

## Prospero's Death: Modernism, Anti-humanism and *Un re in ascolto*<sup>1</sup>

But this rough magic  
I here abjure, and, when I have requir'd  
Some heavenly music, which even now I do,  
To work mine end upon their senses that  
This airy charm is for, I'll break my staff,  
Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,  
And deeper than did ever plummet sound  
I'll drown my book.

*Solemn music.*

Prospero in William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, V/1, 50-57 (Shakespeare 2004, p.67)

Yet, at this very moment when we do at last see ourselves as we are, neither cosy nor playful, but swaying out on the ultimate wind-whipped cornice that overhangs the unabiding void – we have never stood anywhere else, – when our reasons are silenced by the heavy huge derision, – There is nothing to say. There never has been, – and our wills chuck in their hands – There is no way out.  
'Caliban to the Audience', W. H. Auden, 'The Sea and the Mirror' (Auden 1991, p.444)

Luciano Berio was riven by anxiety about opera and theatre. In an interview with Umberto Eco, 'Eco in ascolto', held in 1986 not long after the premiere of *Un re in ascolto*, he insists that the work should be considered a 'musical action' (*azione musicale*), a concept he associates with Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* and in which 'musical process steers the story'. This he contrasts with opera, which, according to him, is 'sustained by an "Aristotelian" type of narrative, which tends to take priority over musical development' (Berio 1989, p.2). His rejection of opera takes a vehement form:

I don't believe you can produce operas nowadays – stories to be told through singing. I've never written any, and I can't think of any instance during the last thirty years where anything worthwhile has been conceived of within the framework of that definition... (ibid.)

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In his lecture 'Of Sounds and Images', held in 1995 during the composition of *Outis*, his views have, if anything, hardened, making him sound like the composer Flamand in Richard Strauss's *Capriccio* squabbling with the poet Olivier over the primacy of music vis-à-vis poetry. Again, his reference point is Wagner, claiming that:

in an opera as coherent in its expressive intensity as Wagner's, what is seen on stage may, given its emblematic nature, actually be replaced by music. Music will tend to govern all the different elements of the performance, and may indeed take their place. (Berio & Osmond-Smith 1997, p.295)

He further cites Wagner's idea of 'deeds of music made visible' (*ersichtlich gewordene Taten der Musik*) (cf. Carnegie 2006, p.118), although Osmond-Smith's unusual translation (as 'musical action made visible', Berio & Osmond-Smith 1997, p.295) somewhat obscures that fact.

In a further step, Berio extends the general principle to all opera, mentioning Mozart, Debussy and Berg by name:

In the great tradition of musical theatre, music is almost always in charge. It tends to organise, to reveal, and indeed to 'direct' narrative and dramaturgical functions that it has itself generated. ... Musical theatre only seems to take on a deep and enduring meaning once the dramaturgical conception is generated by the music (Berio & Osmond-Smith 1997, p.295-296).

We are in familiar territory of course. In the wake of modernism's crisis of representation, renouncing the mimetic apparatus of opera became de rigueur among composers who wanted to be taken seriously. Examples are not hard to find, from Stravinsky's and Schoenberg's experiments with music-theatrical forms to Boulez's infamous demand to blow up the opera houses. Perhaps the most telling parallel to Berio's idea of *azione musicale* is Helmut Lachenmann's *Das Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern* (1997), which the composer insists on calling 'Music with Images' (*Musik mit Bildern*), thereby not only denying any generic connection with opera but also with theatre and the stage tout court. And sure enough, Lachenmann does his utmost to undermine the linearity of Andersen's fairy tale, by collaging it with other texts (by Leonardo da Vinci and Gudrun Ensslin) and by avoiding any dialogue

or scenic action in favour of static tableau-vivant-like scenes and defamiliarized recitation. Despite many differences, the parallel to Berio's treatment of Friedrich Einsiedel and Friedrich Wilhelm Gotter's *Die Geisterinsel* is hardly coincidental.

Is this a case of modernism's much-vaunted purism, instanced for example by Clement Greenberg's idea of 'medium specificity' which he saw realised in Abstract Expressionism (Greenberg 1939)? Arman Schwartz (2003, pp.84–85), in his superb commentary on *Un re in ascolto*, rejects such a notion, without however quite explaining why. To be sure, Berio is not known as a defender of music's autonomy against contamination by other forms and media: on the contrary, earlier works such as *Passaggio* and *Opera* seemed directed against the self-enclosed hermeticism of much of the post-war avant-garde.

But we might wonder with Schwartz why *Un re* got written at all. He considers the contradiction between the fear of sound expressed by Kafka in a text that would become foundational for the work with Berio's own denigration of writing. We might go further and ask what is the point of entering the operatic stage only on condition that music's primacy remains unquestioned. Berio's reference to Wagner here is not without its problems, given that the latter's idea of the 'visible deeds of music' is dependent on the philosophy of Schopenhauer, whose metaphysics Berio would be unlikely to accept wholesale. More confusingly still, his second major reference point is Brecht, as anti-Wagnerian a thinker as one could imagine. Moreover, to charge conventional opera with being 'Aristotelian', as Berio does, seems odd, to say the least, given that any half-decent Aristotelian accuses opera of undermining the primacy of plot and character through melody and spectacle, which in Aristotle's hierarchy are relegated to the very bottom (cf. Kerman 2005). Indeed, an opera reformer such as Wagner could, like Gluck before him, be regarded as Aristotelian in his attempt to put the form on a rational footing.

By contrast, Berio's insistence on the primacy of music itself embraces an aspect of the Aristotelian legacy, namely the belief that the different constituents of the theatrical presentation need perforce to be governed by a strict hierarchy. This puts him at odds with more recent developments in theatre. Hans-Thies Lehmann's influential concept of postdramatic theatre, which is arguably realised in the work of Cage, Kagel and Goebbels among others and which seems to be at least relevant for some of Berio's own earlier work, is not least characterized by 'parataxis', a non-hierarchical simultaneity of different strands, theatrical means and media (Lehmann 2006, pp.84–88).

This is not to measure Berio's work by an aesthetic that is alien to it, but to highlight how, as Massimo Mila, Eco and Schwartz suggested, his insistence on a clear hierarchy of theatrical means aligns *Un re* with the very operatic tradition that he is ostensibly distancing himself from. For, although, pace the 'querelle' of Flamand and Olivier in *Capriccio*, it is not always clear which reigns supreme in opera – words, music or 'drama' – it seems to matter deeply to all concerned that one of them *should*.

It goes without saying that composers were not the only ones to react against realism and dramatic representation. Martin Puchner (2011) has recently highlighted the significant strand of anti-theatricality in modernist thinking, not least thinking about drama. More particularly, Martin Harries (2012) has drawn attention to the persistent modernist utopia of banning human beings from the stage, the culmination of which he finds in Heiner Goebbels's *Stifters Dinge*. While Berio doesn't get rid of human beings, or at least something like human beings, in *Un re in ascolto*, the specifically modernist tradition of anti-humanism which Harries's examples epitomise, certainly resonates with the work and with Berio's thinking at the time. Here's Treplyov from Chekhov's *The Seagull*, laying into actors:

these great talents, acolytes of the religion of art, act how people eat, drink, make love, walk, wear their jackets; ... they talk cheap, vulgar plots and cheap, vulgar speeches and try to extract a moral – not too big a moral, easy on the digestion, useful around the house; when in a thousand different ways they serve up the same old leftovers, again and again and again

And here's Artaud:

All the preoccupations above [whether we will make love well, whether we will make war or be cowardly enough to make peace, how we can learn to live with our little anxieties etc.] stink unbelievably of man, transitory and physical man, I will even go so far as to say *carrion man*. These preoccupations with personal matters disgust me, they disgust me to the highest degree, as does almost all contemporary theater, which is as human as it is anti-poetic and which, with the exception of three or four plays, seems to me to stink of decadence and pus.

Admittedly, Berio's language is more measured, but his distrust of the theatre comes from the same source. Note too how Berio's model, Wagner figures, however ambiguously, in the

history of modernist anti-theatricalism and anti-humanism, not least by inspiring Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, which so memorably describes the character on stage as 'obtrusively alive'.

There are characters in *Un re in ascolto* of course, but only one of them, Prospero, seems 'real' in any way. As for Berio's views on acting and actors, the Concertati scenes, a classic 'play-within-a-play' device featuring many of the figures from the Preface to Auden's 'The Sea and the Mirror' (Auden 1991, p.403), paint a picture of the theatre as inherently grotesque and ridiculous, something that Chekhov's Treplyov would have recognised. Over and above his brilliant insight into the parallels between Calvino's king and Shakespeare's, Berio's choice of *The Tempest* as primary intertext is telling in this context: a play explicitly linking theatrical illusion, magic, music and the supernatural, and which features a host of either super-human (Ariel) or sub-human (Caliban) characters. It is worth noting too that Prospero has traditionally albeit problematically been read as Shakespeare's self-portrait, an authorial alter ego that Berio in turn seems to claim for himself in *Un re*.

This is not to deny that it is possible to read *Un re* in a conventionally humanist fashion: nothing is more human than dying, and we can feel empathy with, even compassion for the dying Prospero. The three auditions and the Protagonista's aria also give voice to an insistence on human dignity in the face of Prospero's instrumentalising control. It is these traditionally humanist elements which lead Osmond-Smith, in his entry on the work in the *Grove Dictionary of Opera*, to read the conclusion as a redemption in traditionally operatic terms (something he avoids in his book):

left to his own meditations [Prospero] finally realizes that the 'other' theatre towards which he has aspired is not that created by lighting and scenery, but that of music. As if summoned by this moment of truth, the female Protagonist (soprano) for whom he has been searching materializes before him. She sings an aria that sums up both music and words of the auditions, giving final form to the strangely intimate message that Prospero has heard in the singing of all the other women who aspired to her role: there is an irremediable gap between the world of the desirer and that of the desired. Her person, her will and her voice are her own. With these hard truths confronted, Prospero is free. His players bid him farewell, and left alone on the stage of his theatre, he dies. (Osmond-Smith n.d.)

This is quite a banal interpretation, one that totally ignores the different dramatic levels between realism, representation and illusion as well as the intricate intertextual games being

played in favour of a realistic plot with a neat conclusion. In particular, it overlooks that the Protagonista's reproaches are taken from the supporting cast's monologues in Auden's 'The Sea and the Mirror'. Not only do Auden's characters emphatically refuse reconciliation with the overbearing, patronising and ultimately ineffectual Prospero, but the latter dies in failure and resignation (cf. O'Shea 2001).<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, in the Shakespeare, music is an instrument of magic, primarily used to lead people astray or put them to sleep, and thus inherently problematic (cf. Lindley 2004); indeed, in the passage cited at the outset, Shakespeare's Prospero renounces music. Berio's does the exact opposite. Although this reversal could be intentional on Berio's part, similar to the transformation of Ariel from an invisible but audible spirit to a mime who can be seen but not heard (except, it seems, by Prospero), to regard *Un re* as an unproblematic encomium to music seems naïve, whether on Berio's part or on Osmond-Smith's.

Even if we take Osmond-Smith's reading at face value, the consolation it seems to offer is more apparent than real: what are we to make of an opera that in its final, potentially most effective and moving scene proposes a complete renunciation of the stage in favour of something like absolute music? Note too that this eschewal of opera is not an isolated gesture: I have already mentioned the Concertati, which are in many ways the most truly operatic and brilliantly realised scenes, and which are indeed based on a genuine opera libretto. Yet they have nothing to do with the actual dramatic conflicts of the work which are played out between Prospero and the auditionees as well as the Protagonista, and, to a lesser extent, between Prospero and his various assistants and underlings, the Regista, Venerdí and the mime. They are mere distractions, providing light relief on one hand while symbolically seeing off the operatic stage on the other. From that perspective, Berio's somewhat dismissive remark that of the 'various levels of reading' elaborated by *Un re*, that of opera is perhaps 'the simplest', only there, as he goes on to state, 'to make the going easier' (Berio 1989, pp.4–5) is certainly justified.

Thus, whatever solace is offered by the ending comes at a price: it is not only Prospero who is dying but the theatre. Note too that even at this moment of renunciation and after having been repeatedly rebuked by the auditionees, who reclaim their own subjectivity,

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<sup>2</sup> To be fair, Auden's Prospero at one stage utters 'To-day I am free and no longer need your freedom' (Auden 1991, p.407), but the meaning of this is unclear. At any rate, any hope of redemption is proved delusional by the remainder of the text, if not by Prospero's own admissions, then by the supporting cast's speeches and Caliban's audience address.

Prospero's idea of theatre (and potentially that of Calvino and Berio too) is one devoid of actors: Osmond-Smith speaks of a 'theatre ... created by lighting and scenery'. The lyrics here are more poetic and allusive, mentioning 'le tavole di questo palcoscenico,/... le polvere sospesa del cono di luce bianca,/ ... le pieghe dell'orecchio conchiglia di/ricordi' ('the boards of this stage/the dust caught in the cone of white light/the folds of this ear shell of/memories'). Whatever this refers to in concrete terms, what has no place in either the old theatre that Prospero used to dream of and the new one that he envisions at the moment of death are actors – human beings on stage. We have reached a concrete embodiment of Ortega y Gasset's ideal of the 'de-humanisation of art' (Gasset 2012).

It is worth quoting Berio's own account of Prospero's death here:

When the "king" dies the spectator must in some way be able to understand that the music is dying structurally alongside him. It's like a discourse that has become familiar, and when it peters out for reasons internal to itself, it helps to transcend an elementary identification with a character who is perhaps real in appearance, but not in substance. (Berio 1989, p.7)

This is noticeably pitiless, devoid of the redemptive gloss that Osmond-Smith felt the necessity to apply: even Prospero never was real. What then are we left with?

An opera that rhetorically renounces opera, while deriving its considerable attraction and fascination from operatic conventions and techniques. As contradictions go, it's an interesting one, and, ironically, one that is rather typical for the aporias of an inherently problematic genre. After all, interrogating the genre is a *sine qua non* of any new addition to it that demands to be taken seriously. What drives *Un re* above all else is the pleasures of formalized spectacle: the regular sequence of arias, ensembles and the occasional chorus or orchestral interlude, in keeping with what Martin Kaltenecker (Kaltenecker 2011, p.20), following Richard Taruskin, has called an anti-sublime aesthetic which prioritises juxtaposition over development and prizes artifice. More than that, as many commentators, Berio himself among them, have pointed out, there are large-scale musical developments that cut across the neat overall structure, such as the motivic links between the auditions, arias and *contertati*.

Berio is right, therefore, to highlight the musical basis for the work's dramatic structure (although that by no means guarantees music's conceptual or perceptual primacy). He is arguably misguided, though, in naming Wagner as his model: *Un re* is a lot closer to number opera, even the ostentatious formalism of *opera seria* – but seen from a critical perspective,

and, as Schwartz correctly observed, re-envisioned as fantasy, literally so. Like number opera, *Un re* derives much of its interest from the conflict between the dramaturgic structure and the demands of the plot, rather than trying to resolve it like Wagner sought to. The role of traditional operatic dramaturgy is to provide justifications for the set pieces – a motivation why the soprano is beside herself with rage or overcome with grief, and the tenor is madly in love – whether these reasons are believable or contrived and whether the singers' hugging the limelight advances the plot matters little. Let's face it: *Un re* works rather like that. Specifically, it is sustained by the most operatic of pleasures: the allure of the female voice *qua* voice. The Protagonista's aria is clearly the most breath-taking moment, well prepared by the preceding auditions. Indeed, the plot itself, what little there is, revolves around the finding of that perfect female voice, a voice that proves – of course – an illusion. As Schwartz (2003, p.94) points out, the rationale for the auditions is far from clear since it is uncertain for which role these singers are auditioning. He is wrong, however, both in suggesting that the words are inappropriate for Miranda, 'Prospero's obedient daughter' as he calls her, and in stating that in the Auden they are spoken by Antonio. In fact, Miranda's repression in the original – and she does have a will of her own even there – makes such a revisionist re-staging desirable. More to the point, the various assertions of independence in the Protagonista's aria are not taken from Antonio's speech alone as Schwartz claims, but are a cobbled together from the whole range of supporting characters – Ferdinand, Antonio, Master and Boatswain and Alonso (if we assume that the latter's 'empire' has been transformed to 'theatre' by Berio); the earlier auditions included lines from Gonzalo's, Master and Boatswain's and Sebastian's monologues – she thus represents a composite character, something like a Fury seeking revenge. Be that as it may, the nature of the character and the auditions and why the singers are addressing Prospero, seemingly without stepping out of character is unclear. Like so many aspects within the piece, they subtly blur dramatic levels, inside and outside perspective, reality and illusion.

Maybe the best explanation is that the auditions are not really happening or at least not in that way but are a figment of Prospero's imagination. If so, can we therefore regard them and consequently much of *Un re in ascolto* as we perceive it as the embodiment of the theatre Prospero is dreaming of? Such a reading would be consistent with the blurred boundary between reality and fantasy in *The Tempest*. Not only is Shakespeare's play full of magic and fantasy, there is also an influential interpretation, first advanced by the scholar D. G. James



and later made the basis of Peter Greenaway's film *Prospero's Books*, according to which the entire plot only takes place in Prospero's mind, the latter never having left Milan (Murphy 2001, pp.35–36). His final monologue, in which he explicitly equates the *character* Prospero's magical power with the *actor's* craft in impersonating him, is conventionally regarded as an address to the audience after the play has ended, i.e. out of character, but *in* character it calls into question what we have just seen.

Now my charms are all o'erthrown,  
And what strength I have's mine own,  
Which is most faint: now, 'tis true,  
I must be here confined by you,  
Or sent to Naples.  
(Epilogue)

Such an interpretation could be seen to be backed up by Prospero's most famous monologue.

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,  
As I foretold you, were all spirits and  
Are melted into air, into thin air:  
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,  
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,  
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
Ye all which it inherit, shall dissolve  
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on, and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep.  
(IV, 1)

The boundary between reality and illusion is similarly shifting and permeable in *Un re*. At the centre of the paradox is, once again, the figure of Prospero, who, if only by virtue of his name, is both a *character* (not an actor playing a character) in the play that is rehearsed in *Un re* and the impresario of the fictional theatre in which it is performed, in other words both within and outwith the action. As already alluded to, these shifting realities are acted out in

the auditions and the Protagonista's aria. These enact another time-honoured, indeed foundational, convention of opera, namely stage song, what in film music is called 'diegetic music', and what Carolyn Abbate (1996) has called 'phenomenal' (as opposed to noumenal) song. Schwartz is right to call attention to the importance of such phenomenal song for *Un re*, in both quantitative and qualitative terms. Its special status is only heightened by our doubts about its reality: do the auditions actually take place or are they only happening in Prospero's feverish mind; are they happening but not in the way we see them, but is what we see Prospero's version of events who only imagines the singers addressing and reproaching him? Do they in fact reproach him or the Prospero of the play that is being rehearsed; does he identify with the latter?

These questions are also enacted musically, without being resolved. Schwartz has pointed to the rehearsal pianists, whose playing, like the singing, should be regarded as on-stage, 'phenomenal' music. It certainly references traditional accompanimental patterns in terms of texture and gesture, but there is an unmistakable parodic element in some of the piano-writing, and at times it 'goes off the rails', an equally cartoonish and nightmarish version of an operatic piano rehearsal. Interestingly, the piano is always, more or less prominently, complemented by the pit orchestra. Where, ontologically speaking, is this music coming from? Furthermore, the piano tends to enter surreptitiously before the actual audition starts. In this way, there is an unbroken stream of music, subtly slipping between and mixing the phenomenal and noumenal levels. Does that not seem like a parallel to the blending of different levels of reality and illusion of the plot, or indeed a representation of Prospero's mind slipping in and out of consciousness?

I'll leave you with what for me is the most subtle moment of such play. The first audition ends with the soprano singing 'adio'. Given that she had earlier addressed Prospero, we assume that she is bidding farewell to her auditioners after the audition proper has finished. But the Regista picks up her line, transposing the last two notes, 'emphatically correcting the Soprano', as the score has it, whereupon she repeats – verbatim – the Regista's line, only to be in turn corrected by Prospero, albeit 'tenderly', with a third, more radically different, version of the motive. This game continues a little while, with the three of them finally singing different versions of the motive homophonically. What are we to make of this? While, despite the continuing piano accompaniment, most of us would probably have heard the first 'adio' as a direct address to the listeners out of character, the fact that the Regista corrects the

soprano suggests that it is part of the aria that is being auditioned for – but, then, without seeing the stage direction, how can we be certain that these are corrections and not an affectionate display of leave-taking? And why is the pianist enraged, unmistakably so even for an audience without access to the score, given that he storms out with the soprano in tow, after having played a couple of fortissimo forearm clusters, which are, however, answered by the orchestra, thereby once again breaking the phenomenal/noumenal divide?

We might literally ask what is being played here, and although, compared to the death of Prospero, this is an innocuous scene, it goes to the heart of the nature of the operatic metaphysics that are enacted throughout *Un re in ascolto*.

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