

Thomas Peattie

“A Composer Listens: Luciano Berio’s Nineteenth Century”

My project considers the crucial and largely unexplored relationship between nineteenth-century musical and aesthetic traditions and the creative practice of the Italian composer Luciano Berio (1925-2003). Over the course of his career Berio devoted significant attention to transcribing the works of “old masters” (Johannes Brahms, Giuseppe Verdi, and Gustav Mahler), a practice that also included the completion of unfinished (and arguably unfinishable) compositions by Franz Schubert and Giacomo Puccini. Whereas our understanding of this rich repertory of co-authored works has been shaped by literary and art historical theories of translation and restoration, as well as by music-historical discourses that privilege music in its notated form, I argue that the very fabric of Berio’s transcriptions also provides evidence of how he *listened* to the music of his predecessors. For although his transcriptions rely on an intimate knowledge of an original “text,” Berio’s relationship to these texts is also shaped by an entirely different kind of knowledge, one that has been shaped by the lingering sonic traces of the performed work as remembered and misremembered over the course of a lifetime of listening.

Berio’s transcriptions have long been accorded a secondary status in assessments of his larger compositional output. Indeed, little attention has been paid to the precise details of their manufacture. Drawing on an extensive array of primary sources from the Paul Sacher Foundation (Basel), I provide the first account of what motivated Berio’s transcribing practice while also addressing the unexplored question of *how* he approached the task of transcription. The sources in question—all of which feature extensive annotations in the composer’s own hand—fall into two main categories: printed scores of works by other composers that Berio used as a starting point for his transcriptions, and Berio’s own conducting scores that he used in conjunction with the performance of these works. Whereas the annotated “source scores” draw attention to the role of listening at the earliest stage of the transcription process, the conducting scores feature an entirely separate layer of annotations that identify anew those moments in which the act of listening was initially registered.