Title || Luciano Berio - biographical notes
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Translation from Italian || Flora Pitrolo
Published in || «Sciami», 2017 - www.nuovoteatromadeinitaly.sciami.com
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Number of pages || pag 1 di 1
Language|| ENG
DOI ||

Luciano Berio - biographical notes

by *Daniele Vergni*

Luciano Berio (Oneglia, Imperia, October 24, 1925 – Rome, May 27, 2003), composer and conductor, has been a pioneer in composing for electronic and electro-acoustic music. He had first approached music in his own family, then studied at the Conservatory "Giuseppe Verdi" in Milan, attending the department of composition with Giulio Cesare Paribeni and Giorgio Federico Ghedini, and that of conducting with Carlo Maria Giulini and Antonio Votto. The first public performance of a piece by him (suite for piano) took place in 1947. In 1951 he studied with Luigi Dallapiccola in Tanglewood, United States; in 1954 he attended the summer courses in Darmstadt, joining the musical avant-garde of those years – Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Bruno Maderna, Luigi Nono, György Ligeti, Mauricio Kagel and others. Berio took such a great interest in electronic music that the following year, in Milan, with Bruno Maderna, he founded the *Studio di Fonologia della RAI,* for the production of electronic music, where also foreign composers such as John Cage recorded and composed. In 1956 he founded the periodical *Incontri Musicali* of which four issues were published between '56 and 1960. In the sixties he was back in the United States and he was appointed a professorship first at Mills College in Oakland, California, then in 1956 at Juillard School in New York, where he created the *Juillard Ensemble*, a group devoted to the execution of contemporary music. In 1966 he was awarded the Prix Italia with *Laborinthus II*; in 1972 he produced and presented *C'è musica e musica* at RAI, a TV documentary directed by Gianfranco Mingozzi and edited by Vittoria Ottolenghi. On Pierre Boulez' request, between 1974 and 1980 in Paris he directed the electro-acoustic division of IRCAM *(Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique)* and in 1987 he created in Florence *Tempo Reale*, a centre for the production, research and teaching, for the application of new technologies to music. In his compositions Berio addressed extremely complex structures, distinctive of a total polyphony: he privileged the plastic qualities of sound matter, mostly in the interactions of acoustic instruments with electronically created sounds, as in *Momenti* (*Moments*) of 1957 and *Differences* of 1958-59, and exploring the sound-word, the vocalism, as in *Thema. Omaggio a Joyce (Theme. Homage to Joyce)* of 1958, *Visage* of 1961 and *Sequenza III* of 1965, all of them performed by Cathy Berberian. Berio developed a dramaturgic concept, already present in these vocal works, in musical operas such as *Allez-hop* of 1959, with texts by Italo Calvino, *Passaggio* of 1962 and *Esposizione* of 1963, both taken from texts by Edoardo Sanguineti. Other works of the seventies and eighties were centered on theatrical action and vocal research, like *Opera* of 1969-70/1977, *La vera storia (The true story)* of 1977-79 and *Un re in ascolto (A king listening)* of 1979-83, both based on texts by Italo Calvino*, Outis* of 1992-96 on texts by Dario Del Corno and *Cronaca del Luogo (News of the place)* of 1997-99 on a text by Talia Pecker Berio. In the academic year 1993-94 he was invited to lecture at the chair of Poetics Charles Eliot Norton of Harvard University, lectures that were then published posthumous in 2006, with the title *Un ricordo al futuro: lezioni americane (A memory at the future:American lectures)*. In 2000 he was nominated president and superintendent of the *Accademia nazionale di Santa Cecilia* in Rome. He died in 2003 at the age of 77.