

# **The “theatre of the ear”: Analyzing Berio’s musical documentary *A-Ronne***

Nina Horvath

2009

Musicological Explorations

UVic Libraries ePublishing Services

© 2009 Horvath.

Original citation:

Horvath, N. (2009). The “theatre of the ear”: Analyzing Berio’s musical documentary *A-Ronne*. *Musicological Explorations*, 10, 73–103.

<https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/me/article/view/150>

---

Downloaded from UVicSpace Research & Learning Repository

dspace.library.uvic.ca



**University  
of Victoria**

Libraries

## The “Theatre of the Ear”: Analyzing Berio’s Musical Documentary *A-Ronne*

Nina Horvath

Peter F. Stacey wrote in his dissertation on *Laborintus II* by Luciano Berio (1925-2003) that “analysis can appear to be a peculiarly destructive process, but only this system of dissection is capable of illuminating the totality of practices and the differences between them.”<sup>1</sup> Stacey raises the point that analysis can obfuscate the sense of wonder and engagement elicited by a work of art. However, analysis also illuminates hidden meaning and expressive potential in artistic works of any medium. For Berio, the best way to analyze a work was to rework the material into a new composition.<sup>2</sup> In this way, he created unique explorations of the original material, whether it was his own or another composer’s, that simultaneously served as an analysis, commentary, and extension of the initial material. In the unaccompanied vocal work *A-Ronne* (1974-75), for eight singers, the material under analysis is not a musical work, but the poetry of Edoardo Sanguineti (b. 1930). Berio described this work as “a documentary on a poem by Edoardo Sanguineti, just as we speak of a documentary on a painting or on a foreign country.”<sup>3</sup> To this end he

---

<sup>1</sup> Peter F. Stacey, *Contemporary Tendencies in the Relationship of Music and Text with Special Reference to Pli selon Pli (Boulez) and Laborintus II (Berio)* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1989), 17.

<sup>2</sup> Rossana Dalmonte and Bálint András Varga, *Luciano Berio – Two Interviews*, trans. and ed. by David Osmond-Smith (New York: Marion Boyars Publishers, 1981), 107.

<sup>3</sup> Luciano Berio, Program Notes for *A-Ronne*.

approached the poem with a scientific mindset to fully explore its potential as a soundscape as well as a work of literature.

How does one analyze a work that is an analysis? As in many compositions of the twentieth century, analysis becomes difficult because of the experimental nature of the work. Certain elements remain stable while others push and pull against the boundaries that have been established by Western musical conventions over hundreds of years. Berio's setting of *A-Ronne* draws freely from the old and the new to create a third, entirely unique product. The most important element of this work is the text and Berio's experimentation with it. For the purposes of this analysis, Peter F. Stacey's research on *Laborintus II*<sup>4</sup> will be used to establish an analytical rubric that applies to *A-Ronne*. The analysis will include study of the original poetic material, the techniques used to set the text, and how these techniques generate the overall form of the work. The intent is to demonstrate how Berio's unique approach enhances understanding and appreciation of the original text and produces a new entity, which Berio dubbed "the theatre of the ear."<sup>5</sup> While Berio gave several definitions of *A-Ronne*, the "theatre of the ear" refers to the way in which disparate vocal and textual elements are dramatized and used to generate recognizable situations that combine into a unified whole, just as the many sides of a theatrical piece (such as staging, actors, lighting,

---

<sup>4</sup> Stacey, *Contemporary Tendencies*.

<sup>5</sup> Berio, Program Notes for *A-Ronne*.

and scenery) are synthesized to generate a total sensory experience.

Berio and Sanguineti met through their mutual acquaintance, Umberto Eco. The three shared similar neo-avant-garde philosophies manifested in their common ideals of innovation through language and a search for new meaning in reality. Berio had previously set Sanguineti’s poetry in *Epifanie* (1959-60). Their first major collaboration was *Laborintus II* in 1965 to celebrate the seven hundredth birthday of Dante. In 1974 the Dutch radio station Hilversum commissioned *A-Ronne* for five singers and radiophonic effects. Berio revised the work in 1975, scoring it for eight amplified singers, and the Swingle Singers premiered it later that year. In the 1975 revision specific directions regarding the varying degrees of amplification and reverberation for different sections of the piece accompany each vocal part. This allows for greater control of the balance between the voices and an added dimension of spatiality.

When addressing the challenge of analyzing compositions that use prose and/or poetic texts Stacey suggests analytical categories that examine the original text, the composer’s setting, and the vocal styles used to deliver the text.<sup>6</sup> He also posits that, in addition to prose and poetic texts, phonetic or paralinguistic texts must be analyzed with meaning and sound as the primary focus.<sup>7</sup> Berio and

---

<sup>6</sup> Stacey, 24.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

Sanguinetti's collaboration falls into both the phonetic and poetic categories that Stacey outlines. Sanguinetti's text is primarily poetic, but in Berio's setting phonetic material is extracted from the text and paralinguistic material is added. Based on Stacey's framework, I have formed the following categories to analyze *A-Ronne*:

- 1) Text – form and meaning.
- 2) Sound elements – including text based sound devices, phonetic and paralinguistic material.
- 3) Intelligibility of text and degree of fragmentation.
- 4) Vocal styles.
- 5) Techniques of relating music and text – musical style, levels of mimesis.
- 6) Overall form.

### **The Text**

The text for *A-Ronne* is comprised of three stanzas. It reveals several recurrent elements of Sanguinetti's work: idiosyncratic use of punctuation, frequent use of quotation, juxtaposition of contradictory ideas, deliberately simplistic organizational procedures, multilingualism, attention to the aural qualities of words, alliterative and onomatopoeic processes, and an absence of syntax and semantics that forces the reader to search for new meanings in the text. The poem has multiple levels of meaning resulting in part from the frequent use of quotation. Below is a breakdown of the quotations used in the poem and translations where necessary. In the figure below, any text that is not indicated as being a quotation is text of Sanguinetti's own composition.

Figure 1: Text for *A-Ronne*<sup>8</sup>

I. (beginning)	Quotation Source/Translation
<i>a: ah: ha: hamm: anfang:</i>	phonemes derived from “anfang”–Ger. “beginning”–alludes to John 1:1 “hamm”–allusion to Samuel Beckett
<i>in: in principio: nel mio principio:</i>	It. “beginning”
<i>am anfang: in my beginning:</i>	“in my beginning” alludes to “East Coker” from T.S. Eliot’s <i>Four Quartets</i>
<i>ach: in principio erat</i>	Lat. “in the beginning was.”
<i>das wort: en arkè en:</i>	“das Wort”–Ger. “the word”; “en arkè en verbum”–Greek, “in the beginning was the word.”
<i>verbum: am anfang war: in principio erat: der sinn: caro nel mio principio: o logos: è la mia carne:</i>	“Der Sinn”–Ger. “Meaning/mind.” Refers to Goethe’s adaptation of <i>John 1:1</i> in <i>Faust</i> ; “caro and carne” (dear and flesh) also allude to further verses in the Book of John
<i>am anfang war: in principio: die kraft:</i>	“Die Kraft”–Ger. “energy”. “Die Tat”–Ger. “deed”. Both are allusions to Goethe’s <i>Faust</i> .
<i>die tat: nel mio principio:</i>	
II. (middle)	
<i>nel mezzo: in medio:</i>	It. “in the middle,” opening of Dante’s <i>La Divina commedia</i>
<i>nel mio mezzo: où commence?: nel mio corpo:</i>	“où commence” alludes to an essay by Roland Barthes on Georges Bataille
<i>où commence le corps humain?</i>	“Paradigm”– This is word 102 of

<sup>8</sup> Luciano Berio, “A-Ronne,” in *Berio*, ed. Enzo Restagno (Turin: E.D.T. Edizioni di Torino, 1995), 100-101.

<i>nel mezzo: nel mezzo del cammino: nel mezzo della mia carne:</i> <i>car la bouche est le commencement:</i> <i>nel mio principio è la mia bocca: parce qu'il y a opposition: paradigm</i>	170, placing it at the Golden Mean of the poem.
<i>la bouche:</i> <i>l'anus:</i> <i>in my beginning: aleph: is my end:</i>	"in my beginning is my end", from "East Coker" in Eliot's <i>Four Quartets</i> ; "aleph"—first letter of the Hebrew alphabet
<i>ein gespenst gebt um:</i>	Ger. "A spectre is haunting," opening of Marx and Engel's "The Communist Manifesto"
III. (end)	
<i>l'uomo ha un centro: qui est la sexe:</i> <i>en meso en: le phallus:</i> <i>nel mio centro è il mio corpo:</i> <i>nel mio principio è la mia parola: nel mio centro è la mia bocca: nella mia fine: am ende:</i> <i>in my end: run: in my beginning:</i>	"in my end is my beginning" "East Coker" from <i>Four Quartets</i> by T.S. Eliot "run"—allusion to James Joyce's <i>Finnegan's Wake</i>
<i>l'âme du mort sort par le pied:</i>	Fr. "the soul of the dead leaves through the foot"
<i>par l'anus: nella mia fine war das wort:</i> <i>in my end is my music:</i>	"is my music"—allusion to a private letter between Sanguineti and Berio
<i>ette, conne, ronne:</i>	final three letters of the ancient Italian alphabet, giving rise to the expression "from a to ronne," analogous to "from a to z"

It would be nearly impossible for a reader to recognize all the quotations used. Sanguineti's disjointed and fragmented quotations force the reader to generate new meanings from a pre-existing text. Even if the quotation goes unnoticed, the effect will still be

achieved, but on a different plane – the reader will assign a meaning to the phrase regardless of whether or not its source is known. Sanguineti believes that writing is a direct representation of an individual’s ideology, suggesting that these quotations carry meaning for him. They are also a subtle way to pay homage to authors he admired such as Dante, Joyce, and Eliot.

Another striking feature is the distinctive use of colons, a technique Sanguineti adopted in his poetry collection *Wirrwarr* from 1972.<sup>9</sup> In *A-Ronne*, the colons compartmentalize each fragment without the complete separation that a period would suggest. This visually highlights the pastiche style of composition but minimizes interruption of syntactic flow. In Berio’s setting the colons are largely abandoned and when the text is recited in longer stretches, it is spoken fluently.

Sanguineti also chose to avoid using capital letters in the poem, eliminating the regular capitalization of “Word” in the biblical quote and the capitalization of German nouns. This results in a further breakdown of syntax and helps to suggest a unified soundscape free of the traditional boundaries between languages. The ear is able to focus on the sounds being created as opposed to their meanings. Berio augments this element in the way he sets and varies the text.

The poem’s overall structure is divided into beginning, middle, and end. Each stanza indicates this by including the words “beginning,” “middle,” and “end”

---

<sup>9</sup> Picchione, 297.

in various languages. Sanguineti indicates that even though the poem is marked by clear divisions, “the order 1, 2, 3, should, in fact, be systematically violated and done violence to.”<sup>10</sup> In the finished product, Berio repeats the text nearly twenty times and frequently overlaps the different sections.

The concept of beginning, middle, and end is one that Sanguineti already utilized in the text he provided Berio for *Laborintus II*.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, some of the quotations used in *A-Ronne* also appear in *Laborintus II*. While an elementary structure like this might suggest a linear sequence of events, Sanguineti’s writing has a cyclic nature. The cornerstones of this circularity are the two phrases from T.S. Eliot. The first fragment is introduced in the first stanza (“in my beginning” and “nel mio principio”), and the quotation is completed in the second and third stanzas. The circular nature of the quotation, stating that endings can be found in beginnings and vice versa, breaks the potentially linear structure of the poem. As we will see later on, Berio’s setting and arrangement of the text reinforces its cyclical nature.

One of the most important words in the poem sits in the middle of the second stanza, at the golden ratio of the poem: “paradigme.” Paradigme, or paradigm, is defined as:

---

<sup>10</sup> Edoardo Sanguineti, Letter to Luciano Berio, 1974, “A-Ronne – A musical documentary based on a poem by Edoardo Sanguineti,” Teatro Minimo. <http://www.teatrominimo.org/teatroeng/aroneeng/aronneeng.html> (accessed September 30, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Vivienne Hand, “Laborintus II: A Neo-avantgarde Celebration of Dante,” *Italian Studies* 53 (1998): 123.

- 1) a typical example or pattern of something; a model (standard usage).
- 2) a basic term in linguistics for the set of relationships a linguistic unit has with other units in a specific context.<sup>12</sup>

This second definition, first pioneered by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, describes the relationship between words that are part of the same class within the language system. This is in direct contrast to syntagmatic relationships which describe the relationships of words in a linear or sentence structure or as Saussure wrote, "elements in praesentia."<sup>13</sup> Paradigmatic relationships are in direct contrast and deal with elements that are related to the word in use but are in absentia. For example, "girl" and "girls" or "girl" and "boy" are related, but would not be used in the same context. The concept of paradigmatic or contrasting ideas appears frequently in Sanguineti's work. In this poem, the underlying contrast opposes beginning to end. It is manifested in different contexts such as:

- 1) Body parts: one of Sanguineti's favourite categories of words, which includes in this text "l'anus" (anus) and "la bouche" (mouth), the end and beginning of the human body.
- 2) Alphabet: Sanguineti uses "aleph," which is the first letter of the Hebraic alphabet, and the last

---

<sup>12</sup> Marle, J. van. "Paradigms," in *The Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, ed. R.E. Asher, Vol. 10 (Oxford: Pergamon Press Ltd., 1994), 2997-2930.

<sup>13</sup> David Crystal. *A First Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1980), 256.

three letters from the ancient Italian alphabet, “ette, conne, ronne.”

3) Quotations which range from sources as diverse as the Greek text of the Bible and the Communist Manifesto.

Sanguineti’s own analysis of this poem is relatively straightforward.<sup>14</sup> He indicates to Berio that it has two main functions. The first is to mark the passage of time with the aforementioned divisions of beginning, middle, and end. The second is to pull the reader into a psychological metamorphosis initiated by the treatment of the text, by the juxtaposition of abstract concepts such as beginning and end, and by corporeity (the inclusion of the body).

Berio’s evaluation of *A-Ronne* is more indistinct. In his introduction to the work, he suggests three main descriptions of *A-Ronne*.<sup>15</sup> According to the first, *A-Ronne* is an “elementary vocalization of a text and its transformation into something equally elementary.”<sup>16</sup> This is a relatively straightforward definition which states that the work is comprised of the setting of a text and its subsequent transformation into a musical piece. Berio then goes on to say that the work is not a musical composition in the traditional sense, but rather a documentary of Sanguineti’s poem. Instead of writing a work that would create a musical setting to accompany the text and enhance its aesthetic value in the manner of a song, the music is a commentary and elaboration of the text. In his setting Berio hopes to

---

<sup>14</sup> Sanguineti, Letter to Luciano Berio, 1974.

<sup>15</sup> Berio, Program Notes for *A-Ronne*.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

explore meaning and clarify thought on the text, just as a documentary film on a foreign country educates us about its features and culture.

Berio’s third description is that *A-Ronne* is a “representative madrigal, the ‘theatre of the ear’... and something of a naïf[sic] painting where the broad canvas of situations...can always be linked to the elementary, to recognizable feelings and states of mind.”<sup>17</sup> This describes the theatrical nature of the work. Although *A-Ronne* is not a musical theatre work in the traditional sense of the word – there is no physical movement and no narrative element in the text – its vivid aural vocabulary creates a work that is theatrical in nature. Berio is also stating that even though the surface processes executed in the piece are complex, the underlying goal is simple. The huge spectrum of vocal effects and styles used in the work are meant to evoke the familiar and result in a product that is ultimately musical and engaging for the listener.

### Sound Elements

As previously mentioned, Sanguineti makes use of alliteration and assonance in his writing and this becomes prominent in the musical setting. *A-Ronne* opens with an example of assonance: in the first line the [a] and [ah] vowels are repeated in each word.

a: ah: ha: hamm: anfang:

In the second stanza there is a great deal of alliteration around the consonants ‘N’ and ‘M.’ The repetition of certain phrases such as “nel mezzo” or “nel mio”

---

<sup>17</sup> Berio, Program Notes for *A-Ronne*.

creates a feeling of sequence as well as unity of tone. Berio uses these alliterative elements as structural markers in his setting. The text is set in a variety of different styles, some of which are texturally dense and chaotic. When multiple voices recite the same vowel sounds in unison it acts like a cadence. For example, on page 8, seven of the eight voices state in unison the [a] vowel sound in “ach,” “hamm,” and then “ah” while Tenor 1 recites part of the first stanza in the style of a “dictator’s harangue.”<sup>18</sup> After so much chaos in the previous pages this moment of unison acts like a structural marker. In the final section of the piece from pages 61 to 69 the ‘N’ and ‘M’ consonants are used as cues to move between each vocal gesture. Phrases such as “nel mio” and “nella mia” are sung by Soprano 1 to mark the onset of the next section.

Berio’s setting makes frequent use of phonetic material, some of which is derived from the text and some that is original. The original phonetic material takes the form of isolated vowels and consonants that are used in three ways. Original consonants are used in two brief sections on pages 31 and 39 (see Example 1) to create a separation between sections. The cacophonous quality is like the inverse of a

---

<sup>18</sup> Berio, Luciano, *A-Ronne* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1975). Berio’s score does not make use of bar numbers, and since there is only one published edition, page numbers will be used to refer to specific places in the score.

**Example 1: Original paralinguistic material and phonemes, page 39.**

The score consists of five systems, each marked with a 5" duration. Each system contains staves for two voices (1 and 2). The dynamic markings are *fff* and *pp*. The phonetic transcriptions are as follows:

- System 1:
  - Voice 1: [d<sub>3</sub>] [b] [d] [f] [s] [r] [f]
  - Voice 2: cough [f] [a] [f] [d<sub>3</sub>] [k] [e]
- System 2:
  - Voice 1: [f] [p] [k] [s] cough [f] [g]
  - Voice 2: [s] [k] [f] [d<sub>3</sub>] [p] [f] cough
- System 3:
  - Voice 1: [e] [k] [p] [s] [g] cough [f]
  - Voice 2: [f] cough [s] [e] [f] [d<sub>3</sub>] [p]
- System 4:
  - Voice 1: [g] [s] cough [f] [p] [f] [k]
  - Voice 2: [r] [p] cough [z] [f] [d<sub>3</sub>]

Additional markings include A4 R4 ⊙, A3 R3, and a musical rest for voice T in the third system.

© Copyright 1975 by Universal Edition A.G., Wien/UE31679  
 All Rights Reserved  
 Used by permission of European American Distributors LLC, U.S. and Canadian agent for Universal Edition

musical rest that creates an aural marker to focus the listener's attention and draw them into the next musical event.

The original vowel sounds serve two functions. They are used in a subsidiary role to provide an instrumental sounding accompaniment to the dominant material of a section. Vowel sounds are also used as the primary material in the few homophonic passages of the work. The absence of any words in these passages suggests an instrumental and absolute quality, which is in sharp contrast to the abundance of text in other sections. The reduction of surface complexity during these homophonic portions creates a striking effect for the listener. In the first homophonic passage sung to vowel sounds (pages 53-58, see Example 2), the relative stillness after the previous passage of frenetic, melismatic lines creates a transcendent quality. Berio uses this passage to allude to the madrigal style of writing, which he mentioned in his description of the work.<sup>19</sup>

The other portion of homophonic writing with vowel sounds arrives near the very end of the piece on page 68 (see Example 3). The dynamic *fff* is marked and the singers are instructed to have a “screeching” tone. This is preceded by seven pages where the voices weave in and out with snippets of text from all three verses, and alternately sustain vowel sounds centred around the pitch of middle C. These pages gradually crescendo, culminating with the arrival of all eight voices on the same vowel sounds. It is as if all the people at a crowded party who have been carrying on independent conversations suddenly start yelling in unison and then walk out the door. Berio also uses

---

<sup>19</sup> Berio, Program Notes for *A-Ronne*.

vowels, consonants, and syllables that are derived from the text.

**Example 2: Original vowel content homophonically set, in a "madrigal" style, page 53.**

The musical score is divided into four systems, each for a different vocal part: T (Tenor), S (Soprano), A (Alto), and B (Bass). Each system begins with a 3/4 time signature and the instruction "Stesso tempo (♩ = 100)".

- System 1 (T):** Features a vocal line with lyrics: "l'uomo ha un centro: qui est le sexe: en méso en: le phallus: nel mio centro è il mio corpo: nel mio principio è la m in my end: run: is my beginning: l'âme du mort sort par le pied: par l'anus: nella mia fine war das wort: in my end". Phonetic transcriptions [u] are placed below the notes.
- System 2 (S):** Features a vocal line with lyrics: "l'uomo ha un centro: qui est le sexe: en méso en: le phallus: nel mio centro è il mio corpo: nel mio principio è la m in my end: run: is my beginning: l'âme du mort sort par le pied: par l'anus: nella mia fine war das wort: in my end". Phonetic transcriptions [u] are placed below the notes.
- System 3 (A):** Features a vocal line with lyrics: "l'uomo ha un centro: qui est le sexe: en méso en: le phallus: nel mio centro è il mio corpo: nel mio principio è la m in my end: run: is my beginning: l'âme du mort sort par le pied: par l'anus: nella mia fine war das wort: in my end". Phonetic transcriptions [o] are placed below the notes.
- System 4 (B):** Features a vocal line with lyrics: "l'uomo ha un centro: qui est le sexe: en méso en: le phallus: nel mio centro è il mio corpo: nel mio principio è la m in my end: run: is my beginning: l'âme du mort sort par le pied: par l'anus: nella mia fine war das wort: in my end". Phonetic transcriptions [u] are placed below the notes.

Each system includes a piano accompaniment line (labeled 1 and 2) and various musical markings such as dynamics (p, mf), articulation (>), and phrasing (segue).

Ⓞ repeat this text until the end of the page in a didactic.

Example 3: Homophonic ending to *A-Ronne*, with all voices in textual unison, page 68.

The musical score consists of four systems, each representing a voice part: Tenor (T), Soprano (S), Alto (A), and Bass (B). Each system contains two staves (1 and 2). The lyrics are: "in [a] [i] [e] [a] [e] in my end [i]". The dynamics are marked as *ff* and *fff*, with the instruction "full voice, screeching". The score is in G major and 4/4 time.

© Copyright 1975 by Universal Edition A.G., Wien/UE31679

All Rights Reserved

Used by permission of European American Distributors LLC, U.S. and Canadian agent for Universal Edition

One of the most sustained uses of derived syllables is in the Bass 2 part on pages 20-26 and 59. The bass is

instructed to sing “espressivo, like an accompanying double bass” (see Example 4). The line serves an instrumental function, and the extracted text follows no order, so that the sounds are perceived as a musical gesture instead of words.

**Example 4: Phonemes and syllables used in an instrumental texture, page 20.**

© Copyright 1975 by Universal Edition A.G., Wien/UE31679  
 All Rights Reserved  
 Used by permission of European American Distributors LLC, U.S. and Canadian agent for Universal Edition

The most striking example of phonemes Berio uses is in the “duets” between Tenor 1 and Bass 1. Here Berio dismantles a phrase from the poem such as “in my end is my music” into its individual vowels and consonants. He then splits the consonants and vowels between the two vocal parts and has the singers reconstitute the word (see Example 5).

The effect is striking and unique. What at first sounds like random vowels and consonants slowly emerges as an intelligible phrase as the tempo of the exchange between the two singers increases. Berio does this with the phrase above and with the phrase “aleph is my end” – two of the more important phrases of the poem because of the circularity they suggest. These

two sections anchor the work and provide an arc to the overall structure.

**Example 5: Reconstitution of constituent vowels and consonants into the phrase “in my end is my music,” page 39.**

The image shows a musical score for Example 5. It consists of two staves, A3 and B3, with a tempo marking of  $\text{♩} = 104$  and a dynamic marking of *mf*. The top staff (A3) contains a phonetic transcription of the phrase "in my end is my music" with the following phonemes: [i] [a] [e] [i] [a] [u] [i]. The bottom staff (B3) contains a musical notation of the phrase with the following phonemes: [d] [m] [nd] [s] [m] [s] [k] [nd] [sm] [m] [s] [k]. The notation includes various rhythmic values and dynamic markings such as *f* and *mf*.

© Copyright 1975 by Universal Edition A.G., Wien/UE31679

All Rights Reserved

Used by permission of European American Distributors LLC, U.S. and Canadian agent for Universal Edition

The paralinguistic elements of *A-Ronne* are used in much the same way as the original vowel sounds were: as an accompanying texture or as a dividing marker. For example, on pages 9-10 seven of the voices perform an ostinato of various paralinguistic gestures such as chewing sounds, popping, whistling, and squeaking. Over top of this the Bass 2 has a short monologue, in which he struggles to announce “die Tat.” The other main paralinguistic feature is the scat

**Example 6: Recurrent paralinguistic motive in Tenor 2 part, page 33.**

The image shows a musical score for Example 6. It consists of a single staff with a tempo marking of  $\text{♩} = 104$  and a dynamic marking of *mf*. The notation includes various rhythmic values and dynamic markings such as *p* and *mf*. The phonemes "den den" are written below the notes. The score is divided into two sections, 4/8 and 7/16, with a key signature of A4.

© Copyright 1975 by Universal Edition A.G., Wien/UE31679

All Rights Reserved

Used by permission of European American Distributors LLC, U.S. and Canadian agent for Universal Edition

syllable, “den.” This syllable is paired with a recurring melodic motive sung by Tenor 2 that reappears at various points throughout the setting to indicate the start of a new vocal section (see Example 6).

### **Intelligibility of Text and Level of Fragmentation**

Berio uses such a wide variety of methods in *A-Ronne* that the intelligibility of the text and its fragmentation vary widely. Over the course of the piece the poetic text is repeated nearly twenty times. The text is either delivered in prime condition – little has been changed from the author’s original – or in a varying level of fragmentation.<sup>20</sup> When Berio chooses to keep the text in its prime condition, he frequently masks it by placing it as an accompanying undercurrent to other musical textures, such as the mumbling dialogue of Bass 1 and 2 on pages 14-16. In other places, Berio creates a babel of voices in which different portions of the text are recited by each singer simultaneously at a rapid pace. This is a texture that Berio had already experimented with in *Laborintus II*, where it evoked the biblical event of God confusing the languages of the builders of Babylon.<sup>21</sup> In these portions of *A-Ronne* (see Example 7), individual words may emerge but the overall effect is a multilingual stew, where many ingredients combine to create a rich and varied texture.

Berio also obscures intelligibility by employing various levels of fragmentation. At a low level of fragmentation, words are kept intact but are placed

---

<sup>20</sup> Stacey, 26.

<sup>21</sup> Hand, 127.

## Example 7: Babel texture, page 13.

20" ca

*p* > *pp* < *pp* < *pp* < *pp* < *pp* < *pp*  
 la bouche car la bouche ou commence nel mio mezzo  
 ein ge-spenst geht ge - spenst um... ein ge-

*pp* < *pp* < *pp* < *mf* < *pp*  
 car la bouche est le commencement parcequ'il ya opposition la bouche: nel mio mezzo:  
 u a [u] ein ge-

*pp* < *p* < *pp* < *pp* < *f* < *pp*  
 ein gespenst geht um: car la bouche fanus: nel mio principio: la mia bocca:  
 +

*pp* < *p* < *pp* < *pp* < *pp* < *f* < *pp*  
 Aleph la bouche fanus: nel mio principio: aleph nel mio mezzo: in medio  
 ge-spenst ein ... [u] ein ge-spenst.

*pp* < *mf* < *pp*  
 nel mezzo della mia carne: nel mezzo del cammino: nel mio corpo ou commence  
 ein

*pp* < *p* < *pp* < *mf* < *pp* < *f* < *pp*  
 car la bouche nel mezzo del cammino nel mio corpo: fanus: ou commence le corps humain  
 gehit um um ge-spenst

*f* < *f* < *f*  
 ein ge-spenst

*mf* < *f*  
 ein ge-spenst

© Copyright 1975 by Universal Edition A.G., Wien/UE31679

All Rights Reserved

Used by permission of European American Distributors LLC, U.S. and Canadian agent for Universal Edition

out of context so that the meaning of the phrase or stanza is obscured. At a higher level, words are dismantled into their phonetic components, losing semantic meaning but gaining musical function. The treatment of extracted and original phonetic material has been addressed in the previous section.

### Vocal Styles

In *A-Ronne* Berio uses three primary vocal styles to present text. These are:

- 1) Speaking or recitation of text:
  - a) speaking in ordinary speech patterns with no notated rhythms or pitch;
  - b) speaking with no pitch centre but using notated rhythms;
  - c) speaking with notated rhythms and a pitch outline, notated around a central line.
- 2) Singing the text:
  - a) singing a vocal contour, notated around a central line;
  - b) singing a lexically dominated line – the setting is primarily syllabic and the words can be clearly distinguished as on pages 14-19 or pages 43-46;
  - c) singing a musically dominated line – the setting is melismatic or is based on phonetic elements as on pages 46-50 and pages 53-58.
- 3) Paralinguistic elements and extended vocal techniques – these include *bouche fermée* singing, whispering, whistling, various percussive sounds created with the mouth, and other previously mentioned paralinguistic elements such as scat syllables.<sup>22</sup>

These vocal styles represent the “characters” in Berio’s theatre of the ear. In a theatre piece, the audience relies on visual information to distinguish characters and understand dramatic action. Berio’s theatre is exclusively aural: characters are identified by recognizable aural qualities. The vocal styles are the most distinct elements of the piece, causing the listener to associate each with a character of the drama

---

<sup>22</sup> Stacey, 27, 234.

and also generating the “local situations and different expressions” that Berio desired.<sup>23</sup> By characterizing vocal styles instead of individual vocal parts or passages of text, Berio has greater compositional flexibility, since multiple voices can portray the same “character” and one passage of text can undergo multiple transformations of meaning depending on the vocal style.

For example, the opening lines of text are presented in all three vocal styles, creating a different characterization or local situation each time. At the opening the text is spoken in fragments of recitation with notated rhythms, accompanied by various paralinguistic and phonetic elements. In the following babel texture, which was discussed in the previous section, the words are spoken without notated rhythms. The opening text is not heard again until the latter half of the piece, where it is set to a folk-like melody sung by Soprano 1. The vocal styles create a different texture and level of intelligibility for each repetition of the text, mimicking the situations of everyday life where words and their context are constantly changing.

### **Techniques of Relating Music and Text**

Music and text can be related in any manner of ways, ranging from a completely contradictory, anti-contextual relationship to direct mimesis.<sup>24</sup> Once

---

<sup>23</sup> Berio, Program Notes for *A-Ronne*.

<sup>24</sup> Stacey, 28. These categories have been derived from Stacey’s classifications for the vocal styles used in *Laborintus II*.

again, Berio experiments with a variety of relationships, as if he were repeating the words many times to himself to search out all possibilities of their meaning.

The start of the work represents a high level of mimesis (see Example 8). The text is not set in a way where each word is assigned a musical gesture that reflects its meaning, like in word painting, but the general feature or mood of the text is conveyed by the music. The first several pages of *A-Ronne* (specifically pages 1-6) set the first stanza of the poem, which speaks about the beginning of the word. Berio fragments the text and employs a wide variety of vocal styles, none of which are sustained for longer than a few seconds. The general sense of chaos this creates gives an impression of searching for language and meaning, as if the music were searching for the beginning of the word. The section emerges into a violent recitation of the first stanza given by Tenor 1, which emphatically declares the emergence of the word.

In general, Berio rarely maintains a consistent relationship between music and text. He is constantly shifting and transforming the meaning of the words by altering the way they interact with the musical elements. The next time the first stanza is heard it is delivered in ordinary speech patterns in an “intimate” dialogue between Bass 2 and Alto 2. The mood is completely different, creating a new possible meaning for the text.

**Example 8: Opening page of *A-Ronne* representing high-level mimesis.**

The image shows a page of a musical score for the opera *A-Ronne*. It features four vocal parts: Tenore (Tenor), Soprano, Alto, and Basso (Bass). Each part has two staves. The lyrics are written below the notes, with some in Italian and some in German. The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics (e.g., *mf*, *f*, *pp*), articulation (e.g., accents, slurs), and performance instructions (e.g., *in principio era*, *in ipsoque, sed non principio*). There are also some markings like *A1*, *R1*, *A2*, *R2*, etc., which likely refer to specific sections or recordings. The tempo is marked as *J = 72*.

© Copyright 1975 by Universal Edition A.G., Wien/UE31679

All Rights Reserved

Used by permission of European American Distributors LLC, U.S. and Canadian agent for Universal Edition

Often the text and music interact in what Stacey terms a non-mimetic relationship.<sup>25</sup> A great deal of *A-Ronne* does not demonstrate correlation between the music and text. This is in part due to the nature of Sanguineti's text, which does not focus on any emotional or expressive concept that would be easy to represent. Its abstract and fragmented nature gives Berio the freedom to set the text as he sees fit and to experiment with a variety of musical gestures. Berio does allude to certain musical styles, although they have no correlation with the accompanying text. These act like vignettes in a theatre piece, offering a glimpse into a potential reality.

<sup>25</sup> Stacey, 29.

One of the more extended vignettes occurs on pages 14-19. The four women sing a passage marked "liturgically" with the sopranos in imitation of the altos a beat later. Simultaneously the two bass parts are instructed to speak the text from the third verse, "like two priests murmuring a prayer: fast and low tones."<sup>26</sup> This conjures up the atmosphere of a church and helps strengthen the link to everyday associations and recognizable states that Berio emphasize in his introduction to the piece.<sup>27</sup> Each vignette creates a musical suggestion of reality, regardless of whether the text shares this meaning. Berio alternately evokes the atmosphere of a church, a crowded party or a busy street, an intimate dialogue between lovers, or the intimidating speech of a sergeant, reinforcing that music can represent everyday reality and offer new perspective on its meaning.

The music and text can also produce an arbitrary association where there is no direct link between the meaning of the text and music, but one is created through a consistent setting. Although none of the texts are set the same throughout *A-Ronne*, an arbitrary association can be developed between a portion of text and a particularly distinctive setting of it. For example, the phrase "l'uomo ha un centro qui est le sexe" is set on page 22 and 23 to a folk-like tune. It is accompanied by occasional interjections of paralinguistic gestures, so the listener is able to hear it with very little masking. Its clarity and tunefulness makes it easy to remember and results in the listener

---

<sup>26</sup> Berio, *A-Ronne*, 14.

<sup>27</sup> Berio, Program Notes for *A-Ronne*.

creating an association between this tune and portion of text. For the most part, however, the constant flux of vocal delivery and musical style makes it difficult to associate any portion of the text with a specific musical gesture.

### **Overall Form**

In Berio's evaluation of *A-Ronne* he describes its form as being elementary and straightforward.<sup>28</sup> Upon first evaluation this is difficult to hear, due to the high surface complexity. It also does not fit the mould of any musical form where returning musical gestures and recapitulatory techniques are used to guide the listener through a basic transformational process. The form is linear like a documentary or literary analysis would be. Berio avoids large-scale development and works in small vignettes or what he describes as "local situations."<sup>29</sup> In this way he is not restricted to developing one representation of the text over the course of the piece, but can approach it from multiple perspectives. Unity is created by a sense of experimentation and a constant forward motion. Berio has chosen the medium he is the most comfortable in and used it to analyze and comment on a work of literature.

While Berio often chose to conduct his musical analyses through composition, he was also well spoken and respected for his opinions on musical topics. Many of his thoughts about music and the arts were recorded in a series of interviews conducted by

---

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

Rossana Dalmonte in the early 1980s. In the fifth interview with Dalmonte, Berio commented on the idea of transformation. He said:

Shall I tell you what my theatrical idea is? Well, it’s to take two simple and banal forms of behaviour, say, “walking in the rain” and “typing” and to put them on stage in such a way that they transform one another and produce by morphogenesis a third form of behaviour: we don’t really know what this is because we’ve never seen it before, and it’s not the elementary combination of the two familiar forms of behaviour.<sup>30</sup>

In *A-Ronne*, he succeeded in that goal. In this case the two “behaviours” are music and text. The result, however, is not a song or an oratorio or an opera in the traditional sense of the word. Instead, Berio has written a musical analysis that dramatizes even the smallest elements of text and sound, creating a “theatre of the ear.” He employs a full arsenal of vocal techniques and styles to fully explore the possibilities of the text. While the overall form is kept as simple as possible, the surface complexity is increased. Berio delves deeply into the phonetic and paralinguistic reconstructing meaning from the bottom up. Sanguineti’s poem is repeated nearly twenty times as it is used to unlock the sounds and meanings of reality and common experience. *A-Ronne* takes recognizable elements like music, speech, singing, and everyday

---

<sup>30</sup> Dalmonte and Varga, 102.

sounds and combines them to create something new. In a piece of theatre all the elements of scenery, costumes, lighting, and staging combine to create a complete sensory experience. In *A-Ronne*, Berio draws on a full arsenal of disparate aural characters and sonic storylines to create a unified dramatic work.

## Bibliography

*A-Ronne and Cries of London*, by Luciano Berio. Swingle II. CD, Polygram Records B00000E449, 1990.

Berio, Luciano. "A-Ronne." In *Berio*, edited by Enzo Restagno, 98-106. Turin: E.D.T. Edizioni di Torino, 1995.

\_\_\_\_\_. *A-Ronne*. Vienna: Universal Edition, 1975.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Laborintus II*. Milan: Universal Edition, 1976.

*Canticum Novissimi Testamenti and A-Ronne*, by Luciano Berio. Neue Vocalsolisten Stuttgart, Newears4 Clarinets, Xasax Ensemble de Saxophones Modulable, Peter Rundel. CD, Wergo WER 6687 2, 2005.

Dalmonte, Rossana and Bálint András Varga. *Luciano Berio – Two Interviews*. Translated and edited by David Osmond-Smith. New York: Marion Boyars Publishers, 1981.

Crystal, David. *A First Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1980.

Hand, Vivienne. "Laborintus II: A Neo-avantgarde Celebration of Dante." *Italian Studies* 53 (1998): 122-149.

*Laborintus II*, by Luciano Berio. Ensemble Musique Vivante. CD, Harmonia Mundi HMA 190764, 1970.

Marle, J. van. "Paradigms." In *The Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, ed. R.E. Asher, Vol. 10. Oxford: Pergamon Press Ltd., 1994, 2927-2930.

Osmond-Smith, David. *Berio*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Osmond-Smith, David. "Berio, Luciano." *Grove Music Online*, edited by L. Macy, 2007. [http://www.grove-music.com/shared/views/article.html?from=search&session\\_search\\_id=199204403&hitnum=1&section=music.02815](http://www.grove-music.com/shared/views/article.html?from=search&session_search_id=199204403&hitnum=1&section=music.02815) (accessed October 30, 2007).

Picchione, John. "Edoardo Sanguineti." In *Twentieth-Century Italian Poets: Second Series*, edited by Giovanna Wedel de Stasio, Glauco Cambon and Antonio Illiano, 293-299. N.p.: Gale Cengage, 1993.

Stacey, Peter F. *Contemporary Tendencies in the Relationship of Music and Text with Special Reference to Pli selon Pli (Boulez) and Laborintus II (Berio)*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1989.

Teatro Minimo. "A-Ronne – A musical documentary based on a poem by Edoardo Sanguineti." Teatro Minimo. <http://www.teatrominimo.org/teatroeng/aronneeng/aronneeng.html> (accessed September 30, 2007).

## Abstract

In 1963 Luciano Berio (1925-2003) was introduced to the Italian neo-avant-garde poet Edoardo Sanguineti (b. 1930). Berio and Sanguineti’s mutual interest in the study of phonology and the possibility of deriving structural form from the transformation of small vocal units led to collaborations on numerous vocal works, including *A-Ronne* (1974-75).

Berio describes *A-Ronne* as a “documentary on a poem by Edoardo Sanguineti.” In this work, Berio dissects and transforms the text, providing an aural analysis of the poetic material. How does one analyze an analysis? This paper develops an analytical approach for *A-Ronne* by adapting existing models of analysis for contemporary vocal works. The primary model will be Peter Stacey’s doctoral dissertation, *Contemporary Tendencies in the Relationship of Music and Text with Special Reference to Pli selon Pli (Boulez) and Laborintus II (Berio)*. This analysis will focus on the original poetic material, the techniques used to set the text, and how these techniques generate the overall form of the work.

Berio also referred to *A-Ronne* as a “theatre of the ear.” Just as the various elements of a theatrical piece (such as staging, actors, scenery, etc.) are synthesized to generate a total sensory experience, Berio dramatized the disparate vocal and textual elements in *A-Ronne* to generate recognizable situations that combine into a unified whole. The this article aims to demonstrate how Berio’s approach both enhances understanding and appreciation of the original text and produces a new theatrical entity.