

A "Recitativo" without Words Luciano Berio's *Les mots sont allés ...*

by Angela Carone

Dear Mr. Berio,

Next year, on 28th April, Paul Sacher will celebrate his seventieth birthday. To mark the event, a Swiss organizing committee wishes to publish a book entitled "Homage" and asked for my assistance, something I will gladly do out of friendship and love. It is with this in mind that I take the liberty to write you. I believe that in our world today, there are few individuals like Paul Sacher [...]. I think that this is the right moment to put together a book in honor of this absolutely special and important person and friend. Let me know if you would like to write something; the form and length of the piece is up to you [...].¹

With this letter, written on May 6, 1975, Mstislav Rostropovich commenced a project that Berio, in his admiration and gratitude for Paul Sacher, enthusiastically agreed to participate in. The cellist's proposal, which culminated in a concert on May 2, 1976, in the Zurich Tonhalle (and in the subsequent publication *12 Hommages à Paul Sacher pour Violoncelle*),² stated a single requirement: the pieces must be "variations on S-A-C-H-E-R for solo cello."³ To pay homage to Sacher, Berio composed *Les mots sont allés ...*: the composer defined it as "an essay [*banco di prova*] for a piece for cello and orchestra" that he dedicated to the Swiss director the following year.⁴

On April 13, 1976, in Mulhouse, Berio finished composing *Les mots sont allés ...*. This we learn from the autograph date on the fair copy,⁵ though this first version was never published. In fact, Berio sent a note to Rostropovich to inform that he would give him "a better copy of this little piece"⁶ on April 17 in New York.

The first version (not shown here) is longer than the final version and has a five-part formal design (ABCB₁C₁). It is clearly recognizable in the different writing styles (free in A, virtuosic in B and B₁, with a predominance of dyads in C and C₁) and alternate metronome markings (quarter-note = 60–80, 82–94, 60–68, 82–94, 60–68). In the final version Berio opted for a structure in three parts (ABC). He completely eliminated B₁, "synthesized" in C everything that was previously contained in C and C₁, and simplified the writing in B in order to more effectively create its "*agit  et flexible*" ("agitated and flexible") character (for instance, Berio reduced the number of *sforzando* marks and eliminated quintuplets and septuplets). The

result is a “slimmer” version, also due to the omission of some repeated notes. On the whole, however, the piece includes numerous passages identical to those of the first version, which is thus easily recognizable.

Following Rostropovich’s suggestions, Berio made the S–A–C–H–E–R cryptogram the central idea of *Les mots sont allés ...* and decided to use transpositions of it. This principle emerged in the first sketch (not shown here). Berio transposed the set of intervals upon the six notes that constitute the cryptogram and obtained thirty-six notes as a whole. Then (second sketch) he transposed the S–A–C–H–E–R intervals starting from each of the thirty-six notes (there is a total of 216 notes). With these 216 notes, written in sequence, Berio built a long contrapuntal line. The second voice reiterates the 216 notes in the same sequence, but it starts from the seventh note and enters on the second note of the first voice.

Example 1: Luciano Berio, *Les mots sont allés ...* (1976–78), second sketch (32.2 × 47 cm, 44 staves), first and second staff: cryptogram S–A–C–H–E–R and transpositions of it (Luciano Berio Collection).

During the successive pre-compositional phases, Berio did not refrain from making use of transpositions, but he decided to employ only one of them: O_6 .⁷ Perhaps the composer chose this transposition because of the regular structure of the intervals (three major seconds and three major thirds) he obtained by alternately joining the O_6 notes with O_3 ones (we can deduce this from the annotations at the top of the continuous draft of the A section).⁸ This choice confirms an aspect of Berio’s *de facto* poetics⁹ that emerged in a famous interview.¹⁰ During the creation of a piece, the global project could be altered after the discovery of new significant relationships, in this case the major third derived from the combination of O_3 and O_6 . It completes the set of seconds and thirds (major and minor) that is contained in S–A–C–H–E–R and often employed in *Les mots sont allés ...*

Example 2: Luciano Berio, *Les mots sont allés ...* (1976–78), continuous draft (34 × 27 cm, 16 staves): section A (Luciano Berio Collection).

The continuous draft shows a gradual process of rhythmic intensification that begins by the insertion of grace notes (*acciaccatura*) and quintuplets and septuplets. In the piece's first version, Berio decided to transform the grace notes (making them real notes, sometimes reversing their order) or to insert passing notes instead of quintuplets (these techniques remain in the final version). Furthermore, the draft shows Berio's intention to create an almost regular formal design; after four statements of the S–A–C–H–E–R theme (it is clearly recognizable thanks to the rhythmic uniformity that remains in the following versions), he inserts a grace note at the beginning of the six- (or twelve-)note groups and long durations (similar to the ones in the final version) as their concluding element.

These micro-groups can be viewed as “variations” on the theme. Their notes are drawn from the S–A–C–H–E–R cryptogram and the O_6 transposition. In the first and final versions, they appear in the A section with some interpolations, as we have seen, derived from “elaboration” or replacement of the grace notes or quintuplets and septuplets in the draft. Berio selected the twelve notes from O_3 and O_6 (pitch classes 3–9–0–11–4–2–6–0–3–2–7–5, for convenience numbered here from I to XII), changing the initial note

and always choosing a different direction, but according to generally regular criteria (for instance, he alternates the O₃ and O₆ notes or moves from the middle towards the end).

	I S E ^b	II A A	III C C	IV H B	V E E	VI R D	VII F [#]	VIII C	IX E ^b	X D	XI G	XII F
1	VII	I	VIII	II	IX	III	X	IV	XI[[#]]	V	XII	VI
2	VII	VI	VIII	V	IX	IV(IX)	X	III	XI[[#]]	II	XII[E.D]	I
3	I	XII	II	XI	III[C [#]]	X(X)	IV[E]	IX	V	VIII[C [#]]	VI	VII[FA]
4	I[E]	XII	II	XI	III	X	IV	IX	V[C [#]]	VIII(VIII)	VI	VII
5	XII	I	II(II)	IX	IV	V	VI	VIII	VII	I	XII	II
6	XI	III	X(III)[E] (III)	IX	IV(IX)	X	IV(IX)	V	XIII	IX	VII	VI[G [#] .A]

Table 1: Luciano Berio, *Les mots sont allés ...* (1976–78), A section. Use of S–A–C–H–E–R (O₃) and notes of transposition O₆. The interpolations are in square brackets, the repeated notes in parentheses.

Compared to the twelve notes of O₃ and O₆, Berio modified G, perhaps in order to emphasize the tritone (the opening interval of S–A–C–H–E–R) produced by G[#] and D, both melodically (on staves 3 and 4, *mf* emphasizes D) and harmonically (on staff 4). It is significant that Berio placed this interval after a note sequence built on minor thirds the first time, and on major thirds and major and minor seconds the second time. In contrast to the draft, Berio also employed tritones to mark the passage to the B section (D–G[#] and A–E^b, the last being the beginning note of B); and above all, he chose this interval to conclude the piece. In this case, Berio moved away from the first version that ends with a long D, and thus made a choice in keeping with the solutions adopted in *Les mots sont allés ...*.

In the B section, Berio departed from employing O₃ and O₆ and concentrated only on the cryptogram and its seventeen repetitions, which are subjected to a decrease in duration. There is a gradual move from eighth-note figurations, also triplets (S–A–C–H–E–R statement n. 1, see Table 2), to eighth- and 16th-notes (nn. 2–8), and 16th- and 32nd-notes (n. 9), concluding in the use of 32nds alone (nn. 10–17). This decrease is followed by a slowing down during the last statement (n. 18) where Berio restored the beginning eighth- and quarter-notes. The opening cryptogram of the B section is also subjected to changes of register. As Table 2 shows, the number of notes the composer placed in a different register increases gradually (statements nn. 2–8); the return (n. 9) to the original arrangement (n. 1) breaks off this process.

1	S	A	C	H	E	R	original registers
2					-1		
3					+1	-1	
4	-1					+1	[E \flat D after B]
5	+1	+1		-1	-1		
6	-1	-1	-1	+1	+1	+1 (harmonic)	[E \flat A after A]
7	-1	-1	+1	-1	-1	-1	
8	+1		-2				[A after C]
9	+1	+1	+2	+1	+1		(return of S-A-C-H-E-R as 1)
10					-1		[G D C \sharp F \sharp B D \sharp E F after A]
11					+1	-1	
12	-1						[C B after B]
13						+1	
14	+1			-1	-1		
15	-1		-1	+1	+1	+1 (harmonic)	
16	-1	-1	+1	-1	-1	-1	
17	+1		-2				[A after H]
18	+1	+1	+2	+1	+1		(return of S-A-C-H-E-R as 1) [E \flat A C after C; C after B]

Table 2: Luciano Berio, *Les mots sont allés ...* (1976–78), B section: register changes of the S–A–C–H–E–R pitches. The Arabic numbers 1 and 2 indicate a leap of one or two octaves (–: lower; +: higher). Each change refers to a respective pitch in the previous cryptogram. The interpolations are in square brackets.

Clearly Berio organized the eighteen cryptogram statements in two almost symmetrical groups, at the end of which (n. 9 and n. 18) S–A–C–H–E–R reappears in the original registers (n. 1); the bipartite form is marked in the middle of the section (n. 10, at the same time as 32nd-note figurations) by the inclusion of the biggest interpolation. This is built on perfect fourths, minor seconds (which are inside S–A–C–H–E–R) and major thirds (as we have seen, this interval is derived from the combination of O₃ and O₆).

The C section confirms the centrality that Berio gave to the S–A–C–H–E–R intervals and those obtained by the combination of O₃ and O₆: seconds and thirds (major and minor) recur incessantly in the course of the final section, frequently framing a tritone. Their employment in the form of

often repeated dyads lends itself perfectly to express the mark *allontanandosi a poco a poco* (“disappearing little by little”) and to introduce the concluding stasis after the vehemence of the central section.

Evidently the move from the five-part design of the first version to the three parts of the final version makes *Les mots sont allés ...* more compact and less “dispersive” without damaging the alternate *Stimmungen* of the first version. In the excitement of the B section, obtained by register and duration changes, Berio creates an atmosphere which is markedly different from the character *Intime, comme en parlant* (“intimate, as if speaking”) that he prescribes in the A section. This is perfectly suited to paying homage “without words” to Paul Sacher,¹¹ “who not only conducted and promoted modern music, but made many contributions to it, both as a man and as a musician.”¹²

¹ Luciano Berio Collection, correspondence (MF 170.1: 2296) (my translation from the German).

² Mstislav Rostropovich, *12 Hommages à Paul Sacher pour violoncelle: Reproduktion der Manuskripte, die auf Veranlassung von M. Rostropowitsch aus Anlass des 70. Geburtstages von Paul Sacher geschrieben wurden* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1980; UE 17182). The book contains pieces by Beck, Berio, Boulez, Britten, Dutilleux, Fortner, Ginastera, Halffter, Henze, Holliger, Huber, and Lutosławski. Recently Heinz Holliger mentioned that the idea to dedicate a cycle of pieces to Sacher was his. See “‘Er hatte die Stärke, sich beraten zu lassen’: Heinz Holliger im Gespräch mit Michael Kunkel,” *Paul Sacher zum 100. Geburtstag*, ed. Matthias Kassel (Basel: Paul Sacher Stiftung, 2006), pp. 36–45, particularly p. 40. My thanks to Tobias Bleek for pointing this out to me.

³ Luciano Berio Collection, correspondence (MF 170.1: 2298). The cryptogram S–A–C–H–E–R is equivalent to *E♭* (Es in German)–A–C–B (*H* in German)–E–D (*Re* according to the terminology of Latin countries).

⁴ Luciano Berio Collection, correspondence (MF 170.1: 2297). The piece is *Ritorno degli Snovidenia* (1976–77) for cello and thirty instruments.

⁵ Paul Sacher Collection (MF 484: 0413–0415).

⁶ *Ibid.* (0415). The second version of the piece is in the book *12 Hommages à Paul Sacher* (see note 2) and has few variants compared to the final version published separately by Universal Edition in 1979 (UE 18399). I refer to the latter in this essay.

⁷ I mean by *O*₆ the transposition of SACHER (*O*₃) beginning from *F*_♯.

⁸ The draft, which Berio subjected to some variants (this will be discussed shortly), corresponds to the published version, p. 2, from the first note to the *d* of the last staff. The B section starts from the next *E♭*¹ and ends on p. 3, staff 7.

⁹ Hermann Danuser, “Inspiration, Rationalität, Zufall: Über musikalische Poetik im 20. Jahrhundert,” *Vom Einfall zum Kunstwerk: Der Kompositionsprozeß in der Musik des 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Hermann Danuser and Günter Katzenberger (Laaber: Laaber, 1993), pp. 11–21, particularly p. 11.

¹⁰ David Osmond-Smith, *Luciano Berio: Two Interviews with Rossana Dalmonte and Bálint András Varga* (New York and London: Boyars, 1985), pp. 89–90.

¹¹ In a telephone conversation of January 21, 1986, with Elena Hift, Berio explains the origin of the title *Les mots sont allés ...*: “The instrument must play as if it were speaking” [Ursprung des Titels: das Instrument soll so spielen, als ob es sprechen würde]. The memo (“Telefongespräch mit Berio”) is held at Universal Edition, Historisches Archiv (box 1986) in Vienna. I wish to express my thanks to Angelika Glatz for her generous assistance.

¹² Luciano Berio Collection, correspondence (MF 170.1: 2296) (my translation from the German).