

Luciano Berio and the problem of musical language

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Abstract Among the various themes that have characterized Luciano Berio's reflection, the comparison between music and language is one of the most representative and documented. Berio's interest in linguistics and philosophy of language led him to an in-depth study of some among the main contemporary orientations and marked an important passage in the history of Italian reception of currents as different as structuralism and generative grammar, from which Berio drew his own theoretical synthesis. This article aims to clarify why Berio speaks of music as a «language of languages», through a comparison with some key texts by de Saussure and Chomsky, authors explicitly mentioned by the composer.

Keywords: Musical Language, Berio, de Saussure, Chomsky

Invited paper.

0. Introduction: the problem of musical language

The relation between the art of sound and verbal language is a central *topos* in the philosophy of Western music. Music and language share sound and meaning as their two essential dimensions, although the relationship between the two terms take on different meanings between the two fields. The idea of musical language, conceived in a more or less metaphorical sense by the different authors, has inspired much theoretical discourse on music, especially in the field of tonal music, where comparisons with language stem from the idea that both share distinctive features such as syntactic order, pragmatic dimension, grammatical correctness (see Oliva 2020).

The real test of the comparison between music and language – and of the hypothesis that music is a *sui generis* language – is the possibility of identifying in a stable and defined way a semantics of musical 'discourse'. In other words, if what is at stake is to establish whether or not music is a language, an obligatory step is to identify the meaning of what Eduard Hanslick (1854, ch. III) calls «moving sound forms», which form music's content. Hanslick pointed out sharply that the power to portray feelings, traditionally attributed to music, does not go beyond the generic imitation of a dynamic traceable in an emotional course, without any reference to specific contents. But to represent (*darstellen*) in such an indeterminate way is a contradiction in terms; therefore, argued Hanslick, we must conclude that music is not able to express any content (in this case emotional) beyond its own sound form.

Therefore, in the context of the Romantic notion of music as the language of feelings, the indeterminacy of the emotional content conveyed by the musical form poses a

problem. Determinacy and indeterminacy are the two horns of a real antinomy, which the French philosopher Francis Wolff has recently called «Mendelssohn's paradox», referring to the composer Felix Mendelssohn, who would have formulated it thus: on the one hand, musical emotion is more vague than what we can identify through words; on the other hand, it seems more precise than any linguistic description. This antinomy can, however, be solved by recognizing that «nous entendons cette émotion vaguement exprimée par la musique comme précisément causée par elle» (Wolff 2015: 253). According to Wolff, the causal relationship between music and feeling are precisely identifiable, even while the emotional content expressed remains indeterminate.

The indeterminateness of musical content is also at the centre of a recent dispute on the semantics of music that has seen as protagonists the analytical philosopher Peter Kivy and the neuroscientist Aniruddh D. Patel. Kivy's (2002) revival of Hanslick's formalism, enriched (enhanced) by a reference to the relevance of emotions and in particular of the emotion connected to musical beauty, reaffirmed the extent to which the term 'meaning', correctly understood, might be inapplicable to the musical sphere. Music, for Kivy (and Hanslick), is not a representational art, since it does not have the ability to refer in a univocal and stable way to facts of the world. Against this position, considered excessively severe and tributary of an exclusively linguistic conception of the term 'meaning', Patel (2008) insists that music does indeed have a semantic dimension, although one that is distinct from that of verbal language. Music does, in fact, convey «semantic contents», clearly identifiable and distinct from those of language, which are able to convey broad and indeterminate «semantic concepts» that are connected to the emotional sphere and recognizable by most listeners. Patel harnesses experimental data to corroborate this thesis. In his subsequent critique, Kivy (2012) does not question Patel's experiments or the resulting data, but critiques the theoretical-conceptual assumptions of the latter's research. The distinction between concepts and semantic content, says the philosopher, is entirely stipulative and is used surreptitiously to affirm that music is able to convey a meaning, understood as the association of an idea with an object or event and as a graduated property, on a scale ranging from a minimum to a maximum. But, in fact, «being a semantic artifact is not – cannot be, as Patel et alia seem to think – a matter of degree» (Kivy 2012: 177).

So, in order to establish whether it is possible to consider music a form of language, it seems that the existence of a musical semantics is essential. But does excluding a properly semantic dimension means *ipso facto* rejecting that music is given the 'status' of language?

1. Langue or langage?

Luciano Berio (1925-2003) was one of the protagonists of the first experiments in electroacoustic music in Italy and reference point (sometimes *malgré soi*) of important trends in the contemporary music scene. The recent publication of his writings and interviews in three volumes (Berio 2006; 2013; 2017) has shed new light on his theoretical reflection and his dialogue with some relevant intellectuals of the last century.

Among the various themes that have characterized his reflection, the comparison between music and language is one of the most representative and documented. Berio's interest in linguistics and the philosophy of language led him to an in-depth study of some of the main contemporary orientations within these fields. This work was particularly important to the history of Italian reception of currents as diverse as structuralism, analytical philosophy and generative grammar, from which Berio formed his own theoretical synthesis:

When I worked together with [Umberto] Eco on Joyce in 1957-58, it was I who made him read de Saussure for the first time! [...] Why did I take an interest in linguistics? I think I felt, with regard to music, a very strong need to explore the eternal path between sound and meaning (Berio 1983: 150)¹.

The intimate knowledge of the texts, theories and debates that animate the philosophy of language allowed Berio to shed light on the nature of the musical experience, identifying points of contact and divergences between ‘musical language’ and verbal language. But it is precisely on the recognition of music as a form of language that Berio would always be very critical: on more than one occasion over the years, in fact, he would state firmly that «music is not a language» (Berio 1976: 116). In music, according to Berio, does not have the characteristics that scholars, each from their own point of view, attribute to language: in music there is no distinction between a deep level and a superficial level (as in language, according to Chomsky), as well as a difference between signifier and meaning (terms borrowed from de Saussure), or a genuine semantic dimension, understood as the ability to refer to facts of the world.

Despite his clear refusal to consider music as a language, Berio suggests on several occasions that music is actually «a language of languages» (Berio 1975: 86; 2006: 60), an evocative expression but apparently in contradiction with what the claims cited above. If music is not a language, how is it possible to speak of it as a language of languages? What is to be understood by this expression? My thesis is that Berio uses this expression to work to understand some central categories in de Saussure’s thought, whose theories of linguistic structure and meaning were highly influential in the second half of the 1950s, coinciding with Berio’s engagement at the Studio di Fonologia of RAI in Milan.

In order to support this thesis, however, it is necessary to take a step back and return to the musical and theoretical context within which Berio’s reflections and compositional experiences had matured, that is to say, to the comparison with serialism and the Darmstadt School. The so-called crisis of tonality, which had coalesced during the nineteenth century as a stable code with its own ‘vocabulary’, calls into question the very idea of ‘musical language’. Arnold Schönberg’s response was to develop a musical language *ex novo* through, ultimately, dodecaphonic techniques; after him, the Darmstadt School expanded this project, advancing a range of compositional practices that came to be known as serialism. This led, however, to important contradictions, which Nicolas Ruwet (1959) in an article published in the journal *Incontri musicali* – founded and directed by Berio – identifies using a Saussurian lexicon.

In language, Ruwet writes, two dimensions can be distinguished, *langue* and *parole*, which correspond respectively to the general, reversible and preliminary aspect of language, and to the single, irreversible and determined linguistic act. According to Ruwet, composers like Pierre Boulez and Henri Pousseur «reduce language to only one of its terms, the *words*» (*Ivi*: 59). The point at which serial ‘language’ falls into contradiction is in its rejection of *langue*’s discursive plane, and therefore of the existence of a common heritage that precedes individual expressions, to the advantage of an exclusivity of *parole*, i.e. of individual utterance. The ambition to found a language of *parole* alone, without ever accessing the plane of *langue*, undermines the foundations of the project of a ‘serial language’.

Berio, who identifies in Schönberg the same tension towards a ‘private’ language, which would mark a sort of palingenesis of musical expressiveness, has the opportunity to

¹ All English translations of Berio’s quotations (except Berio 2006) are mine.

return years later to his own confrontation with serial experience using, like Ruwet, a lexicon borrowed from de Saussure:

Within the serial experience, the search for new organizations of musical language was running a bit idle. I searched in a very natural way for deeper and more concrete reference points; de Saussure, in this regard, had a fundamental and very deep influence on me and offered me a rational basis for the urges, for the abyss of expressiveness (Berio 1983: 150).

As already mentioned, Berio is well acquainted with de Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916) and the conceptual distinctions introduced by it. First of all, that between *langue* and *parole*, which as we have seen plays an important part in Ruwet's reflection on the aporetic outcome of the serialists' re-foundation of musical language. But unlike Ruwet, Berio believes that this failure is not due to the partiality of a certain poetics but to the irreducibility of music itself to any form of pseudo-linguistic constraint. Simply put, music escapes the conceptual grids that come from linguistics. In music, Berio repeats several times, there cannot be a perfect analogy with the distinction between *langue* and *parole*. In this sense, music cannot be considered a language, in the same way as historical-natural languages such as Italian or English.

But, the composer asks, is the irreducibility of music at the linguistic level given «perhaps because music is a language of languages?» (Berio 1975: 86). In this expression I propose to read the term 'language' in a technical sense, once again Saussurian (*langage*), not identifying it with the term '*langue*' but considering it as referring to the *faculty* of language. In fact, it is de Saussure himself who, beside the binomial *langue/parole*, identifies the *faculté du langage* as an additional layer in his theory of linguistic function.

The distinction between *langage* and *langue*² reflects that between faculty and social product. This couple seems to propose in the linguistic field the more general dualism often posited between nature and culture, since *langage* is to be understood as a faculty or ability proper to the species, while *langue* is to be understood as a set of conventions accepted at a given time by a community of speakers. In reality, de Saussure is cautious in recognizing the integrally 'natural' character of *langage*, but in any case, in order to avoid misunderstandings, he states that eventually «what is natural for mankind is not oral speech but the faculty of constructing a language, i.e. a system of distinct signs corresponding to distinct ideas» (de Saussure 1916, tr. eng.: 10). While *langue* is homogeneous, defined, conventional, *langage* is considered multiform and heteroclitic, heterogeneous and resistant to any classification: «Language, once its boundaries have been marked off within the speech data, can be classified among human phenomena, whereas speech cannot» (*Ivi*: 15)³. In fact, it straddles different areas, not letting itself be perceived as a phenomenon with its own domain. As a «associative and co-ordinating faculty» (*Ivi*: 13), *langage* – quite distinct from *langue* – cannot be the object of systematic study and positive knowledge.

Language systems (*langue*) and concrete acts of speech (*parole*) do not therefore exhaust the functioning of language (*langage*), which presupposes a «psychological faculty of association between the elements of the sign and between the units of the system» (De Palo 2009: 197, my trans.). In spite of the anti-psychologism traditionally attributed to de Saussure, and acknowledged by 20th-century structuralism as an essential aspect of

² «But what is language [*langue*]? It is not to be confused with human speech [*langage*], of which it is only a definite part, though certainly an essential one» (de Saussure 1916, tr. eng.: 9).

³ «La langue, ainsi délimitée dans l'ensemble des faits de langage, est classable parmi les faits humains, tandis que le langage ne l'est pas» (de Saussure 1916 [1995]: 32-33).

the author's thought, the reference to the faculty of *langage* does not close the understanding of the linguistic phenomenon in the dualism between general and particular or community and individual, but opens paths of research regarding the possibility of language acquisition. In a similar perspective, speaking of 'musical language', Berio observes:

Finally, the use of a specific language is not so important, perhaps, compared to man's ability to learn a language. I wondered if it would not be possible to find this universality of experience in the field of music, as there is no culture without music. The phenomenon is very complex and I think there will be an immense work to do (Berio 1983: 150).

Beyond the concept of *parole*, whose insufficiency had already been pointed out by Ruwet, and beyond the concept of *langue*, since «specific language», to which music can never be reduced, «is not so important», Berio questions «man's ability to learn a language»; what de Saussure calls *langage* and what refers to a universally human capacity of which it is possible to imagine a musical equivalent. In this sense, one can speak of music not as a *langue* but as *langage*.

Other remarks by Berio reveal that the distinction between *langue* and *langage* is for the composer a point of reference from which to reflect on the specificity of music. Taking his cue from the works of Lévi-Strauss, Berio clearly identifies the distinction between *langue* and *langage* (in Italian *lingua* and *linguaggio*) by juxtaposing it with the difference between superstructure and structure:

Paraphrasing CLStrauss, one could say that Strawinsky poses the problem of the relationship not between *lingua* and culture, but between *linguaggio* and culture. The relationship between *lingua* and culture always arises, in any case, even without our knowledge, every time we say something. We reveal our being in culture through our linguistic choices with all that can inevitably be predetermined in our choices. The *linguaggio*-culture relationship, instead, is simultaneous: it is almost a pleonastic relationship. *Linguaggio* and culture are the same thing and by explaining one we are also talking about the other. (*Linguaggio* is structure, *lingua* is superstructure)⁴.

Linguaggio, identified with structure, is not an accessory element or specific product of culture, but is rather coextensive with it: «*linguaggio* and culture are the same thing». Now, refusing music the status of *lingua* and recognizing it as *linguaggio* means precisely refusing any semiological reduction, sheltering music from too-close parallels with linguistics, and at the same time inscribing music in the order of human cultural phenomena).

⁴ ([*Instrument und Funktion*], 1963, unpublished; Luciano Berio Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel («Textmanuskripte», original in Italian, 41ff., here f. 4). I let the Italian terms *lingua* and *linguaggio* to stress the conceptual difference, not reflected in the English vocabulary. Here the Berio's original text in Italian: «Parafrasando CLStrauss, si potrebbe dire che Strawinsky si pone il problema del rapporto non tra lingua e cultura, ma tra linguaggio e cultura. Il rapporto tra lingua e cultura si pone sempre, in ogni caso, anche a nostra insaputa, ogni volta che diciamo qualcosa. Riveliamo il nostro essere nella cultura attraverso le nostre scelte linguistiche con tutto quello che di predeterminato ci può essere, inevitabilmente, nelle nostre scelte. Il rapporto linguaggio-cultura, invece, è simultaneo: è quasi un rapporto pleonastico. Linguaggio e cultura sono la stessa cosa e spiegando uno parliamo anche dell'altro. (Linguaggio è struttura, lingua è sovrastruttura)».

2. Musical Universals

We have seen how it is possible to give meaning to Berio's expression according to which music is a «language of languages» starting from a Saussurian conception of *langage*, that is to say from the idea of a faculty distinct from *langue* as a social entity and from utterance as an individual linguistic act. The faculty of language, for Berio, is connected to the theme of learning, which as we have seen is for the composer a crucial issue in the study of language, much more significant than that of linguistic use. In this alternative between learning (allowed by the faculty of language) and use, it is possible to find the echo of the distinction proposed by Noam Chomsky (1965) between competence and performance, which formed the basis of the development of Chomsky's generative transformational grammar in the early 1960s.

Berio understood very early on the innovations Chomsky made in the field of linguistics. In a lecture given at the Juilliard School of Music in 1965 and initially dedicated to Chomsky, Berio draws a distinction between music and language, explaining how the former is an «open system», while the latter «a closed system where a few rules produce an infinite amount of meaning». The reference to Chomsky is explicit:

Chomsky stressed the need to start *not* from discrete units (which in any case turned out virtually impossible to isolate) but from a global formal knowledge of language, from a general structure, from a deep structure that could be interpreted from a semantic point of view. It is from this deep structure that, through a series of transformations, derives a surface structure to which is assigned phonetic form. A way of conceiving language that emphasizes relative frequencies and probability of events and that takes a given and limited set of sentences as the basis for a theoretical formulation and a linguistic performance loses sight of the creative aspect of language (infinite use of limited means) and of the fact that language is something much more than sound, in any set of sentences, or of the particular inventory of elements that a given procedure can translate (Berio 1965: 39).

Berio clearly identifies the qualifying points of Chomsky's transformational generative grammar, as it is outlined in the writings that the composer may have already read in 1965⁵ (Chomsky 1959; 1965) and in later ones (first of all Chomsky 1966): linguistic creativity as the infinite, recursive use of finite means; a distinction between the deep level and the superficial level of language, to which correspond competence and performance; a biological rootedness of the faculty of language that challenges notions of behaviourism or culturalist reductionism. If all this gives back a new image of human language that transcends previous studies in the field of linguistics, Berio is cautious in juxtaposing musical mechanisms with those indicated by Chomsky as essential to the determination of a generative transformational grammar (in this sense we must read the distinction between music as an open system and language as a closed system). And in any case Berio is skeptical about the possibility of using the musicological research⁶ inspired by Chomsky to develop new musical works:

⁵ A possible influence of Chomsky on Berio is hypothesized by Hermann (1995: 394n) on the basis of Osmond-Smith (1991: 28-29): «In the autumn of 1964, Oyama [Susan, soon to be the Berio's second wife] began her doctoral research at Harvard University, where Berio also took on a semester's teaching». For Hermann «It is difficult not to draw conclusions about possible influences of Chomsky upon Berio's compositional thought – for at least this work [*Sequenza IV*] – given the coincidences of interest, time, and location between these two men».

⁶ Berio was clearly familiar with, for example, Lerdahl and Jackendoff's (1983) research about the possibility of identifying a generative grammar in music: see Berio (1976).

Now and then music sends out hesitant cues as to the existence of innate organisms which, if fittingly translated and interpreted, may help us pinpoint the embryos of a universal musical grammar. I do not think that such a discovery can be useful to musical creativity, nor to the utopian prospect of a perfect, common musical language that will enable musicians to speak and be unanimously spoken. But I do think that it could contribute to exploring musical experience as a “language of languages,” establishing a constructive interchange between diverse cultures and a peaceful defense of those diversities. I hope so. In the meantime, we'll keep translating (Berio 2006: 60).

Given the universal presence of music in all human cultures, Berio is less interested in identifying a common structure, a common denominator among all musical forms practiced in different cultures, and much more fascinated by music's endless *complexity*, which multiplies exponentially every time a particular musical form is taken for expressive reasons outside its original context. In this sense, just as the faculty of language makes infinite use of finite means, the ‘musical faculty’ can make infinite use of musical forms already present in different cultures, respecting their specificities and at the same time constituting a ‘language of languages’.

3. Conclusions

Berio's reflections on the relationship between music and language lead to the conclusion that music cannot be considered akin to a *langue*, i.e. a historical-natural language with its own vocabulary, socially shared. But at the same time it cannot be considered separately from the *faculté de langage*, as a human phenomenon universally found – albeit in an infinite variety of expressions – across different cultures. Music shares with the faculty of language the characteristic of being able to use previous forms of expression in recursive and creative ways, absorbing them within synthetic processes that makes music itself a «language of languages» irreducible to verbal language in its ability to absorb a multiplicity of codes, including the word itself. Whereas linguistic creativity makes infinite use of finite means, music can make infinite use of infinite means in turn.

Referring to a page by Roman Jakobson (1960), Berio tries to describe the absorbing and synthetic power of music through an anecdote:

[Jakobson] gives the example of a missionary in Africa who was talking to a group of natives trying to convince them not to walk around naked: “But you're naked too,” they said, pointing to his face. “But it's only my face that is naked,” and they replied, “You see, for us the face is everywhere”. That's how it is: the face of music, like the face of poetry, is everywhere: on the whole body of acoustic processes and on the whole body of linguistic processes, which in music tend to identify and join together in a single body (Berio 1993a: 268-269).

The face of music is everywhere⁷, its expressiveness can be nourished by the infinite multiplicity of sounds, materials, references, codes, systems. From this comes Berio's poetics of complexity and the very expression of «language of languages», a phrase similar to another «*Text of texts*, like *Song of Songs*», used by the composer to illustrate the «immanent pluralism» (Berio 1993b: 75) of musical ‘textuality’. Irreducible to speech but

⁷ On the theme of music and faciality, see Oliva (2019).

not conceivable without the faculty of language, music is considered by Berio as a formative process capable of taking on virtually infinite expressive potentialities⁸.

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⁸ I want to thank Chris Stover for his valuable suggestions, which helped me to clarify some passages of my article and some important terminological and conceptual issues.

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