

***Sinfonia* by Luciano Berio**  
**Analysis by David Mitchell**

I believe Luciano Barrio's experience with electronic music has influenced his style of composition in the world of acoustic music and in *Sinfonia*. The choice of instruments, amplification, treatment of words and melodic content are all evidence of electronic music influence. Every composer is consciously and unconsciously influenced by what he listens to and pieces he has written in the past. To paraphrase Keene, every composer is a part of his own continuum and the continuum of music in general. Berio's *Sinfonia* has evidence of influence from composers and styles from the past and from his own past experience in the world of electronic music.

The most obvious influence is the instrumentation of the symphony. It calls for electronic organ. And right next to the organ is a harpsichord and piano. This choice in itself represents the renaissance, classical, and modern history of the keyboard. Berio uses microphones strategically placed in the string section and for the violin soloist for effect and balance. He specifically says the singers should never overpower the orchestra. He is very concerned about balance, blend and separation. He recommends the mixing board be placed in the audience. Presumably, the sound engineer can get the correct mix, like a studio engineer, from the audience's perspective.

Harmonically, Berio uses chord clusters to start movement I and they quickly resolve to a very tonal C minor major 7. Movement II starts with all instruments on a unison f natural note. Movement III also has tone clusters. And there are some very tonal references to Mahler, Wagner, Bach, Stravinsky, and Stockhausen in the third movement. Like his choice of instruments and their treatment, Berio seems to be

touching a variety of historical chords by quoting prominent composers from a variety of time periods. So harmonically, Sinfonia is a free mix of tonal and non-tonal elements. The overall effect is an ambient sound that creates a very effective mood.

Melodically, the slow glissandos in the strings sound like an electronic pitch bending technique. There also seems to be some imitative elements between the instruments and voice. This is similar to the imitative composition techniques of composers during the renaissance. Berio seems to be consciously or unconsciously touching historical keystones with instrumentation and melodic elements with Sinfonia. One could also find in his use of the title Sinfonia and its five movements a structure similar to the classical symphony structure.

Berio's treatment of the libretto is consistent with what a number of other composers were doing with speech in electronic music at the time. The use of vowels and fragments of speech in the third movement is similar to what Berio did with *Visage*. There is also an analysis by Samuel Beckett that says it has a similar feel to Legeti's Requiem found in 2001: A Space Odyssey. I think it is Berio's use of tight tone clusters and vowel sounds as a libretto that make it sound so similar to Legeti's uses of the International Phonetic Alphabet in 2001: A Space Odyssey. Legeti was also an electronic musician. Berio uses solfege and a clever homage to Martin Luther King in the second movement. Martin Luther King's name is so smoothly worked into the libretto it is barely noticed.

The third movement is probably the most interesting. It is a very clever use of speech and fragmentation of language. I think *Visage* was probably in the back of his mind while he composed this movement. It sounds like stream-of-conscious dialogue. It

reminds me of entering the concert hall and hearing all of the idle chatter and conversation going on around you. Berio is thinking about the reviews that will be in the paper the next day, reading the program notes and musing about the true significance of this piece and music in general. “Can a piece lower the price of bread?” It is very clever how Berio uses the conductor and singer’s names in the libretto. This is an element of randomness that changes with each new performance similar to the music of John Cage. It never hurts to give your conductor and performers top billing.

In conclusion, Berio draws together the present and the past, his own and that of other composers, in an homage to classical form using modern techniques.