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Berio and his 'Circles'

by Misha Donat

Luciano Berio's 'Circles' will have two British performances in February: at the Macnaghten Concert in the Mahatma Gandhi Hall on Feb 15; and in the BBC Invitation Concert on Feb 18. Both concerts—conducted by Berio, with Cathy Berberian as soloist—also include other works by Berio (see the London Diary in last month's MT, and the Macnaghten programme advertised overleaf). Misha Donat, who has worked with Berio, contributes this introduction to 'Circles'. The score is published, at 21s, by Universal Edition, by whose permission the music examples are quoted.

Luciano Berio was born in Imperia Oneglia in 1925. He received his first musical training from his father, an organist and composer. He entered the Milan Conservatory where he studied composition with Paribeni and Ghedini, and later studied with Dallapiccola at Tanglewood. In 1954 he founded the Studio di Fonologia Musicale for electronic music at the Italian Radio. In 1956 he started the music review *Incontri Musicali*, and has organized concert seasons of contemporary music, also entitled *Incontri Musicali*. He teaches composition at Mills College, USA, and has also taught at the Dartington Summer School. His wife, Cathy Berberian, is a brilliant singer who has inspired several works not only by Berio, but also by other important avant-garde composers.

Berio is not very well known in this country, although he is without doubt one of the most important composers of his generation. While obviously an 'avant-garde' composer, he has little time for the wilder experiments of some of his contemporaries, although he has evidently profited from the more fruitful of their ideas. He has flirted with total serialization (particularly in *Nones* for orchestra) but has now abandoned it in favour of a technique built upon chord structures (eg *Tempi Concertati* for flute and four chamber groups), or a freer, melismatic, style (eg *Circles*). Much of Berio's music is far easier to come to terms with than the works of some of his better-known contemporaries, and it is difficult to understand why so few of his works have been heard in this country.

Circles was written in 1960 in response to a commission by the Fromm Foundation. It is scored exclusively for instruments in which Berio specializes: female voice (the composer's wife), harp (his favourite orchestral instrument), and percussion (a section of the orchestra in which he is continually searching for new sounds). This accounts for the astonishing skill with which the work is scored. The percussion is divided into two widely separated groups, between which is placed the harp. Instruments of similar timbre are placed in different groups in order to create an antiphonal effect (a favourite device of Berio). Thus the marimbaphone is on the left, the xylophone on the right, the *lujon* (an instrument invented for the Modern Jazz Quartet) on the left, the vibraphone on the right. The voice dominates throughout, and according to a programme-note, 'the use of harp and percussion instruments is

intended to extend or induce sound qualities of the vocal part, for this reason the instrumental parts are occasionally not completely defined in conventional musical notation but the general nature of the action is indicated. The specific result thus depends somewhat on the personal characteristics of each performer.'

The singer has three positions, and her movements contribute to what is considered as 'a structure of actions which also determine the "theatrical" aspects of the performance'. At the opening of the work she has a central position, well in front of the instruments. During the climax of the work, at the end of Poem III, she moves to a stand in front of the first percussion group (situated on the left), and at the end of the fourth section of the work she moves to a stand between the harp and the second percussion group. The singer also plays percussion instruments and conducts the performance at places specified in the score.

The work sets three poems by e. e. cummings, two of which appear twice, in the order ABCBA. This creates a strong overall form which, however, is largely destroyed by the interchanging of the music of the poems on their repetition. The work falls naturally into five sections which are clearly divided musically as well as textually.

The vocal line is throughout almost entirely based on a three-note figure and its permutations. In its basic form this consists of a major or minor third followed by a major or minor second in the same direction; there are several obvious appearances of this figure in Examples 1 and 2.

The first two sections show a gradual development towards the climactic central poem. Poem I ('stinging') is set for voice and harp only (Ex 1a). At the end of the poem the prolonged 'S' of the singer (cummings writes the last words, 'dreamS', with a capital S) is imperceptibly taken over by the sand-block and worked up into a gradual crescendo by the percussion. One might have expected a suspended cymbal here but, as we shall see, Berio is dividing his percussion into three groups consisting of wood, skin, and metal instruments. The second section, 'riverly is a flower', opens with the first entry of the skin instruments and ends with the first entry of the metal instruments. Since Berio is building up his forces towards the central climax, this is an excellent way of separating the opening sections. Towards the end of the second section (on

Ex 1a POEM I, first setting

Ex 1b POEM II, 2nd setting

Ex 2a POEM II,
1st setting

Ex 2b
POEM I,
2nd setting

page 15 of the score) there appears for the first time a rhythmical figure which recurs at intervals throughout the work, consisting of a crescendo on a repeated note in crotchets. The number of notes is different on each occurrence, varying from 5/10.

Poem III ('n(o)w') is clearly differentiated from the rest of the work by its use of improvisation, by the complexity of its instrumentation, and by its word-setting. Throughout the first half of the work the word-setting becomes progressively more disjointed until at the climax of the work, which occurs towards the end of this third section, the text becomes a series of meaningless exclamations designed to stimulate the improvisation of the percussionists. The voice part is still closely built on the three-note figure, although what are visually its most obvious appearances are always given in *Sprechgesang*.

With the return of Poem II comes the first, clearly audible, recapitulation. From the tutti of the preceding section there is a sudden return to the instrumentation of the opening of the work (voice and harp), and the voice has two rhythmically altered but melodically identical versions of the opening of the first setting of Poem I (Ex 1a and b—the second version sets the words, 'gods whiten'). At the words 'rain anguish' (page 33) begins a recapitulation of the corresponding section in the first setting of this poem. This recapitulation is, however, less obvious since the instrumentation is altered and the music is punctuated by speech.

The last section of the work is distinguished by its static rhythm, the percussion being used in block chords for the first time in the work (the repeated crotchet figure is here prominent). The vocal part is in complete contrast to the first, melismatic, setting of the same text (see Ex 2a and b), and its opening is, in fact, more closely related to the vocal line of Poem III (the three-note figure returns in *Sprechgesang* at the words, 'the litanies' on page 36). A relationship with the first setting of the poem is

established by the setting of the word 'rose' to the same melisma both times (Ex 2). This is followed by the beautiful ending of the work in which the three-note figure is sung in augmented note-values accompanied by harp, bells, and glockenspiel. As the music dies away the final S of 'dreams' is again imperceptibly, but this time briefly, taken over by the percussion.

Circles, although it has subtleties enough, is extremely straightforward in construction, and thus forms an excellent introduction to the music of Berio. It contains several elements which are typical of the composer's recent work, not least of which is a sheer delight in chamber music *per se*. Even in so complex a score as *Tempi Concertati* he states that in performance (though not in rehearsal) the work should always be performed without a conductor, the flautist directing wherever possible. The 'stereophonic' placing and use of instruments is to be found in many of Berio's works, particularly *Allelujah II*, *Différences*, and *Tempi Concertati*, and the division in space of instruments of similar timbre is an integral part of this technique. The use of sudden contrasts between static and violent passages, as in the transition from the third to fourth sections in *Circles*, is also characteristic of Berio's music.

An extreme example of such contrast occurs at what can be regarded as the opening of the second section of *Tempi Concertati* in which an extremely rapid changing of register in each instrument (in semiquavers) is followed immediately by a completely static passage in long note-values (pages 20-24 of the study score). An encouraging feature of Berio's works is that the more outrageous they sound at first, the simpler they turn out to be on closer inspection. *Circles* is a case in point, and there is no reason why, after a few hearings, the language of this extraordinarily original and dramatic work should not become as familiar as that of a Bach cantata.