

Luciano Berio

PIANO WORKS



Andrea Bacchetti



DECCA

Petite Suite pour Piano 1947

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7 Cinque Variazioni 1953

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In remembrance of the Maestro

The encounter with Luciano Berio influenced in an extraordinary manner my “musical” life, and it’s with a sincere emotion that I try to revive in these lines some of the most touching moments I had the chance to share with him.

I met him for the first time when I was 12, in 1989, during my concert in the Grosses Saal of the Salzburg’s Mozarteum. The Maestro thereafter invited me at Radicondoli, his villa near Siena, in Tuscany. During my visit there he was extremely hearty, and he dedicated to me most of his time: we talked for a long time and he listened to my performances with great attention. An entire universe, until then unknown, exploded in that moment in front of me; what happened there left me completely confused, but in the same time enthralled with a new curiosity and deeply fascinated. The Maestro gave me as a precious gift an autographed copy of his *Petite Suite*, a piece I was proud to perform in 1993, once again in Salzburg, inside a more traditional program. Berio – among the audience – was once more generous with guidance and encouragement.

Again in front of him, in 1996 in Florence – for *Gli Amici della Musica* – I performed for the first time his *Encores*, but at that time the Composer found the execution too romantic,

not enough aggressive and sensationalistic. In the following days I was invited into his Florence study; under his guide I continued to explore the new world of the avant-garde experimentation, extremely interesting to understand, to study, to deeply investigate, to live. Executions totally deprived from phrasing; no freedom, complete estrangement; emotions to be looked for - and found – in the very immobility: impassiveness and coldness towards the musical line, which becomes “modern” just because of its complete lack of expression. An ironic and aggressive touch, an attempt of transforming the piano in an electric keyboard, in a synthesizer.

I kept on with my assiduous and painstaking study, overjoyed for having been given the keys of a new way of understanding the music and the piano, a world which existence I had been until now completely unaware of; I deepened my knowledge of Boulez’s music – recorded by Pollini – and in 1997 I began to venture upon the study of the *Sequenza*, which I eventually performed for the first time in 1999 in Macerata, at the Contemporary Music Festival. A mesmerising experience, a performance this time immediately appreciated by the Maestro who, again, dedicated to me more of his time and guidance.

At the Piano Festival of Bergamo and Brescia, in 2000, during a special evening celebrating

the Maestro, I performed his piano works composed until that date, and I accompanied the soprano Luisa Castellani during the four Canzoni Popolari, featuring Pascal Gallois in the Sequenza for bassoon. The Maestro expressed his satisfaction.

My personal relationships with Luciano Berio, in those years, had grown actually intense; I tried to describe him the feelings and the emotions I could feel whilst playing his music during my performances, and he – as usual – kept on guiding me with great generosity through the path of the interiorization of the slightest nuances and the refining of the interpretative details. Precious impulses and unrivalled support for my artistic maturation, his words fed enormously my love for the Music and my awareness of the “mission” that this Muse represents in my whole life.

In the meanwhile, my dream of recording a performance dedicated to Berio began to become more and more real; thanks to the confidence and sensibility of Maestro Franco Scala, my teacher at the International Piano Academy of Imola, and to the professionalism and experience of the Engineer Giulio Cesare Ricci, who personally produced the recording, we began our challenge. In these circumstances as well I was once again supported by the precious recommendations of the Maestro, who in the end expressed his appreciation for the final result.

On 2001, at the Scala Museum in Milan was performed a concert dedicated to Luciano Berio, organised by Serate Musicali; the program was entirely focused on his piano compositions, of which I had the unparalleled honour of being the interpreter. The concert was introduced by an enthralling conversation among Berio, Franco Puccini and Hans Fazzari. The informal tones and the sober environment contributed to transform the evening in an enlightening and fascinating event, overflowing with the human, musical and artistic pathos that sparked from the Maestro’s personality, and from the universal dimension of his Music.

On 16th January 2003, Berio invited me as a guest, together with the well-renowned musical critics Carmelo Di Gennaro and Filippo Dei Corno, to “Il Caffè” - a program broadcasted by Rai International channel - during an interview hosted by Giorgia Caruso. In a wonderful set, where the guests and the Maestro himself had the chance of describing his thoughts, his life and his compositions, I played – sadly for the last time in his living presence – four of the Six Encores. And once again overwhelming emotions, unforgettable sensations and gratifying compliments: a human and artistic inheritance that will always be at my side during my life as Man and Musician.

Thanks, Maestro!

Andrea Bacchetti

The Piano works of Luciano Berio

Luciano Berio always believed in the expressive possibilities of the piano, and this is proved by the fact that his compositions dedicated to this instrument can be found with continuous regularity during his entire creative period, from 1947 (*Piccola Suite*) until 2001 (*Sonata per pianoforte solo*); his position must not appear reckoned with in advance, even because – after the great Romantic florescence – the main instrument of chamber music during 19th century didn't definitely get an overwhelming appreciation with today's composers. Together with Berio, nonetheless, we can find distinguished names (Boulez, Ligeti, Stockhausen, Messiaen, Donatoni, Sciarrino and on a slightly less proportion – only concerning quantity and never quality – Nono and Henze) who are in open contrast with – for example – the position of Giacomo Manzoni, who sees the expressive possibilities of the piano as all but exhausted (his unique composition for piano and orchestra, *Masse*, shows a massive and percussive interpretation of the piano, which rather tends to depict its barbaric and atavistic nature).

On the other hand, as he himself wrote, Berio inherited the love for the piano – and for all keyboard instruments as well – from his grandfather Adolfo, his first harmony teacher, exceptional organist and inexhaustible

composer of waltzes, polkas and mazurkas (for four-hand piano) dedicated to “Austrian princesses or Swedish queens” (Berio).

It should not be forgotten that Berio grew artistically as pianist, but due to a hand injury suffered in 1944 he was forced to stop studying this instrument, dedicating himself thereafter entirely to the composition: he then became a pupil at the Milan Conservatory of Giorgio Federico Ghedini and Giulio Cesare Paribeni. The *Petite Suite per Pianoforte* (1947) dates back to these years; it would have also been the first of his compositions to be played in front of an audience, a *pièce* yet composed without any serial technique and which therefore results in a malicious parody of baroque dance forms, among which an outstanding, ironic *Gavotta* built with large, deliberately exaggerated intervals.

Enzo Restagno writes that in this *Petite Suite* “the historians agree upon finding inside it some influences from Ravel, Prokof'ev and the neoclassic culture. We will therefore limit ourselves in recognising the unusual skilfulness of the composer in assimilating these influences, a quality which, in the future compositions, is destined to expand and to engender propitious conflicts”. As a matter of fact, Berio showed a factual ability in appropriating the music and the styles of other composers, re-elaborating them in the meantime in an outmost personal way:

emblematic (and wonderful) is the case of *Rendering*, from Schubert.

The *Cinque Variazioni* (1953), together with the first two Boulez's *Sonate*, represent – in the wake of Webern's *Variazioni* op. 27 – a noticeable contribution to the application of the serial writing to the piano; Boulez's austere structuralism, however, becomes always diluted – in Berio's compositions – by an inborn lyricism, able to avoid any expressive aridity (as written by François-René Tranchefort).

In 1965 Berio composes his *Sequenza IV* for piano: *Sequenze* are nothing else than soloistic works (going from *Sequenza I* for flute, 1958, to *Sequenza XIV* for cello, 2002) usually written for great virtuosi of the instrument (like Severino Gazzelloni, Cathy Berberian, Heinz Holliger, Rohan ce Saram ecc.); some *Sequenze* eventually bred the *Chemins'* series, where the soloistic part is enriched – without any alteration – with an orchestral part, which acts however as a mere comment. It's worth to report the unabridged annotation – written by Luciano Berio himself – to the composition: “*Sequenza IV* for piano has to be considered as an exploration journey inside the known- and unknown regions of the instrumental colours and articulation: two independent, harmonic ‘sequences’ develop together at the same time, sometimes even interacting between themselves; one is real, left to the

keyboard, and the other one is almost ‘virtual’, left to the pedal”.

Philippe Albèra affirms that “The concept of virtuosity in Berio [...] is not a plain technical exhibition, but instead a boost towards new frontiers of writing and expression”. As a matter of fact, *Sequenza IV* underlines the “improvisation” concept, straight from the jazz (in those years Berio was living and working in the United States), and therefore the composer recommends considering this aspect (the improvisation, that is) during the execution of the pièce. Under a compositional point of view, *Sequenza IV* puts two kinds of chords in contrast, where the former is based on triads (which can be major, minor, exceeding, but which will be considered only by their colour, and not by their functional harmony) and the latter – not easily definable – is based on contiguous groups of sounds which resemble it to the cluster. This contrast remains the composition's main generating principle during all its length. The first type of chord unwinds also melodic figurations, which are progressively introduced through an interaction with the remaining material. Another key element is the third pedal (resonance pedal); Albèra again writes that “The harmonic structures grabbed by the third pedal and maintained in the shadow of the main ones strictly depend from these, but they do nonetheless enjoy their own evolution. They create a perspective and

seem to be a kind of comment to the normal execution. [...]

In this way, Berio doesn't create a polyphony of notes but an actual polyphony of actions, a kind of metapolyphony which generates, undoubtedly, the gestural – even theatrical – dimension of the performance”.

The same effect, aimed to obtain many possible listening layers, is researched by Berio in *Rounds* (1967), originally written for harpsichord and later transcribed for piano: a search – which foresees the resonance pedal's (third pedal) usage - for transmitting the feeling of a multiplication of the original material, which virtually plays a kind of interpolation with the outflowing resonance: the final effects are unpredictable and not easy to master on paper.

Despite the fact that the miniatures represented by the *Six Encores* had been composed in different periods, they constitute an “eloquent evidence of the technical continuity which permeates the mature work of Berio” (D. Osmond-Smith).

The first *Encore*, *Wasserklavier*, was composed after a conversation among friends in New York about the interpretation of Brahms' *Intermezzo* in B-minor and Schubert's *Fantasia* in F-minor for four-hand piano; once again, then, the relationship with the story of the music plays out.

Berio saw the composition as a musical comment to that evening's speculations: is

not a coincidence that the F-minor tone is present during all the length of this short *pièce*. *Erdenklavier* (1969) starts instead from a small group of notes, which attract the other ones in a determined melodic range: with an usual procedure, some notes are prolonged in order to build a kind of resounding horizon, a “harmonic sheath” (Osmond-Smith).

The *Luftklavier* (1985) comes after the undergone experience of the wonderful *Concerto per due pianoforti* (1972-73) and with the equally wonderful *Points on the curve to find...* (1974, which will lead to the composition of *Echoing Curves*, 1988, written for Daniel Barenboim).

From the materials of these project broke out the above-mentioned *Luftklavier* and the *Feuerklavier*, 1989 (which conclude a mini-cycle inside the *Six Encores*, dedicated to the *Elements*): from the simple ostinato of the first fragment we move to the second one's rapid figurations, which show a clear illustrating intent.

The cycle ends, as foresaid, in 1990 with *Brin* (an exploration of a well defined field of heights, but always to be performed “doux et immobile in pppp”) and *Leaf*, which reviews the first- and last pages of *Sequenza IV*, putting in the background just a single chord, always maintained with the resonance pedal and interpolated by strong higher staccato chords.

Carmelo Di Gennaro

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