

Text of Texts

By *Luciano Berio*

IT IS UNDERSTANDABLE THAT A COMPOSER SHOULD OFFER A certain resistance to speaking about Music as Text, since he, if anyone, is aware that a text written to be verbalized has little in common with a piece of music written to be performed. A musical Text is not only a written score or what a performer plays or what an audience hears. A musical score is a means of providing a professional musician with the information necessary for the piece's performance, and does not necessarily imply a listener or specific modes of listening, though the composer is of course fully aware that he cannot separate the music he writes from its acoustical realization. A verbal Text, on the other hand, is available to everyone and open to every kind of interpretation, and implies, within a given linguistic community, a writer and a reader, a speaker and a listener. A person speaking always implies, in broad general terms, at least, the possibility that what is being said can also be formulated in writing (though of course not every written text obeys the rules of oral grammar). The musical score is an instrument of specialized non-linguistic knowledge in which an

LUCIANO BERIO IS ONE of the leading composers and musical thinkers of the late 20th century. He has conducted the Cleveland Orchestra, Israel Philharmonic, New York Philharmonic, the Dutch Royal Concertgebouw, and many others. In 1993-94 he served as the Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard and is currently Distinguished Composer in Residence there. He is founder of the Studio di Fonologia Musicale at RAI and the "Tempo Reale," an institute for music research and production in Florence, and has won numerous awards for his compositions, which are performed regularly throughout the world.

exorbitant number of perceptual experiences and expressive and intellectual choices converge. The composer, as manager of these convergences, becomes himself a musical Text; he is programmed as a Text, but, at the same time, he cannot describe himself objectively as a Text. If this were possible, we would have neither Text nor composer.

If I have been unable to resist the temptation to write about Music as Text, the reason is because I feel relatively free. I do not have a musical theory of the Text to offer but only a few general convictions which, while presupposing on the one hand the specific experience of musical performance, invite us on the other not to ignore the experience of the literary Text. It nonetheless remains true that, like the literary text, the musical Text too, whatever kind it belongs to, is made up of Texts that mutually condition each other. In fact, in the case of musical creativity also, intertextual conditioning can become such a potent force that

the more the “speakers” are (or feel they are) “being spoken,” the more they lose the courage to speak, the more they take refuge in silence.

“Text of Texts as Song of Songs.” This allegorical title implies the possibility of an obvious hermeneutical inversion — Songs of Song or Texts of Text — but it also evokes the intrinsic otherness of Songs (and Texts) and the immanent pluralism of Texts (and Songs). Furthermore, my title is intended to suggest the idea that in music, as in literature, it is possible to imagine an alternative between the Text’s supremacy over the Reader and the primacy of the Reader over the text: the Reader, in other words, becomes his own Text. As Harold Bloom has remarked: “You are or you become what you read,” and “What you are is the only thing you can read.” But music implies performance, and the choice between these two options can become terribly complicated, given the fact — let me repeat what I have already affirmed — that performing and interpreting a musical Text is not the same thing as reading and interpreting a literary Text.

A literary Text is customarily the object of repeated scrutiny and contemplation. It is preserved and protected by cultural canons and contexts because it translates into words values significant to the members of a cultural community. In and around a Text cultural

“In the case of musical creativity, intertextual conditioning can become such a potent force that, the more the ‘speakers’ are (or feel they are) ‘being spoken,’ the more they lose the courage to speak, the more they take refuge in silence.”

investments of great scope and duration are given concrete realization; between individuals and textual objects continual and repeated contacts take place.

There are texts made to be spoken, “performed” in other words, such as theatrical works, liturgical texts, official speeches, and so on; but since we value the ability to read and write, we expect the individual to establish a personal contact with these Texts through reading. In Western cultures (apart from expressions of the folk and oral tradition) there are no verbal texts that exist only to be listened to: they always imply reading. This is not true of music. Perhaps it would be undemocratic to require universal musical literacy, but if this were to occur, the “victims” of this enforced literacy would enjoy as a result the privilege of establishing a multifaceted and possibly more creative relationship with the musical Text, to say nothing of a more responsibly free one.

Music as Text is a matter strictly for musicians. We, as musicians, live constantly with Texts, but we don’t talk about them much because our Texts are usually ideas, or, precisely, a score which we hand over to performers, convinced that it can speak for itself. Its performance may suspend and/or give a structure to the passing of time. It will give the listener a provisional coherent “being-in-time,” which, incidentally, is the only human experience to which we can attribute a universal value.

It is of course possible for a musician to approach a score as if it were a poem to be read, making it an object of pleasure through prolonged private contemplation. But, whereas a Haydn string quartet represents a highly “discursive,” that is to say, grammatical and syntactical, kind of music, which can be read and re-read easily and pleasurably by musicians, an orchestral score by Debussy, Webern, Stravinsky or Boulez can demand considerable effort and experience if it is to be “heard” accurately through silent reading.

It can happen that composers feel themselves prisoners of Texts. They may get the overwhelming sensation that they are being “spoken” by Texts, and, as I previously remarked, they may lose the courage to “speak.” As a consequence, they withdraw into themselves, displaying a kind of resentment with regard to an evolutionary and stratified idea of the Text. Their musical rebellion tends to manifest itself in pseudo-mystical meditations on silence, as well as in flight into sound events which pursue a monodimensional idea of music as acoustical experience comfortably and passively ensconced within us, in time. A musically inactive presence is formless. Listeners can only coexist with it; their inner being has no way of dancing with

it. It cannot be directed or “choreographed,” nor can it be touched by experience, history, the unexpected, knowledge, or the emotions. If we were to imagine ourselves interpreting this passive time, the time-that-is-not, we would not find much to interpret or discover, because this passive

“It can happen for composers to feel themselves prisoners of Texts . . . As a consequence, they withdraw into themselves, displaying a kind of resentment with regard to an evolutionary and stratified idea of the Text.”

acoustical material has nothing to do with one of the basic properties of the Text, the property of always meaning something more (if not indeed something else) than it intended to say.

When James Joyce declared that his *Ulysses* would keep scholars busy at least for a hundred years, his Mephistophelian nature was showing. He knew that scholars would not be able to resist the temptation to identify references, once they knew the references were there. But Joyce also knew that getting in touch with evaded and disguised truths was an important aspect of the poetic and narrative conception of *Ulysses*. We are aware that interpretations of a literary Text involve not only the production of other Texts but also a hierarchy among the values we attribute to the various interpretations of the Texts themselves. I myself tend to admire analytical listeners and performers, but I realize that there is a delicate, even precarious balance (to be defended, however, at all costs) between the recognition of conventions, stylistic reminiscences, references, and codes on the one hand and independence of them on the other. The ability to remember can become a poison, unless it is counterbalanced by the desire to forget and communicate, even in the absence of interlocutors and without conscious reference to specific codes of listening. The

Text needs forgetfulness.

Listeners, performers, even composers must know the experience of consciously infusing new life into a work inasmuch as it is an object of knowledge. They must undergo a kind of alchemical transformation in which the recognition and awareness of conceptual links — the fruits, in other words, of their relationships with Texts — are spontaneously transformed into a “being” which transcends and sublimates technical realities. We are profoundly conscious of this whenever we write or perform music, whenever we ask ourselves — however unconsciously — the eternal questions regarding the Text’s profound relationship with ourselves, our own being as Texts, our constant need to be emancipated from a given notion of the Text, and our evolving and proliferating relationship with a Text which — without thereby wishing to deify it — seems to be everywhere and nowhere at the same time, and which seems to exist even when no one is talking about it. φ