

Allusion and Quotation in Luciano Berio's Mahler Transcriptions

by Thomas Peattie

In the fall of 1973 Luciano Berio wrote to Henry-Louis de La Grange warmly praising the initial volume of his recently published biographical account of Gustav Mahler.

Dear Henry-Louis,

I must let you know that I'm practically living with your "Mahler." It happens to everybody to live intensely with a book for some time. But my relation with your "Mahler" is so intense that sometimes I feel that I should *do* something with it. For some strange reason I can recall only one experience of similar emotional proportions, when – 37 years ago (I was eleven) – I was living with the 10 volumes of R[omain] Rolland's "Jean Christophe"! You did a magnificent, rigorous, moving, dignified, fascinating and loving work. You built around Gustav Mahler the only space a book could possibly provide today.

Thank you for ever.

Yours,

Luciano Berio¹

In addition to confirming Berio's long-standing interest in Mahler's music, this letter also gives voice to his impassioned reading of de La Grange's biography. Of particular note is Berio's cryptic remark about the need to "do something" with a biographical account that he felt provided a space around Mahler and his work. And while this remark is difficult to parse, it reminds us that Berio's interest in Mahler was ultimately rooted in a number of shared aesthetic and compositional priorities.

This interest was rekindled in November of 1985 when de La Grange sent Berio the score of Mahler's *Lieder und Gesänge*: fourteen songs for voice and piano distributed over three volumes, composed between 1880 and 1890, and first published in 1892.² These volumes served as Berio's main source for two sets of Mahler transcriptions that were later published as *Fünf frühe Lieder* (1986) and *Sechs frühe Lieder* (1987). Berio's approach to the task of transcription in the context of these two sets can now be stud-

1 Letter from Luciano Berio to Henry-Louis de La Grange, 11 November 1973 (Luciano Berio Collection, PSS). Berio refers to the first volume of de La Grange's *Mahler*, published in English (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973).

2 Gustav Mahler, *Lieder und Gesänge, für eine Singstimme und Klavier: tief* (Mainz: Schott, and Vienna: Universal Edition, n. d.).

ied more carefully thanks to the availability of several new sources that include Berio's copy of Mahler's *Lieder und Gesänge*, the fair copies of his subsequent transcriptions of these songs, and his conducting scores.³ The piano-vocal scores offer particular insight into Berio's transcribing practice. For during the initial stages of transcribing these songs Berio made detailed annotations that include, among other things, indications of instrumentation, minor changes to the original melodic and harmonic content of individual songs, and the elaboration of their contrapuntal and motivic fabric. When taken together, these scores reveal that Berio's practice of alluding to and borrowing from multiple musical sources played a central role in his conception of transcription in the earliest stage of the creative process. In what follows I will focus on two songs in which Berio's attitude toward transcription emerges as a kind of homage to Mahler's own well-known re-cycling practices. In the first, "Zu Straßburg auf der Schanz'," Berio alludes to Mahler's abandoned attempt to orchestrate the song, while in the second, "Ablösung im Sommer," he quotes the symphonic movement by Mahler that is in itself an instrumental transcription of the original song.

Given that many of Mahler's songs for voice and piano served as stepping-stones for their eventual orchestral elaboration, it is perhaps not surprising that Berio approached these un-orchestrated songs in a similar spirit. Commenting on Mahler's setting for voice and piano of "Zu Straßburg auf der Schanz'," Dika Newlin observes that the accompaniment is "always reaching out for orchestral effects."⁴ Indeed, the resulting "orchestral allusions" in this song are often acknowledged by way of performance annotations that, according to Newlin, are meant to "stimulate the imagination of player and singer alike."⁵ In the opening measures, for example, the right hand of the piano is marked *Wie eine Schalmei* (Like a herdsman's pipe), while in connection with the subsequent low-register trills in the left hand the pianist is instructed to perform these trills with an ear to imitating the sound of muted drums. But if by orchestrating this song Berio literalizes such allusions, he also frequently transforms the passages in question in a way that alters their very fabric. Whereas at the beginning of "Zu Straßburg auf der Schanz'," Berio's orchestration merely amplifies the pedal effect called for in the piano part, as the transcription unfolds he allows the dotted march rhythm that accompanies the singer's initial utterance to proliferate in ways that transform the rhythmic surface of the original song (see *Plate 1*).

3 I owe a particular debt of gratitude to Angela Ida de Benedictis, who has continued to act as a generous reader and interlocutor. I would also like to thank Talia Pecker Berio for her valuable insights, as well as for her kind permission to reproduce portions of this material.

4 Dika Newlin, *Bruckner, Mahler, Schoenberg*, rev. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), p. 125.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 126.

Verso Sträubung, alternata et trillet

(X) Zu Straßburg auf der Schanz'

Aus „Des Knaben Wunderhorn“

Gustav Mahler

Im Volkston (ohne Sentimentalität, äusserst rhythmisch).

p

(Wie eine Schalmey.)

pp *accel.* *pp rit.*

Mit starkem Pedalgebrauch.

In gemessenem Marschtempo. ein wenig zurückhaltend

Strassburg auf der Schanz, da ging mein Trau-ern an! Das Alp-horn hör' ich

drü-ben wohl an-stim-men, in's Va-ter-land musst ich hin-ü-ber schwim-men, das

ging ja nicht an, das ging ja nicht an!

*) In allen diesen tiefen Trillern ist mit Hilfe des Pedals der Klang gedämpfter Trommeln nachzuahmen.

FAGS-D
+ Vm. alt.
SARD - Sträubung
7-1

Plate 1: Gustav Mahler, *Lieder und Gesänge*, printed edition with annotations, vol. 3, p. 2 (Mainz: Schott, and Vienna: Universal Edition, s. d., Ed. Schott 834 / UE 3954b; Luciano Berio Collection, PSS).

“Zu Straßburg auf der Schanz’” also offers an example of Berio’s practice of drawing on multiple musical sources. Here the striking similarities between the first sixteen measures of Berio’s transcription and Mahler’s abandoned attempt to orchestrate the song suggest that Berio had access to this seldom-discussed fragment.⁶ That Mahler’s abandoned attempt dates

6 In a letter from Henry-Louis de La Grange to Luciano Berio, dated 28 November 1985, de La Grange offers to send Berio the manuscript (Luciano Berio Collection, PSS). Its

from 1904 – some fifteen years after the song was first composed – also explains why, by borrowing from this later model, Berio’s transcription anachronistically evokes the sound world of Mahler’s later *Wunderhorn* settings.

In the case of “Ablösung im Sommer,” Berio engages more openly with the multiple musical sources on which he draws, while at the same time significantly transforming the song’s melodic and rhythmic fabric. In the summer of 1895, when Mahler began work on his Third Symphony, the song served as the initial point of departure for the work’s scherzo. Indeed, the scherzo’s first sixty-seven measures offer a more or less faithful transcription of the original song. But what distinguishes Berio’s transcription is the way he puts it into dialogue with the original song *and* the symphonic movement it inspired. Not only does this reworked song offer a full-blown commentary on Mahler’s own practice of creating instrumental symphonic movements out of his own vocal settings, it can also be heard as a commentary on his own more general attitude toward transcription.

Whereas the song and the scherzo serve as Berio’s primary models, his frequent alterations often draw on this material in unexpected ways. This is already evident at the outset where Berio slyly introduces an invented *perpetuum mobile* figure comprised of running sixteenth notes, a figure that is present at the beginning neither of the original song nor of the symphonic scherzo (see *Plate 2*). Indeed, a sustained *perpetuum mobile* figure does not appear in either work until the subsequent shift to the major mode.⁷ But rather than thinking of this figure simply as a reference to its two models, its presence might also be heard as an allusion to an earlier work: namely, the scherzo of the Second Symphony, whose *perpetuum mobile* manner haunts the third movement of Berio’s own *Sinfonia*.

Perhaps the most extraordinary moment in this transcription comes in the idyllic A-major interlude at the line: “Ei! Das soll thun Frau Nachtigall! Die sitzt auf grünem Zweige!” Here, on the word *Zweige*, Berio alters the original pitches (C \sharp and A), replacing these two notes with the pitches A and E (see *Plate 3*). Unlike many of his other alterations, in this case Berio is not shy about revealing the source of the altered notes. Whereas in the piano-vocal score he provides only a general clue (in the form of a pencil annotation that reads “III Sinf.”), the fair copy includes a more precise annotation that directs the reader to the exact source of these notes (see *Plate 4*).⁸ By making such a direct reference to the scherzo, Berio makes fully

receipt by Berio is confirmed by the existence of a photocopy of Mahler’s abandoned orchestration tucked inside the front cover of the annotated piano-vocal score Berio used while transcribing this song.

7 Gustav Mahler, “Ablösung im Sommer,” m. 32; Mahler, Symphony No. 3, scherzo, m. 34.

8 “Vedi Scherzo III *Sinfonia*, 1^o oboe, 8 battuta dopo 2 (Ed. Universal).” This annotation is preserved in the published score, albeit in a slightly different form.

6

Diskalto in estate
2 Ablösung im Sommer
Aus „Des Knaben Wunderhorn“

Mit Humor 1=72

The image shows a page of a musical score for 'Ablösung im Sommer' by Gustav Mahler. It consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The score is annotated with handwritten notes and symbols. At the top, there is a handwritten note 'Diskalto in estate' and a circled '2'. The title 'Ablösung im Sommer' is printed, followed by 'Aus „Des Knaben Wunderhorn“'. The tempo and mood are indicated as 'Mit Humor' and '1=72'. The score is divided into four systems. The first system shows the vocal line starting with 'Ku-kuk hat sich zu To-de go-fal-len,' and the piano accompaniment. The second system continues the vocal line with 'To-de go-fal-len an ei-ner gru-nen Wei-den! Wei-den! Wei-den!' and the piano accompaniment. The third system shows the vocal line with 'Ku-kuk ist tot! Ku-kuk ist tot! hat sich zu Tod-go-fal-len!' and the piano accompaniment. The fourth system shows the vocal line with 'Wer soll uns denn den Sommer lang die Zeit und Weil ver-trei-ben?' and the piano accompaniment. Various annotations are present, including 'vide I', 'p', 'f', 'pissiertlich', and circled symbols.

Ku-kuk hat sich zu To-de go-fal-len,

To-de go-fal-len an ei-ner gru-nen Wei-den! Wei-den! Wei-den!

Ku-kuk ist tot! Ku-kuk ist tot! hat sich zu Tod-go-fal-len!

pissiertlich
Wer soll uns denn den Sommer lang die Zeit und Weil ver-trei-ben?

Plate 2: Gustav Mahler, *Lieder und Gesänge*, printed edition with annotations, p. 6 (see Plate 1; Luciano Berio Collection, PSS).

transparent his attitude toward transcription: namely, that the source of a given transcription might also be another transcription. What is more, by modeling his own transcription on Mahler's subsequent instrumental elaboration, he self-consciously practices a type of borrowing that mirrors Mahler's own practice. And by drawing on the scherzo of the Third as a source for his transcription of "Ablösung im Sommer," Berio is doing what Mahler himself did during the process of orchestrating and transcribing many of

Eil! Das soll thun Frau Nach-ti-gall! Die sitzt auf grü-nem
 Zwei-ge! Die klei-ne, fei-ne Nachti-gall, die lie-be, sü-sse Nachti-gall! Sie

*) Von (c bis) kann die Gesangsstimme eventuell nach Bedürfnis des Sängers weggelassen werden.

Plate 3: Gustav Mahler, *Lieder und Gesänge*, printed edition with annotations, p. 7 (see Plate 1; Luciano Berio Collection, PSS).

ARPA
 VOCE
 I
 II
 VLE
 VC
 CB

SITZT AUF GRÜ-NEM ZWEI-GE! DIE KLEI-NE, FEI-NE NACHTI-GALL, DIE LIE-BE, SÜ-SSE NACHTI-GALL! SIE

⊗ Von Schenke III Sufronin, p. oben, p. botte
 dopo [2] (Ed. Universal) - 8 -

Plate 4: Luciano Berio / Gustav Mahler, *Fünf frühe Lieder*, autograph full score, p. 8 (Luciano Berio Collection, PSS).

his own songs, including “Ging heut morgen über’s Feld” and “Die zwei blauen Augen” from the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*.⁹

For Berio the difficulty in assigning borders to what he called “the vast territories of transcription” can be attributed, at least in part, to the sheer diversity of approaches that have long motivated composers to transcribe the works of their predecessors.¹⁰ In the case of his own transcriptions, however, we know that Berio often undertook the task of transcription with a rather specific analytical goal in mind. As he later wrote in connection with his Mahler transcriptions, his goal here was “to bring to light the undercurrents of the original piano part: Wagner, Brahms, the adult Mahler, and the modes of orchestration that came after him.”¹¹ But if this process gives rise to a range of rather specific musical references, it is also important to remember that these references seem to defy any clear chronology. And since Berio’s transcriptions are rarely modeled on a single musical source, we might also say that, rather like an act of listening, they always imply an ever-growing network of musical associations.

9 When Mahler first orchestrated these two songs he drew not only on the original piano-vocal versions but also on those passages in the First Symphony where they first attained orchestral form.

10 Luciano Berio, *Remembering the Future* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 39.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 41.