Re-evaluating the collaborative process between Luciano Berio and Cathy Berberian for *Sequenza III* (1965-66) and its critical reception in North America, the United Kingdom and Australia.

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During the 1960s and 1970s, Luciano Berio and other composers actively pursued virtuoso performers to form professional partnerships. This initiative stemmed from composers' fascination with the possibility of new tasks with their new-found partner and confidant.¹ In addition to Berio and Cathy Berberian, such teams included John Cage and David Tudor, Milton Babbitt, and Bethany Beardslee. Performers not only inspired these composers, but also gave advice on techniques. For instance, Joan La Barbara explained to Philip Glass techniques including how to avoid vocal fatigue and the length of time a vocalist could stay within a limited tessitura.²

Composer/performer relationships also help the performer to better transmit the music to the audience. Flautist Nina Perlove describes the symbiotic relationship between a composer and a performer:

Composers stretch the expressive and technical possibilities of the performers, musicians challenge composers to communicate their ideas clearly, composers and performers challenge technology to meet their changing needs, and technology in turn, challenges composers and musicians to create and master new methods of performance.³

In turn, these established partnerships elevated the reputations of both the composer and their respective performer. Berio's work for Berberian of 1953 entitled *Chamber Music* established the team's reputation within avant-garde circles. The impact of the Berio/Berberian partnership not only transformed vocal technique but also its future compositional possibilities. However, after her death in 1983, Berberian's important contribution to the creative process was somewhat overshadowed by the celebrity status of Berio.⁴

¹ Cfr. Foss [1963, 46].

² Cfr. La Barbara [2002, 37].

³ Cfr. Perlove – Cherrier [1998, 52].

⁴ Halfyard [2004].

This point of contention is not exclusive to Berberian's collaborative works with Berio. The vocalist's communicative and performing skills were tangible practices widely adapted and embedded in the works by several composers who also failed to acknowledge the relevance of her contribution once their work had achieved its final format.⁵ Other works for Berberian include John Cage's *Aria* (1958), Bruno Maderna's *Dimensioni II: Invenzione su una voce* (1960), Roman Haubenstock-Ramati's *Credentials or Think, Think Lucky* (1961), Igor Stravinsky's *Elegy for J.F.K* (1964), Darius Milhaud's *Adieu* (1964), Sylvano Bussotti's *La Passion Selon Sade* (1965), Henrie Pousseur's *Phonemes pour Cathy* (1966) and William Walton's *Façade II* (1977).

Berberian, like many of her female predecessors and contemporaries within the arts including photographer Claude Cahun (1894—1954), artists Louise Bourgeois (1911—2010), Carmen Herrera (1915—2022), Nil Yalter (1938—) as well as artist and writer Tomaso Binga (1931—) have generally been biased and/or inadequately acknowledged by scholars and critics.⁶ As a consequence of a second feminist movement towards the end of the 20th century, the re-evaluation of women in arts, led also to the rediscovery of Berberian's important contributions to the twentieth century avant-garde music scene.

No doubt, Berio was fascinated by Berberian's innate ability to use different vocal techniques as well as to evoke many differing aspects of the voice. The mezzo-soprano had a three-and-a-half octave vocal span and a wide-ranging technique that included traditional classical singing and extended vocal techniques. Berberian also executes with ease and precision the onomatopoeic sounds of animal noises, guttural sounds, grunts, growls, squeals, squeaks, squawks, clicks, clucks, shrieks, screeches, hisses, hoots, and hollers.⁷

Another aspect of virtuosic appeal was Berberian's rapid-reflex technique, which allows seamless and extremely quick movement between disparate musical styles. Berberian's ability to sing in one vocal style then switch abruptly mid-phrase to another style Berio exploits in *Recital I (for Cathy,* 1972). The composer drew his 'collage' of musical quotations from Berberian's recital repertoire. This work moves rapidly within two to three notes from a Monteverdi aria to a Baroque style aria as well as a selection of over forty phrases from Bernstein, Bizet, J.S. Bach, de Falla, Donizetti, Hollaender, Jules Massenet, Milhaud, Meyerbeer,

⁵ Placanica 2014, *La nuova vocalità nell'opera contemporanea (1966): Cathy Berberian's Legacy,*" in Karantonis – Placanica – Sivuoja – Kauppala – Verstraete [2014, 53].

⁶ Cfr. Dekel [2013, 7].

⁷ Cfr. Paull [2007, 34].

Mahler, Prokofiev, Purcell, Poulenc, Ravel, Rossini, Schubert, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Verdi and Wolf.

Many of Berio's works in partnership with Berberian were composed during their marriage from 1950 to 1964. As collaborators, Berio and Berberian made several mutual decisions in the pre-compositional process. For instance, Berberian preferred chamber music settings to operatic settings, conceding that she could not 'fight a big orchestra'.⁸ Therefore, Berio cast Berberian mainly within smaller instrumental groups. Take, for example, *El mar la mar* of 1952 for which Berio included an accordion, piccolo, two clarinets, harp, cello and double bass.

Chamber Music Berio scored for an even more intimate setting that includes a cello, clarinet and harp. Berberian also participated in the decision as to which of the James Joyce poems of the same title to incorporate in *Chamber Music* poems to incorporate into this work. Similarly for *Folk Songs*, Berio opts for a smaller instrumental group rather than a full-size orchestra. The composer arranges two versions of this work: one for voice and flute, piccolo, clarinet, two percussions, harp, viola and cello of 1964 and the other for voice and chamber orchestra that the composer reorchestrated in 1973.

Berio's *Epifanie* (1959-61) is the only orchestral composition for Berberian. This work is a collection of seven short orchestral pieces and five vocal pieces that are in a modernist idiom and include a wide range of vocal expressions and techniques. The text Berio drew from the writings of Bertolt Brecht, James Joyce, Antonio Machado, Marcel Proust, Edoardo Sanguineti and Claude Simon. So as not to 'fight' the orchestra, Berio substantially reduces the instrumental accompaniment for Berberian's vocal parts.

As a joint enterprise, Berio and Berberian explored new ways to present the human voice within electro-acoustic media. For instance, *Thema* (*Omaggio a Joyce*) of 1958, Berio was interested in creating 'a new kind of unity between speech and music, developing possibilities of a continuous metamorphosis one into another'. ¹⁰ The creative process began with Berberian reading texts adapted from James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*. Berberian presented to Berio three different readings of Joyce's overture—in English as well as French and Italian translations of the original text. Berio then mixed and electronically transformed Berberian's vocalisations,

⁸ Cfr. Amirkhanian [1972].

⁹Cfr. van Rossum [2014, 38].

¹⁰ Cfr. Berio [n. d.].

resulting in a 'stream of half-comprehended utterances, where words and fragments of speech are engulfed by meaningless, synthetic sound'.¹¹

The inception of Berio's radio drama *Visage* (1961) was Berberian's vocal improvisations. This course initially involved a series of two-to-three-hour recording sessions at the Studio di fonologia musicale Rai di Milano. Berberian first improvised on a series of phonetic repertoire in English, Hebrew and Neapolitan dialect. Berio aspires to work within the parabola from the failure of communication, through to trivial conversation, to serious emotion, and then to song. Berberian explains the way Berio guided her improvisations during the recording process:

He gave me certain ideas that I was going to create [in] the moment — improvising—under his guidance. I was either inventing a language or I was exploiting a vocal gesture. For example, he'd say 'alright now you start out with a total inability to communicate and then you work into a situation where you acquire phonemes, and you acquire several phonemes at a time and then you can make a comprehensible phrase and then you become social'. At one point he said – 'now give me what you remember of the muro del pianto,' which was The Wailing Wall. He said, 'start at an agonized [point]—with agony and desperation quietly and build it up and build it up and get to such a high tension that the sound you've arrived at will naturally melt into singing'. ¹⁵

Berberian's verbal discourse includes phonemes, vowels consonances, gibberish and babbling on an invented language; the Italian word *parole* (words) appears only twice in the final version of the work. In addition to the improvised sections on an invented language or vocal gestures, Berberian devoted one of these sessions exclusively to different types of laughter.¹⁶

The final recorded vocal material for *Visage* was six hours in duration, from which Berio then extracted components to counterpoint against the electronic sounds.¹⁷ Berio's 'decomposition' of the voice into articulatory elements or gestures neutralises the voice, which then resonates through a range of electronic sounds.¹⁸ Berio edits, filters, distorts and remixes Berberian's vocal part, including laughter, moans, groans, snorts, wheezes, sighs, sobs and cries with electronic sounds. In the final version of *Visage*, Berberian evokes for the listener a wide range of emotional states that move in a rapid and seamless successive manner.

¹¹ Cfr. Mussgnug [2008, 85].

¹² Cfr. Osmond-Smith [2004, 8].

¹³ Cfr. Osmond-Smith [2004, 8].

¹⁴ Cfr. Osmond-Smith [2004, 8].

¹⁵ Cfr. Van Rossum [2014, 41].

¹⁶ Cfr. Osmond-Smith [1991, 63].

¹⁷ Cfr. Osmond-Smith [2004, 8].

¹⁸ Cfr. Osmond-Smith [2004, 8].

Berberian's contribution was an essential part of the final composition; therefore, *Visage* is a collaborative work even though it has never been officially acknowledged as such. In the following 'author's notes' Berio validates his use of electronics within a composition and credits himself as the sole composer of *Visage* and acknowledges Berberian as 'the voice' rather than a collaborator:

When I was composing *Visage* what attracted me, as always, was research intended as a way to expand the chances of bringing nearer musical and acoustic processes, and as a means to find musical equivalents of logistic articulation. This is why the experience of electronic music is so important: it enables the composer to assimilate into the musical process a vast area of sound phenomena that do not fit pre-established musical codes. The voice is Cathy Berberian's.¹⁹

Conversely, the symbiotic relationship for *Visage* depends on Berberian's improvised vocal repertory, which is the base for Berio's electronic insertions. Likewise, for *Sequenza III* the symbiotic relationship depends on Berio's vocal ideas and, equally, Berberian's exemplary vocal technique and theatrical virtuosity. Berio chose a modular text by Markus Kutter which consists of fragmentary phrases that are intentionally ambiguous to allow for syntactic and semantic mobility:²⁰

Give me a few words for a woman to sing a truth allowing us to build a house without worrying before night comes²¹

Berio's concept is to assimilate the sung words with for example, laughter, muttering, whispering or coughing and then to transform this combination of sounds into musical units. As in *Visage*, Berberian differentiates and expresses in rapid succession approximately forty emotions that include anxiety, tension, bewilderment, apprehension, serenity, coyness, desperation, urgency, dreaminess and joyfulness.²²

Berio and Berberian create theatre within the work by using phonetic and semantic associations so that even a non-specialist listener could derive meaning from the performance.²³ The listener is presented with a succession of words in a series of two, three, or five groupings that do not form significant phrases; or alternatively a succession of syllables that do not produce words. The phonetic elements of this work are repeated many times in different orders to create for the listener a kaleidoscopic view of the text, rather than the actual

¹⁹ Cfr. Berio [n. d., 2].

²⁰ Cfr. Dalmonte - Bálint [1985, 94-95].

²¹ M. Kutter in Berio [1965].

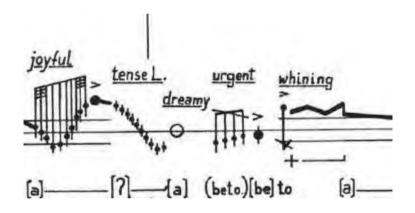
²² Cfr. Dalmonte - Varga [1985, 96].

²³ Cfr. Dalmonte – Varga [1985, 96].

form of the text.²⁴ Further to their experimentation in *Visage*, this *Sequenza* also includes other everyday vocal gestures and behaviours such as sighing, muttering, whispering, laughing, and sobbing as Berio explains:

I am not interested in sound by itself – and even less in sound effects, whether of vocal or instrumental origin. I work with words because I find new meaning in them by analyzing them acoustically and musically. I rediscover the word. As far as breathing and sighing are concerned, these are not effects but vocal gestures, which also carry a meaning: they must be considered and perceived in their proper context.²⁵

The simultaneous and parallel development of the text segments with the vocal gesture and the expression of the work form a three-part invention, which, in part, are foreign to one another, but interfere, inter-modulate and combine into a unity.²⁶ Take, for example, the following excerpt (Ex.1 *Sequenza III*, page 2, line 4).²⁷



Ex. 1. Sequenza III, page 2, line 4.

Berberian needs to evoke a 'joyful' expression on the vowel 'a' (specified to be sung 'as fast as possible' and with 'different speeds of periodically articulated sung sounds'); laugh in a 'tense' manner; whisper in an unpitched sound (specified by \circ) to depict a 'dreamy' state; create a sense of 'urgency' for the spoken text fragments 'be—to' (executed as 'fast grace notes'); then create a whining intonation with a closed mouth (specified by +) (vocal actions written on three lines indicate relative register positions). Here, Berberian achieves Berio's desired effect:

²⁴ Cfr. Muller [1997, 17].

²⁵ Cfr. Dalmonte - Varga [1985, 141].

²⁶ Cfr. Dalmonte – Varga [1985, 96].

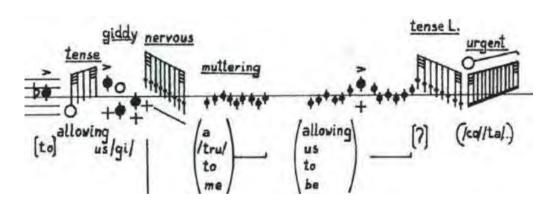
²⁷ Cfr. Berio [1965].

the rapid alternation between the sung and spoken words to create the illusion of instantaneous speech and song. 28

Berio's treatment of the text is tailored to exploit Berberian's ability to change rapidly from many different and complex psychological states of the mind as well as different vocal articulations. For instance, in the following excerpt

(Ex. 2: *Sequenza III*, page 1, line 3), the whispered, unvoiced sounds (specified by ○) beckon a 'tense' character, then a 'giddy' sensation requires Berberian to intone with closed mouth ▲

(specified by , + and 'as short as possible'), followed immediately by a 'nervous' downward gesture (specified by + and 'as fast as possible'). Berberian then mutters 'as quickly as possible', in random order and in a slightly discontinuous manner the words 'a /tru/ to me' and 'allowing/ us/ to/ be'. After a 'tense' form of laughter (specified 'as fast as possible'), a sense of 'urgency' entails the sounds 'ca/ta' (executed 'as fused and continuous as possible with a breathy, almost whispered tone'). This multiplicity of vocal elements and the tension of the speed with which these elements move from one to another in this *Sequenza* showcase Berberian's vocal and conceptual virtuosity.



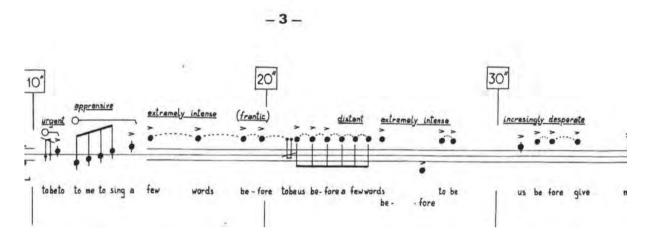
Ex. 2. Sequenza III, page 1, line 3.

Another way in which Berio and Berberian articulate the tension and drama of the narrative in this *Sequenza* is via gestures of a sung and non-sung text. The following passage (Ex. 3 *Sequenza III*, page 3, line 1) presents a non-sung text, 'to—be—to' (articulated with 'urgent' expressivity); 'to—me—to—sing' (articulated in an 'apprehensive' manner); 'few words' (articulated with an 'extremely intense' expression); 'be—fore, to—be—us, be—fore (articulated in a 'frantic' manner); 'a few words (articulated in an 'distant' manner); 'be—fore—to—be

²⁸ Cfr. Dalmonte - Varga [1985, 96].

(executed with 'extremely intense' expressivity); 'us be—fore give' (specified to sound 'increasingly desperate').

The deconstructed phonemes and the quick, wide- ranging articulations of this non—sung gesture, for the listener, Berberian creates the sensation of tension and panic, for the seemingly impossible task 'to build the house of words before night comes'. A clue to Berio's treatment of the text and its narrative function is in the phrase 'without worrying' as these words do not appear in full or by phoneme, implying that the performer fails to achieve this notion.²⁹



Ex. 3. Sequenza III, page 3, line 1.

In contrast, the next gesture is sung (Ex. 4 Sequenza III page 3, line 4). Here, Berberian appears less concerned about not completely task of 'building a house before night comes'. The auditory information begins with 'be—fo—o/ore night' (sung in an 'ecstatic' manner) followed by a laugh (sung with 'witty' expressivity) then 'comes to' (sung in a 'tender' manner) and the word 'sing' (to be sung in a 'wistful', 'distant' manner) concludes this work. The culmination of these articulations evokes, for the listener, a sense of unfazed calm.

²⁹ Cfr. Halfyard [cur., 2007, 105].



Ex. 4. Sequenza III, page 3, line 4.

The above analysis demonstrates that the symbiotic relationship depends on Berio's vocal ideas and Berberian's vocal capabilities. However, Berberian, also, asserts her contribution to avant-garde vocal composition via her manifesto of 1966 titled 'La nuova vocalità nell'opera contemporanea' (The New Vocality in Contemporary Music). Like Berio, Berberian also argues for and validates the communicative function of sounds such as sobs, sighs, tongue snaps, screams, groans and laughter within vocal composition. Consequently, Berio and Berberian helped to transform conventional vocal practices of the day.

To enhance the reception of *Sequenza III*, theatrics are an integral part of Berberian's performance realisation. This aspect of a live performance is where the music creates meanings through physical action that the audience comprehend via the visual sense as well as through the musical sounds.³⁰ Berberian prescribes that a singer should be able to act, dance, mime, and improvise to 'affect the eyes as well as the ears' of the audience.³¹ To develop these skills, Berberian early in her career pursued studies in stagecraft and pantomime.

Sequenza III relies on three different modes of theatricality that are interlinked. They include the use of a dramatic scenario or linear narrative; the presence of specific characters within the text of the composition; and the inclusion of stage actions beyond exclusively singing.³² The dramatic scenario and narrative are that of a female character, 'Cathy', and her personality and psyche. The stage actions and antics further enhance the reception of 'her' character. Take for example, in the opening of this *Sequenza*, Berio and Berberian disband the protocol of a recital for which the singer walks onto the stage platform; the audience applauds; the singer smiles and bows and then commences the performance. Instead, Berberian chose to enter the stage already muttering as though pursuing an off-stage thought.³³ The singer ceases to mutter just

³⁰ Cfr. Halfyard [cur., 2007, 105].

³¹ Cfr. Berberian in P. Karantonis et al. [2014, 49].

³² Cfr. Halfyard [cur., 2007, 104].

³³ Cfr. Berio, Preface to Score of *Sequenza III* in ID. [1965].

before the subsiding of the applause of the public and then 'resumes' the work after a short silence.³⁴

These stage actions and antics create a disconcerting effect for the audience member. The conventional process of walking on stage, the applause, and the silence that then follows creates a transitional space between the reality of the concert hall and the manifest presence of the singer, and the partial time-place-character matrix that the singer then enters as she performs the piece. Sequenza III disrupts this audience expectation and removes the transitional space as the singer enters already performing, and then the applause subsides at this realisation. On the part of the singer, the lack of audience acknowledgment and obliviousness to the conventions of a recital suggest that this might be 'real' rather than performance: and 'perhaps the singer has gone mad'. Sequenza' 1.36

The success of a performance relies on the singer's commitment to storytelling and characterisations. Berberian explains that the text of a vocal work identifies the character and describes their narrative, then the performer, by assuming that voice, represents that character.³⁷ No doubt, the first-hand experience of working with Berio aided Berberian to better communicate to the audience the objectives of the work at hand. Berberian's recital scenarios were ad lib and tailor-made to fit the audience reactions on the night:

You always have to manipulate an audience. That's what an audience is for. It should be like putty in your hands. You should be able to play on an audience like you play on an instrument and they like being played with, if you know how to play. You have to tickle them, you have to squeeze them, you have to scratch them a little and sometimes you have to give [th]em a punch in the jaw. But you also have to make them enjoy.³⁸

Berberian gained notoriety for her dramatic stage antics, theatrical flair and for her ability to 'pull off' the performance. Indeed, Cathy Berberian is a name that 'sells' and her live concerts were always 'exciting,' 'successful'³⁹ and attracted 'numerous' 'faithful patrons'.⁴⁰ Tim Page of the *New York Times* credits the positive audience reactions to Berberian's 'expertise in both traditional classical repertoires and in new music'.⁴¹

³⁴ Cfr. Berio, Preface to Score of Sequenza III in ID. [1965].

³⁵ Cfr. Halfyard [cur., 2007, 110].

³⁶ Cfr. Halfyard [cur., 2007, 110].

³⁷ Cfr. Berberian in P. Karantonis et al. [2014, 49].

³⁸ Cfr. Van Rossum [2014, 41].

³⁹ Cfr. Nonken [2002. Online publication date 27 November 2009, 27].

⁴⁰ Cfr. Paull [2007, 60].

⁴¹ Cfr. Page [1983].

During the 1980s and 1990s Berberian's theatrical flair at times is a factor that dominates the critics' commentary rather than the composition at hand. For instance, Donal Henahan of the *New York Times* regards Berberian as an 'indispensable active ingredient' for Berio's works.⁴² The *Guardian's* Andrew Clements describes Berberian as the 'most inspiring interpreter of contemporary music, bringing to life the most unpromising material'.⁴³

Arguably the level of rapport and understanding between Berio and Berberian for the performance realisation of *Sequenza III* and indeed, all their collaborative works have been unparalleled by other performers. This is in large part due to the level of intimacy between the couple—Berio's tailoring of musical material to Berberian's personality and virtuosic abilities and hence, Berberian's successful execution of the work. Berio dissects the psyche of Berberian in *Sequenza III* the composer admits that this work is 'about Cathy'.⁴⁴

Berberian also had an innate ability to personalise a piece to become a 'signature piece' on the stage. In turn, there is evidence that some contemporary singers are somewhat overshadowed by Berberian's performances. The critical reception of Berio's vocal works as performed by other singers at times, resort to a comparative discourse. For instance, in his review of 1999 for the *American Record Guide*, Arved Ashby claims Luisa Castellani's recording of *Sequenza III*, lacks Berberian's 'ease with the work's cabaret style and ribald humour'. 46

This was not exclusive to *Sequenza III*. Henahan comments that no subsequent interpreter has worked such 'witty wonders' with Berio's works for the singer than did Berberian.⁴⁷ Clements argues that Berio tailored the vocal lines to Berberian's personality; therefore, critics and audiences familiar with Berberian's performances find it 'impossible to hear a single phrase without recalling how indelibly she coloured it'.⁴⁸ Berio even concedes that on several occasions when Berberian was not performing, he was tempted to transcribe this *Sequenza* for two or three voices.⁴⁹

⁴² Cfr. Henahan [1986].

⁴³ Cfr. Clements [1995].

⁴⁴ Cfr. Dalmonte - Varga [1985, 94].

⁴⁵ Cfr. Snapper [2014, 211].

⁴⁶ Cfr. Ashby [1999].

⁴⁷ Cfr. Henahan [1986].

⁴⁸ Cfr. Clements [1994].

⁴⁹ Cfr. Dalmonte - Varga [1985, 96].

Considering Berberian's rediscovery in the early twenty-first century, the critical reception confirms her 'cult' status. Cults of personality around musicians suggest that such individuals are 'not like us', and they process superior wisdom, gifts, and perceptions. Media executive and former assistant to Berberian Kim Williams refers to her as one of the 'great personality performers of the post-war.⁵⁰ In *Musical Opinion*, John Warnaby describes Berberian as a 'flamboyant public persona' who communicated to the audience with 'enormous panache'.⁵¹ According to Mark Swed of the *Los Angeles Times* this is due to Berberian's stage theatrics and her innate ability to transform instantaneously from a 'comedian' into a 'dangerous seductress'.⁵² Steve Schwartz accolades Berberian to the status of a super-singer:

[O]ne of the greatest exponents of tough, contemporary music. She has both the musical intelligence and solid vocal technique to sing advanced work superbly, but, really, she could sing just about anything. She shone in early music, Lieder, Rossini, and could also do convincing pop—in short, a super-singer.⁵³

Likewise, critic for the *American Record Guide* Ira Byelick remembers Berberian's histrionic talents:

[H]ad a seemingly unerring sense of 'arc', a way of bringing even a piece composed of the most disparate elements to a structural unity, a moment of epiphany that sets the entire work to rights. This is an often nearly supernatural occurrence where one wanders until the very end whether she can pull it off. [Berberian] always, as far as I've heard, did just that—and that thrill of the 'save' is part of her greatness, part of her charm.⁵⁴

The critical reception highlights that Berberian was a 'drawcard' and she contributed enormously to the success of *Sequenza III*. Berio and Berberian had a symbiotic partnership: through her virtuosity Berberian introduced Berio to vocal possibilities, and Berio's inventiveness led Berberian to a performance space that was new and original. I suggest that both artists stretched each other's musical capabilities to limits and into terrain they may not have discovered on their own.

As I have argued, the creative processes were a joint enterprise with varying degrees of input from Berberian. In turn, Berberian's interpretative skills in *Sequenza III* then became to some

⁵⁰ Cfr. Ford [2003].

⁵¹ Cfr. Warnaby [2003, 5].

⁵² Cfr. Swed [2013].

⁵³ Cfr. Schwartz [n. d.].

⁵⁴ Cfr. Byelick [2011, 239].

extent prescriptive to subsequent performers. The role of the Berio/Berberian partnership in the music of the second avant-garde has never been questioned.

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