

## Sinfonia

for eight voices and instruments (1968-1969)

Texts by Claude Lévi-Strauss and Samuel Beckett

- I.
- II. O King
- III. In ruhig fließender Bewegung
- IV.
- V.

The title *Sinfonia* bears no relationship to the classical form – rather it must be understood in its etymological sense of “sounding together” of eight voices and instruments or, in a larger sense, of “sounding together” of different things, situations and meanings. The musical development of *Sinfonia* is always conditioned by the research for a continuity and an identity between voices and instruments, between spoken and sung words on one side and the whole harmonic structure of the work on the other. This is why perception and understanding of the text are never taken for granted, but are integral parts of the work: the different degrees of understanding, even the experience of “not quite hearing”, are to be regarded as essential to the nature of the musical process.

I. The text of the first part consists of a series of short fragments from *Le cru et le cuit* by Claude Lévi-Strauss, in particular from those sections of the book where the author analyses the structure and symbology of Brazilian myths concerning the origins of water, and related myths characterized by similar structure.

II. The second part of *Sinfonia* is a tribute to the memory of Martin Luther King. The eight voices exchange among them the sounds constituting the name of the black martyr until the point when his name is clearly enunciated: “O Martin Luther King”.

III. The main text for the third section consists of fragments from Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*, which, in turn, generate a large number of “daily life” references and quotations.

IV. The text of the fourth part, after a brief reference to the opening words of the fourth movement of Mahler's Second Symphony, mimics, rather than enunciates, verbal fragments taken from the preceding parts.

V. The text of the fifth part recapitulates, develops and completes the texts of the preceding parts, giving narrative substance and continuity to those fragments (from *Le cru et le cuit*) that in the first part had been enunciated as snatches of imaginary stories.

The third section of *Sinfonia* requires a more detailed comment because it is perhaps the most “experimental” music I have ever written. It is a tribute to Gustav Mahler (whose work seems to bear the weight of the entire history of music of the last two centuries) and in particular to the third movement – the Scherzo – of his Second Symphony (*Resurrection*). Mahler is to the totality of the music of the third part of my *Sinfonia* as Beckett is to the totality of the text. The result is a kind of *voyage to Cythera* made on board the Scherzo of Mahler's Second Symphony. The Mahler movement is treated like a generator – and also as a container - within whose framework a large number of musical characters and references is proliferated; they go from Bach to Schoenberg, from Brahms to Strauss, from Beethoven to Stravinsky, from Berg to Webern, to Boulez, to Pousseur, to myself and others. The different musical characters are always integrated into the flowing harmonic structure of Mahler's Scherzo. They interact and transform themselves - as it happens with those familiar objects or faces that, placed in a different light or in a new context, suddenly acquire a different meaning. The combining and the unifying of different and often unrelated musical characters may be the main motivation for the third part of *Sinfonia*, for this meditation on a Mahlerian *objet trouvé*.

If I were to describe the presence of Mahler's Scherzo in *Sinfonia*, the image which comes most spontaneously to my mind is that of a river flowing through a constantly changing landscape, sometimes going underground and emerging in another altogether different place, sometimes very evident in its journey, sometimes disappearing completely, present either as a fully recognizable form or as small details lost in the surrounding host of musical events.

The five parts of *Sinfonia* are apparently very different one from the other. However, it is the role of the fifth part to annul those differences, bringing to light and developing the latent unity of the preceding parts. In the fifth part, in fact, the discourse begun in the first part finds its conclusion: all other parts flow together into it, either as fragments (third and fourth parts) or in its complete form (second part). The fifth part can thus be considered as a true analysis of *Sinfonia* conducted with the “language” of the composition itself.

*Sinfonia*, composed for the 125th Anniversary of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, is dedicated to Leonard Bernstein.

Luciano Berio