

An Americanization of Berio **Tracing American Influences in Luciano Berio's *Traces***

by Tiffany Kuo

"SÍ YES JA OUI ITA,"¹ replied Edoardo Sanguineti, in 1963, to Luciano Berio's invitation to be the librettist of a new opera, entitled *Traces*. Composed for a commission from the Serge Koussevitzky Foundation,² the work was conceived originally for more than twenty-five instrumentalists,³ fifty vocalists, and two actors,⁴ with neither a plot nor character names, but filled with various notable quotables in multiple languages, and contemporary slang. This new project resembled their previous collaborations, in particular *Passaggio* (1961–62). Both were conceived as "messa in scena,"⁵ and both had the overall effect of a deceptively disorganized stage work that was at once about nothing in particular and everything imaginable. As the duo's fourth collaboration, *Traces* was to be their first all-American production, destined for its world première in the fall of 1964⁶ at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, where the autograph manuscript would reside as part of a special collection. Yet somehow, despite the promises and previous successes, their work was withdrawn from the program by the presenter,⁷ and, a few months later, Sanguineti asked Berio for his name to be disassociated from *Traces*.⁸ Undoubtedly, a contract – tacit or implied – was breached. Whatever the composer, the librettist, and the presenter had agreed to in late 1963 had altered by mid-1964, implying a change of intent by one or more parties. Whose intention changed, and why?

This essay attempts to answer this question on the basis of evidence found at the Paul Sacher Foundation that implicates Berio as the person who broke from the pact. The documents include: two sketchleaves of the score,⁹ a draft of the preface to the libretto,¹⁰ a draft of the scenario, and versions of the text found in the correspondence between Sanguineti and Berio,¹¹ as well as correspondence with the Library of Congress.¹²

The "original" commission – May 1961

The Koussevitzky commission that would lead to *Traces* preceded Sanguineti's reply by three years. In May 1961, the Music Division of the Library of Congress informed Berio, via mail, that he would receive a commission grant from the Koussevitzky Foundation "in recognition of [his]

contribution to the music literature of our time.”¹³ He was to reciprocate with a work for “chamber ensemble of instruments or a series of short works for string or wind instruments.” The “original completed manuscript” of the work including a dedicatory inscription was to be placed at the Library permanently. Unlike a typical commission from a symphony orchestra or an opera house, however, the Foundation and the Library did not claim “any privilege of first performance nor does it assume any obligation to obtain performances.”¹⁴

Strangely, in Berio’s correspondence during June 1964 with Harold Spivacke, the Chief of the Music Division at the Library who also oversaw the Koussevitzky Foundation’s commissions and the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation performances at the Library, there were references to a new opera called *Traces* that was scheduled to be premièred in the Coolidge Festival for the fall with singers from the nearby School of Fine Arts at Howard University.¹⁵ Though it is possible that *Traces*, an opera instead of a chamber work, was not Berio’s submission for his Koussevitzky commission, it was, in the end, the work he offered to the Foundation, and it is the work held at the Library.¹⁶

Early conception of Traces – January 1964

Sanguineti sent Berio the first draft of a libretto for *Traces* only ten months before the scheduled première. The scenario is embedded in the body of a letter dated January 29, 1964.¹⁷ From this letter, it is clear that *Traces* was conceived by Sanguineti in the style of experimental theater, its cast comprised of unoriginal stereotypes organized in pairs of diametric opposites: two types of chorus (“un oratorio” and “una cantata,” speaking versus singing), two types of actors (“un ragazzo” and “un vecchio,” young versus old), and two types of female vocal ranges (a soprano and a mezzo-soprano, high versus low).

Even the actions and texts are configured into contrasting elements. The spoken words, as implied in the scenario, are at times simple and direct, like “a cantare i versi didascalici,” and at other times, they are incomprehensibly tangled, jumbled, and chaotic, such as a multi-layered drama with laugh track, a soloist sight-reading a text from a script, one chorus “parlano tra loro” interrupting each other, while the other chorus alternates with singing as if an “opera da concerto (...) con gesti melodrammatici,” and speaking in simple, plain speech, “parlato vero.” These juxtapositions anticipate their subsequent collaboration *Laborintus II* (1965), which Berio described as

different levels of intelligibility of the text [that] are an integral part of the structure (...) a sort of *theatrical speech*, a multi-level “conference”, a heterophony of “arias”, whose perfectly defined musical structure suggests various methods – real or virtual – of dramaturgy.¹⁸

Revisions – April 1964

Two to three months elapsed between the first draft and the next. Three letters to Berio,¹⁹ dated April 17, 27, and 28, indicated that a fair amount of the text had been revised, mostly to incorporate suggestions Berio sent after having received the first draft from Sanguineti, possibly in February. What appears to be the revised text is not dated, though the contents of the three letters sent in April allude to this specific text.²⁰ This new text included the following additional scenes: two more dialogues between the two actors, a call-and-response style dialogue between one of the female soloists and one of the two choruses, and a dual choral fight scene with a changing of masks.

In these three letters, Sanguineti reiterated Berio's request for the changes and additions to highlight both the new text and his acquiescence. First, the call and response between the soloist and the chorus was to evoke "spiritual song (...) con tutta la ritualità del caso."²¹ Secondly, the changing of costumes was to be "come violentemente rituale" so that it would represent a "mista di violenza bianca e di violenza negra."²² Additionally, the mixed up masks scene would resolve into "una visione di una società 'bicolore'."²³

Each of Berio's phrases quoted by Sanguineti can be linked to a specific contemporaneous American religious practice or political cause, absent from the first draft of the text, implying a change of intent by Berio, sometime between January and April of 1964, from the abstract concepts of musical theater to a politically poignant message. "Spiritual song," "una società 'bicolore'," and a "mista di violenza bianca e di violenza negra" in 1964 America reverberate with the African-American civil rights movement. Oakland, California, a multi-ethnic city struggling with racial and class conflicts, where Berio resided during his term at Mills College, was a hotbed of the movement, giving birth to the Black Panther Party in 1966. West Oakland, where Berio attended an African-American Pentecostal church service,²⁴ hearing both spirituals and call-and-response style singing, was "the center of midcentury East Bay African American social life and politics."²⁵ Moreover, in 1963, the proposed site of the work's première, Washington, DC, had heard Martin Luther King, Jr. reimagine the destiny of a segregated nation before more than two-hundred-thousand people between the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and the National Mall, proclaiming freedom for all with his unforgettable "I have a dream" oration.

The double omission

In June and October 1964, Berio received letters from Spivacke²⁶ and Sanguineti,²⁷ respectively. Separately, each stated his disapproval of the English text of *Traces*, translated by Susan Oyama. Though their reasons for withdrawal were different, both were shocked by the libretto they received, implicating Berio's failure to fulfill the common objective they had previ-

ously agreed upon. Spivacke wrote, "I must confess that the English text strikes me as wholly unsuitable for performance at the Library of Congress particularly because of the vulgarities and obscenities which it includes as well as certain other passage which would certainly give offense."²⁸ Sanguinetti's disapproval, on the other hand, did not rest on American political sensibilities, but on personal and professional discord. Upon receiving the proofs of the libretto to be sent to Universal Edition for publication, Sanguinetti insisted, "Non d'accordo, invece, per TRACES. (...) TOGLI IL MIO NOME."²⁹ Whatever changes were made to the text of *Traces* for the English version, Sanguinetti believed it departed so far from his text, that he was no longer the true librettist. He took offense not at the specifics of the English text but at his collaborator's disrespect. He replied, "(...) il male, invece, comincia se io mi trovo costretto a sotto scrivere una cosa che ha pallida parentela con il mio lavoro."³⁰ The published libretto, in English, credits Oyama as the librettist and bears little resemblance to Sanguinetti's April 1964 text. It is unclear whether the published version was the version Spivacke opposed, as this text is not found in the Paul Sacher Foundation. What is clear from the evidence cited here is that a rift emerged between Berio and the others, his presenter and his original librettist, after Berio began incorporating American socio-political themes in *Traces*.

In conclusion, I would like to suggest that to consider Berio's new intentions for *Traces* is also to consider his milieu in 1964, which in turn reflects back on the composer himself, illuminating another, and a very different, image of Berio, not only as a Western European avant-garde composer, but also as an American.

¹ Letter from Edoardo Sanguinetti to Luciano Berio, 31 October 1963 (this and the following letters are preserved in the Luciano Berio Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation).

² Letter from Margaret Grant to Luciano Berio, 9 May 1961.

³ Instrumentation taken from a sketchleaf of *Traces* in the Luciano Berio Collection.

⁴ Vocal parts taken from a draft of the preface to the libretto in the Luciano Berio Collection.

⁵ Umberto Eco on *Passaggio*, text manuscript, Luciano Berio Collection.

⁶ Letter from Harold Spivacke to Luciano Berio, 9 June 1964.

⁷ Letter from Harold Spivacke to Luciano Berio, 29 June 1964.

⁸ Letter from Edoardo Sanguinetti to Luciano Berio, 26 October 1964.

⁹ One page of the sketchleaves does not appear to be of *Traces*.

¹⁰ "Traces," text manuscript, Luciano Berio Collection.

¹¹ The draft of the scenario and all correspondence with Sanguinetti are found in the correspondence, filed under "Sanguinetti."

¹² Correspondence with the Library of Congress is found under "Margaret Grant" and "Harold Spivacke."

¹³ Letter from Margaret Grant to Luciano Berio, 9 May 1961.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Letter from Harold Spivacke to Luciano Berio, 9 June 1964.

¹⁶ Letters from Harold Spivacke to Luciano Berio, 29 July 1965, 15 April 1966, and 18 May 1966.

¹⁷ Letter from Edoardo Sanguinetti to Luciano Berio, 29 January 1964.

¹⁸ Excerpt taken from “Play of Projection, layering of sound, imaginary philology” by Paolo Petazzi, booklet notes (p. 5), CD Luciano Berio, *Points on a Curve to Find* etc. (Bologna: Ermitage, 1997; ERC CD 12014-2).

¹⁹ Letters from Edoardo Sanguineti to Luciano Berio, 17, 27, and 28 April 1964.

²⁰ Three pages of text found in the Sanguineti correspondence, undated.

²¹ Letter from Edoardo Sanguineti to Luciano Berio, 17 April 1964.

²² Letter from Edoardo Sanguineti to Luciano Berio, 27 April 1964.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ In both the draft of the preface to the libretto and in the final published version, Berio and Susan Oyama acknowledged indirect contributions from a Pentecostal church in West Oakland, though the names of the two churches were different. In an interview with the author, December 2008, Oyama confirmed an attendance of a church service in Oakland with Berio.

²⁵ Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 48.

²⁶ Letter from Harold Spivacke to Luciano Berio, 29 June 1964.

²⁷ Letter from Edoardo Sanguineti to Luciano Berio, 26 October 1964.

²⁸ Letter from Harold Spivacke to Luciano Berio, 29 June 1964.

²⁹ Letter from Edoardo Sanguineti to Luciano Berio, 26 October 1964.

³⁰ *Ibid.*