

Luciano Berio – Sinfonia (1968)

Section I	
Section II	O King
Section III	In ruhig fliessender Bewegung
Section IV	

The four sections into which *Sinfonia* (1968) is divided are not to be taken as movements analogous to those of the classical symphony. The title, in fact, must be understood only in its etymological sense of 'sounding together' (in this case, the sounding together of instruments and eight voices). Although their expressive characters are extremely diversified, these four sections are generally unified by similar harmonic and articulatory characteristics (duplication and extended repetition being among the most important).

I. The text of the first part consists of a series of short fragments from *Le Cru et le cuit* by the French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss. These fragments are taken from a section of the book that analyses the structure and symbology of Brazilian myths about the origins of water and related myths characterised by similar structure.

II. The second section of *Sinfonia* is a tribute to the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Here the vocal part is based on his name, nothing else.

III. The main text for the third section includes excerpts from Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*, which in turn prompt a selection from many other sources, including Joyce, spoken phrases of Harvard undergraduates, slogans written by the students on the walls of the Sorbonne during the May 1968 insurrection in Paris (which I witnessed), recorded dialogues with my friends and family, snatches of *solfège*, and so on.

IV. The text for the fourth section, a sort of coda, is based on a short selection from those used in the three preceding parts.

The treatments of the vocal part in the first, second and fourth sections of *Sinfonia* resemble each other in that the text is not immediately perceivable as such. The words and the components undergo a musical analysis that is integral to the total musical structure of voice and instrument together. It is precisely because the varying degree of perceptibility of the text at different moments is a part of the musical structure that the words and phrases used are not printed here. The experience of 'not quite hearing', then, is to be conceived as essential to the nature of the work itself.

Section III of *Sinfonia*, I feel, requires a more detailed comment than others, because it is perhaps the most 'experimental' music I have ever written. It is another homage, this time to Gustav Mahler, whose work seems to bear the weight of the entire history of music; and to Leonard Bernstein for his unforgettable performance of the *Resurrection* Symphony during the 1967-68 season.

The result is a kind of 'voyage to Cythera' made on board the 3rd movement of Mahler's Second Symphony. The Mahler movement is treated like a container within whose framework a large number of references is proliferated, interrelated and integrated into the flowing structure of the original work itself. The references range from Bach, Schoenberg, Debussy, Ravel, Strauss, Berlioz, Brahms, Berg, Hindemith, Beethoven, Wagner and Stravinsky to Boulez, Stockhausen, Globokar, Pousseur, Ives, myself and beyond. I would almost say that this section of *Sinfonia* is not so much composed as it is assembled to make possible the mutual transformation of the component parts. It was my intention here neither to destroy Mahler (who is indestructible) nor to play out a private complex about 'post-Romantic music' (I have none) nor yet to spin some enormous musical anecdote (familiar among young pianists). Quotations and references were chosen not only for their real but also for their potential relation to Mahler. The juxtaposition of contrasting elements, in fact, is part of the whole point of this section of *Sinfonia*, which can also be considered, if you will, a documentary on an *objet trouvé* recorded in the mind of the listener. As a structural point of reference, Mahler is to the totality of the music of this section what Beckett is to the text. One might describe the relationship between words and music as a kind of interpretation, almost a *Traumdeutung*, of that stream-of-consciousness-like flowing that is the most immediate expressive character of Mahler's movement. If I were to describe the presence of Mahler's 'scherzo' in *Sinfonia*, the image that comes most spontaneously to mind is that of a river, going 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 recognisable form or as small details lost in the surrounding host of musical presences.