 1989)', *this journal*, 2 (1990), 174.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586703000831 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The evocation of forgotten music and a foreign voice is set with an elaborate melisma on the word 'canta'. The most florid passage in the entire aria, this melisma makes use of all three pitches outside of the primary collection, none of which appear elsewhere in that piece (see Ex. 2). The baritone is instructed to perform this passage '*lontanissimo e flessibile, con un altra voce*'. The new pitches, melismatic writing, and altered sonority all emphasize the same point: Prospero is singing with a voice that isn't his.

Could this voice be the same voice we have heard asserting itself in the auditions? The techniques separating these passages from their immediate contexts are much the same. Furthermore, the 'è mia' theme and Prospero's outburst have two pitches in common: F and F♯. This correspondence might suggest (*après* Barthes) that Prospero hears in the sopranos a fantasmatic projection of his own voice, or alternately the anonymous voice returns here to undermine the coherence of Prospero's own *logos*. This question will be posed again as the opera progresses.

VIII

At the climax of the work Prospero sees a vision, or – perhaps more accurately – hears a voice. A character identified only as 'Protagonista', who appears nowhere else in the opera, walks on stage, sings a long, ravishing, virtuoso aria, and then vanishes. The Protagonista initiates a new type of music and a new mode of listening, but to understand this remarkable scene requires a summary of the events preceding it.

The second act of *Un re* stages a dissolving of boundaries and a descent into madness: in the words of one of the stage directions, 'the separation between Prospero's room and the stage becomes less distinct and gradually disappears'. As the divisions of the stage are transformed into a single space, the various personae of Berio's character – dying man of the theatre, Shakespearean hero, listening king – begin to fuse. At the beginning of the act the impresario begins to sing lines given to Prospero in *The Sea and the Mirror*; later on, he sits in an enormous chair, 'like a sad king', as stage hands place a royal mantle on his shoulders. When the second soprano enters for her audition, she is forced into the costume of a queen. After she is escorted out, the previously timid Prospero, now enthroned, declares himself the king of sound:

> Mi trovo dentro il suono perchè sono io che lo spingo.
> Vola, sollevati onda, nuvola passa, scorri fiume:
> Sono io il padrone di questo fiume che scorre.
> Il mio regno non si vede nè si tocca.

[I find myself in the sound because it is I who propel it. Fly, arise wave, pass cloud, flow river: I am the master of this river that flows. My kingdom can not be seen or touched.]

A flourish of trumpets and a soprano's high B♭ abruptly bring this aria to a close, introducing the Protagonista as a challenger to Prospero's ascension. The text of her aria, like the texts of the three auditions, is derived primarily from Antonio's retorts to Prospero, which recur throughout the second part of *The Sea and the Mirror*. But

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586703000831 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Ex. 3: The Protagonista's first citation of the 'è mia' theme.

now these denunciations have a context: we can imagine the Protagonista proclaiming, as Antonio does, 'I exist so you shall be denied'. If Prospero has become a meeting point for the opera's various patriarchs, then the Protagonista is his inverted nexus, fusing Auden's egoist with Calvino's voice in the dungeon, together negating all that Prospero now represents.

Not surprisingly, the 'è mia' theme figures prominently. The Protagonista repeats a number of the phrases from the auditions, claiming her '*persona*', '*volontà*' and '*bussola*' (person, will, and compass) as her own. To these assertions Berio adds several additional lines which, appearing neither in the auditions nor in Auden's poem, make the Protagonista's opposition to Prospero even clearer:

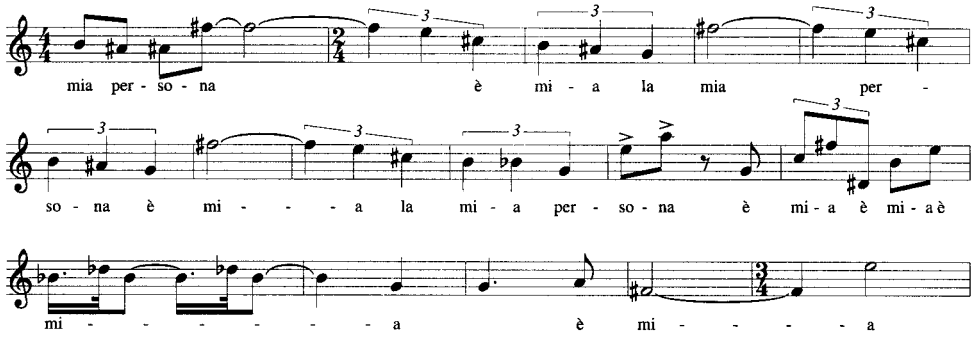
> Un suono è irritante, Prospero,
> La mia voce è mia.
> La meraviglia è spenta, Prospero,
> Il mio teatro è mio.
> Il mio canto è pianto per te, Prospero.

[One note is jarring, Prospero: my voice is my own. The marvel is spent, Prospero: my theatre is my own. My song is a lament for you, Prospero.]

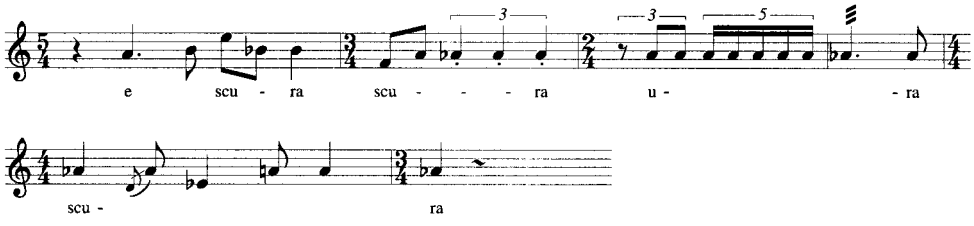
The theme itself appears three times in the Protagonista's aria, reinforcing these assertions, and here its tendency towards repetition, noted above, is brought to the fore: not only does the theme recur often enough to form a sort of refrain, but each iteration contains numerous repetitions of the originary five-note cell (see Ex. 3). These passages contribute to a logic of vocal excess that characterizes the aria as a whole: elaborate melismas, growled lines recalling the experiments of *Sequenza III*, and a flamboyant, almost unsingable, cadenza with abrupt shifts from *fortissimo* to *pianissimo*, upward pushing chromatic swoops, and strings of rapidly repeated high G's (see Ex. 4). Here, voice *qua* voice emerges in its full sonority for the first time in the opera; it flaunts the grammar of the text, if not is overall meaning, to become (in Abbate's sense) an independent voice-object.

Having undermined the identity of the auditions and the stability of Prospero's own discourse, the 'è mia' theme now appears as a musical figure for the Protagonista's independence. But if it functions as a springboard, pushing the Protagonista beyond the walls of the theatre, it is also a motivic recoil: by recalling the music of the auditions it draws the Protagonista back towards them, grounding her performance soundly on Prospero's stage. Although their ironic double function – both asserting and undermining the Protagonista's independence – is unique, the reiterations of the 'è mia' theme are not the only references to earlier music; several other points in the Protagonista's aria have explicit parallels in the auditions. The Protagonista, then, may seem less like an agent sent to debunk

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586703000831 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Ex. 4a: A typically virtuosic passage (and an alternate setting of the words 'è mia').



Ex. 4b: The Protagonista growls.



Ex. 4c: The climactic cadenza.

Prospero's fantasy than like his fantasy's very creation: an ideal prima donna, which the deluded impresario pieces together, fragment by fragment, theme by theme, from his memories of the previous auditions.[48]

[48] For one example, see Osmond-Smith, *Berio* (see n. 5), 109–13.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586703000831 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The Protagonista's appearance is also marked by an immediate shift to noumenal music: unlike the auditions, her aria is accompanied by the full orchestra. Furthermore, her music is also not generically stereotyped in the manner of the auditions. We have no choice but to listen to her music *as music* without the distancing effects of phenomenal performance. Yet, once again, the references to the earlier auditions make it difficult to imagine the Protagonista's aria as sounding from an entirely foreign place. Barthes describes the second stage of listening as a ligature between two worlds, and the Protagonista seems to be this very link, the membrane between the phenomenal stage and an imagined noumenal.

The scene is disquieting precisely because the Protagonista embodies so many contradictory roles. She is both Prospero's fantastic creation and an agent sent to dispel his illusion. Similarly, her music rests uncomfortably between noumenal and phenomenal realms. The resounding presence of her voice masks a deeper lack: she comes from nothing and disappears into thin air. Prospero's ultimate fantasy, but also the one thing resolutely beyond his consciousness: the Protagonista brings to mind what Lacanian theory terms the vocal *objet a*, that which structures identity but also 'embodies the very impossibility of attaining auto-affection, [as] it introduces the scission, the rupture in the middle of the full presence and refers it to a void'.[49] Indeed, the Protagonista's unstable footing illustrates the essential paradox that Michel Poizat finds in the relationship of the soprano to her voice: to succeed, the diva must become a pure vocal cry, thereby annihilating herself as subject; if, however, she asserts herself as a subject – bringing attention to the status of her own performance – she thereby fails, and becomes an object, debased by her fans with catcalls and dead roses.[50]

It is telling that this troublesome scene is also, from another perspective, the most conventional in the opera. It is the opera's only true virtuoso showpiece: a soprano aria with that most standard of operatic climaxes – a sustained high C. Massimo Mila has aptly described the scene in formal terms as an 'aria-rondo': certainly no other number in the opera allows such a traditional description.[51] This intersection of operatic convention and radical dramaturgy recalls Adorno's initial critique. For like *Lulu*, this virtuoso aria looks back to some of the great moments of opera past. But, like Lulu, the Protagonista sings to annihilate; death alone follows pleasure.

IX

One reason that the Protagonista's aria supports so many conflicting readings is that she has no *name*. If she were called 'Prima Donna' or even 'Soprano', we could comfortably imagine her as part of the on-stage production team. If she, like Prospero, had a name culled from literary history, we would have a context in which

[49] Mladen Dolar, 'The Object Voice', in *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, ed. Renata Slalcel and Slavoj Zizek (Durham, NC, 1996), 16.

[50] Poizat, *The Angel's Cry: Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Opera*, trans. Arthur Denner (Ithaca, 1988), 35.

[51] Massimo Mila, '*Un re in ascolto*: una vera opera' (see n. 7), 111. Although Mila does not elaborate his suggestion, the 'A' sections of the rondo form presumably begin on the words 'Un letto è vuoto', 'Il tutto di te' and 'La meraviglia è spenta'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586703000831 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to understand her denunciation. But the Protagonista is exiled from both these orders of meaning: she has a function, but not a text to function in. 'A lost thing looks for a lost name', the assembled troupe sings as she exits the stage, 'Perhaps everything is lost'.

The verse is Auden's, but readers of *The Sea and the Mirror* might find the citation bizarre: it is taken from a song the glutton Stephano sings to his stomach. 'Embrace me, belly, like a bride', Stephano begins, asking whether his gut has taken on a life of its own:

> Though in the long run satisfied,
> The will of one by being two
> At every moment is denied;
> Exhausted glasses wonder who
> Is self and sovereign, I or You?
> We cannot both be what we claim,
> The real Stephano – Which is true?
> A lost thing looks for a lost name.[52]

The bawdy blends into the metaphysical, and a simple drinking song becomes a reflection on the nature of identity. Stephano's dilemma can be translated into operatic terms as well: although we could imagine the voice as one part of a musico-dramatic body (or 'character'), it forever exceeds this role, contradicting notions of identity and unity. The Protagonista, a voice without a name, marks this moment of rupture.

And in so doing, she resembles another nameless character in the opera: the mime. If the Protagonista is a voice without a character, then this mime is a body without a voice. (It is as if all the components of an operatic persona have separated off and, like Stephano's belly, taken on lives – fragmented, incomplete lives – of their own.) Like the Protagonista, he does not seem to be a member of the on-stage troupe: at the beginning of the opera he is pictured 'lost in thought' (but we will never know what he is thinking) and later he leads Prospero around the stage. The mime's constant presence may ill resemble the Protagonista's brief apparition, but he is 'outside' the text of the opera in a much more literal way than she. For obvious reasons, the mime does not appear in the score of *Un re in ascolto*, but he is also given strikingly few instructions in the libretto. He improvises, authors his own role, and, as such, exists (again like the Protagonista) only as long as his performance.

In his long essay 'The Double Session', Jacques Derrida explores how literary writing undermines traditional conceptions of mimesis. In opposition to closed representational systems (where names are bound to things), he places a text by Stéphane Mallarmé that, in his reading, describes a pantomime *outside* of any verbal order. Derrida's focus is a self-authoring mime, who strikingly resembles Berio's

[52] W. H. Auden, 'The Sea and the Mirror: A Commentary on Shakespeare's The Tempest', in *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London, 1976), 318.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586703000831 Published online by Cambridge University Press

creation: 'There is nothing prior to the writing of his gestures . . . His movements form a figure that no speech anticipates or accompanies'.[53] This mime's performance, writes Derrida, is

> nothing other than the staging, the theater, the visibility of nothing or of the self. It is a dramatization which *illustrates nothing*, which illustrates *the nothing*, lights up a space, re-marks a spacing as a nothing, a blank: white as a yet unwritten page, blank as a difference between two lines.[54]

Derrida's arabesques work well as a description of Berio's dramaturgy, and this is partially because they are anticipated by the argument of *The Sea and the Mirror*. In the preface to that poem (cited by Berio in the first concertato, and then throughout the opera), Auden outlines an opposition between poetic language and the natural world it cannot begin to describe, the 'Lion's mouth whose hunger / No metaphors can fill'. Art is imagined as a manicured lawn, fenced off (like Kafka's studio), from an encroaching silence:

> Well, who in his own backyard
> Has not opened his heart to the smiling
> Secret he cannot quote?
> Which only goes to show that the Bard
> Was sober when he wrote
> That this world of fact we love
> Is insubstantial stuff:
> All the rest is silence
> On the other side of the wall;
> And the silence ripeness,
> And the ripeness all.[55]

Auden's 'silence' and Derrida's 'nothing' are two names for the absence simultaneously foreclosed from and at the heart of representational systems: Berio's mime makes this silence visible, reinscribing it within the space of the theatre.

X

But perhaps the mime does have a name. Near the beginning of the second act, Prospero calls out 'Ariel! Dov'è Ariel?'. The mime appears, and the dying director addresses him with lines from the 'Prospero to Ariel' section of *The Sea and the Mirror*. If the mime recasts Ariel's role, however, it is with a tremendous irony. In *The Tempest*, Ariel is invisible to all but Prospero; the marooned Italians identify him only by the sound of his song. Thus, from early on in the play he is linked to the ever-evasive Sirens. In Ferdinand's description,

[53] Jacques Derrida, 'The Double Session', in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago and London, 1981), 194.
[54] *Ibid.*, 208.
[55] Auden, 'The Sea and the Mirror' (see n. 52), 311.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586703000831 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> Where should this music be? I' th' air or th' earth? . . .
> This music crept by me upon the waters,
> Allaying both their fury and my passion
> With its sweet air. Thence I have followed it,
> Or it hath drawn me rather, but 'tis gone.

But, if Ariel is sonorous but invisible in Shakespeare's play, perhaps he is visible but inaudible in *Un re in ascolto*. Or, to make the correspondence with Shakespeare more exact, perhaps the mime is *visible* to all, but only Prospero can *hear* him.

The ability to hear songs that no one else (neither other characters nor the audience) can hear is an awesome power indeed, and here, on the borderline between life and death, Prospero's experience of the music around him seems finally to part company from the audience's. But is this a sign of his transcendence or rather of his madness? If, as some critics have suggested, opera is a unique staging ground for otherworldly – 'metaphysical' – songs, Berio proscribes any representation of these from his opera. A modernist revision, perhaps, suggesting that opera can no longer call other worlds into existence. But there is also a suggestion that they never existed at all, never had more substance than the baseless fantasy of lunatic kings.

Kafka seems to have arrived at a similar conclusion. In 'The Silence of the Sirens', a cryptic gloss on the famous episode in the *Odyssey*, he could be said to offer an ironic interpretation of his own fascination with female song. Ulysses, forewarned of the Siren's power, stops his ears with wax and ties himself to the mast of his ship. But, for Kafka, 'The Sirens have a still more fatal weapon than their song, namely their silence. And though admittedly such a thing has never happened, still it is conceivable that someone might possibly have escaped from their singing; but from their silence certainly never'.[56] So, when Ulysses approaches, the Sirens do not sing:

> But Ulysses, if one may so express it, did not hear their silence; he thought they were singing and that he alone did not hear them. For a fleeting moment he saw their throats rising and falling, their breasts lifting, their eyes filled with tears, their lips half-parted, but believed that these were accompaniments to the airs which died unheard around him. Soon, however, all this faded from his sight as he fixed his gaze on the distance, the Sirens literally vanished before his resolution, and at the very moment when they were nearest to him he knew of them no longer.

Ulysses looks upon a pantomime and imagines music: his earplugs have made him deaf even to silence. The Sirens' magic is no rival for such tenacious delusion. As we said of Prospero and the Protagonista, his self-absorbed fantasy both creates the song and makes the singer vanish.[57]

[56] Kafka, 'The Silence of the Sirens', in *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York, 1971), 431.

[57] For a gloss on this story alongside other modern versions of the myth of the Sirens, see Renata Salecl, 'The Silence of the Feminine Jouissance', in *Cogito and the Unconscious*, ed. Slavoj Zizek (Durham, NC, 1998), 175–96.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586703000831 Published online by Cambridge University Press

XI

There is one final sound to listen to: a dull one, which undoes the mime's song and the Protagonista's voice, pointing beyond them toward an empty noumenon or an amplified silence.

After the Protagonista exits, all the other characters remove their costumes, bidding farewell to Prospero as they leave the stage. The men leave first and, briefly, the five female characters – the two sopranos and the mezzo-soprano, a nurse and a wife (Prospero's?) – are left alone on stage. They sing, *pianissimo*, a five-voice canon, based on a whole-tone scale (see Ex. 5). Each part enters at the unison, one crotchet after the previous part. The effect is impressionistic, for the close-knit texture makes it impossible to distinguish individual lines in the counterpoint. What one hears is a shimmering, something more than a single female voice, but somehow less than a chorus. This alluring canon is followed by a short orchestral interlude. Then an eight-part choir begins to sing off stage, for the first and only time in the opera. The choir sustains a dense chord, wordless and devoid of lustre. This chord cannot be identified with any character, any gender, or any place on stage: arising from the orchestra pit, beneath the stage, it recalls Calvino's dungeon and Barthes' unconscious. It sounds like music heard through ears stuffed with wax.

The chord contains eight pitches, which (save for one) constitute the same octatonic scale from which the auditions, and thus the Protagonista's aria, were fashioned (see Ex. 6). Insubstantial stuff, and these women, with the seductive presence of their voices, had good reason to disguise it. Prospero, in his final aria, describes '*il buio illuminato della voce, l'ombra dove il ricordo non arriva*' (the illuminated darkness of the voice, the shadow where memory does not reach).

But no one hearing these soft, simultaneous pitches can recognize them as an octatonic scale. The reference is pure *augenmusik*, a detail to be read in the score. And so before we contemplate the chord further, and worry about its one 'wrong' note, we must note that the moment we turn our eyes to the written page we, like Calvino's king gazing too late towards the sun, are no longer listening.

XII

Un re in ascolto was premiered at the Salzburg Festival in 1984. To commemorate the first performances, Berio wrote a brief programme note, an elusive essay that takes the form of a 'Dialogue between You and Me'.[58] More intriguing, perhaps, than the note itself is the long epigraph that precedes it, taken from Baudelaire's *Journaux intimes*. The genesis of the opera thus ends as it began, with the diary of a modern writer. The conceit is strange, but far from framing the work, it opens it up to other fantasies and other shores of discourse. The poet writes:

I believe that the infinite and mysterious charm which lies in the contemplation of a ship, especially of a ship in motion, is linked, first, to the regularity and symmetry that are among

[58] The 'Dialog zwischen dir und mir' is reprinted in the booklet which accompanies Lorin Maazel's recording of the opera, Col Legno 20005.

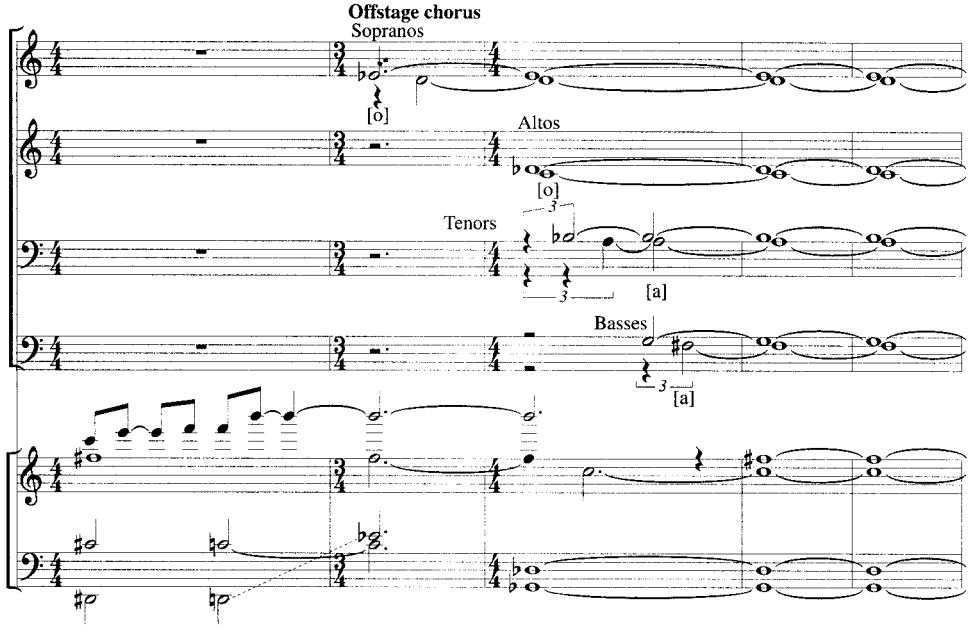
https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586703000831 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Ex. 5: The final canon.

the primal needs of the human spirit, just as much as complexity and harmony, and, second, to the successive multiplication and generation of all the imaginary curves and figures produced in space by the real elements of the object. The poetic idea which emerges from this operation of lines in motion is an hypothesis of a vast, immense, complicated but

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586703000831 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Ex. 6: The final chord.

eurhythmic being, an animal filled with spirit, suffering and sighing all the sighs and all the ambitions of humanity.

Borrowing equally from the vocabularies of geometry and enchantment, Baudelaire imagines an impossibly complex surface, organized by a basic symmetry, and enlivened by the spirit of man. The successive multiplication of figures in space, the wrinkles produced by the boat on the surface of the water, suggest the curves and lines of handwriting: they could be an image of Berio's own practice, which allows a primal confrontation between a male listener and a female voice to give rise to a vast network of textual lines. But this perfectly harmonized palimpsest is also an instrument, animated by a sigh, and it thus brings to mind words sung on another operatic ship:

> Mein irisch Kind,
> Wo weilest du?
> Sind's deiner Seufzer Wehen
> Die mir die Segel blähen?

One could also imagine this complex edifice as itself being pulled through the sea, driven towards a voice, the sound of a siren's song.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586703000831 Published online by Cambridge University Press