

# Listening as a Letter of Uriah: A note on Berio's *Un re in ascolto* (1984) on the occasion of the opera's first performance in London (9 February 1989)

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Imagine what would have happened if Prospero had come out in front of the curtain at the end of the first performance of Shakespeare's *Tempest* on 1 November 1611 and if, at his words

Now, 'tis true,  
I must be here confin'd by you,  
Or sent to Naples. Let me not,  
Since I have my dukedom got  
And pardon'd the deceiver, dwell  
In this bare island by your spell;  
But release me from my bands  
With the help of your good hands.  
Gentle breath of yours my sails  
Must fill, or else my project fails,  
Which was to please [...],

the audience had not applauded. In accordance with Jacobean theatrical practice, the sound of applause breaks the theatrical illusion. But imagine that Prospero has no desire to step outside his part and revert to being an actor, no desire to receive his reward in coin of the realm. He does not regard the front of the stage as a barrier between illusion and reality, but maintains that his banishment to the island, where a highly undramatic action has just unfolded, is precisely the sort of enchantment that we feel when the curtain goes up and we hang enthralled on every word that falls from the artists' lips. Prospero maintains that he has, so to speak, become the victim of a work of art, albeit a work of art that the audience believes he himself to have staged through the orders he gives to Ariel – the only character apart from Caliban who mediates between the three completely separate groups of characters. In other words, Prospero claims that this staging has been an illusion and that the entire action has taken place inside his head. His magic, he insists, has just been sufficient to enable the audience to share in that illusion. But if the audience were to applaud,

they would acknowledge the illusion as a finished product, thus granting it an independent existence. Prospero would be allowed to escape as an artist and return to Milan via Naples.

It may be that the trochees of the Epilogue are not by Shakespeare at all, but were added by the editor of the First Folio of 1623 as equally applicable to Shakespeare himself following the playwright's renunciation of his magic power over words and his return to Stratford from London. But the objection is irrelevant: what matters is not so much authorship as the work transmitted under Shakespeare's name, thus including the Epilogue and its unique metaphor encapsulating the play's principal theme. This is the theme of *vanitas* – a view of the world as a place of transitory pleasure – which finds expression elsewhere in the play in the line, 'We are such stuff as dreams are made on', a line quoted by Luciano Berio and Italo Calvino in *Un re in ascolto*, at the end of the 'Concertato con figure' (the title and action of which point in turn to Adrian Leverkühn's 'Apocalypsis cum figuris' in Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus*, another tale of an artist caught halfway between black and white magic):

è finita la festa  
[...]  
così svaniranno le torri,  
i palazzi sontuosi,  
i templi,  
e questo immenso mondo:  
svaniranno senza traccia,  
come un sogno.

[Our revels are ended / [...] / thus the towers shall vanish, / the gorgeous palaces, / the temples, / and this great globe: / all shall vanish without trace, / as if in a dream.]

What, then, would have happened to Prospero if the audience had not applauded on 1 November 1611? He would have had to remain on his 'island full of noises', in the company (one assumes) of Caliban and Ariel, the fairy isle's original inhabitants, the former pre-civilised, the later embodying the pure force of nature. Prospero would have been left alone in his cell, waiting for a voice that could invest his magic spell with sufficient skill to make the audience begin their applause. He would sit there, condemned to listen, waiting in the midst of some vast web of noises whose meaning must be grasped and interpreted and with which he must make contact. This is the central figure of *Un re in ascolto*, the Prospero of the five Prospero arias. His singing lurches to and fro between B flat and A,

an interval extended to a longer sequence which then reappears in ever new forms, encircled and encircling, circulating within itself and observing itself from a distance. But this is precisely what Prospero does in this 'musical action': a static figure, he observes himself, moving around himself, around himself and his thoughts. There is no development in this character, no development in his musical characterisation.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> H. J. Herbort, 'Töne mit Kehrseite', *Die Zeit*, 17 August 1984.

## 2

There was indeed one occasion when applause was withheld at the end of *The Tempest* and Prospero was consigned to that (acoustic) Fata Morgana of which Berio's score, with its ghostly dances in G minor (or in no key at all), tells so cleverly confusing and confusingly clever a tale. The man who declined to applaud was W. H. Auden: between 1942 and 1944 he wrote an epilogue to the play which he described as 'a commentary' and which he entitled *The Sea and the Mirror*. The conclusion of *The Tempest*, he argued, was 'inadequate for its themes [...] Both the repentance of the guilty and the pardon of the injured [in Shakespeare's last scene] seem more formal than real'.<sup>2</sup> In Auden's epilogue the supporting characters return to the stage and describe *sotto voce* the extent to which the play's events have changed their lives or, to be exact, have *not* changed their lives. Some claim that *The Tempest* is not a drama in the Aristotelian sense because it involves no catharsis – no purification and transformation of character. (It is the act of catharsis which, according to Aristotle's *On the Art of Poetry*, treats drama as a mirror of life, experience of which makes us older and wiser.) Others maintain that catharsis, in life as on stage, is mere illusion – a claim which encourages them to correct 'Prospero's' drama in the light of his insights into the insubstantiality of life.

In *Un re in ascolto*, Prospero (an impresario in search of the voice that will bring him his freedom) has no choice but to listen to Auden's supporting cast as he auditions them (Audizioni I–III, Aria V). The singers all hurl accusations at him, echoing Antonio ('Your all is partial, Prospero, / My will is all my own'), Ferdinand ('One bed is empty, Prospero, / My person is my own'), and so on. And in doing so they deny the controlling power of his (magic) art – a power which operates on two levels, the pretended, and (hence) the theatrical level. It is scarcely surprising that Prospero collapses exhausted at the end of Act I. The framework that has held the opening act together falls apart, and with it the rehearsal which Prospero had ordered. (If he had managed to turn all this into a viable play – and to achieve this he needs not only the Protagonista's voice but also a polished performance – the audience would have applauded and, released from his artistic obligation, he could have returned to Milan or Stratford, as the case may be.) But the rehearsal ends in panic-stricken confusion as a group of terrorists bursts in, weapons blazing: an acoustical symbol of the irruption of the earthly world into the world of art.

The Audizioni continue, but a parody of the dialogue (Duetto II) in which Prospero had explained his highly contradictory ideas to his Regista makes it all too clear that artistic activity has already disappeared. The (naturally) silent Mime and Venerdi (who plays himself and who speaks for both) re-rehearse the conversation, an interchange of which they had no doubt understood the sounds but not the message: what we hear are quotations that violate the original

<sup>2</sup> Humphrey Carpenter, *W. H. Auden: A Biography* (London, 1981), 325. The text of *The Sea and the Mirror* is taken from W. H. Auden, *Collected Longer Poems* (London, 1968), 199–252.

text. And Duetto II was itself a quotation, this time from the correspondence between Berio and Calvino in which they had discussed their ideas about opera in general, ideas from which *Un re in ascolto* was soon to develop. (This begs the question of whether the completed piece represents a perversion of the original ideas in the sense that Duetto II could be said to be a perversion of Duetto III, or whether the finished work transcends the inevitably rudimentary dialogue in the way that Duetto III transcends Duetto II.) But Duetto III is in turn a quotation, borrowing from the Postscript to Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror* in which Ariel addresses Caliban – in an 'Echo by the prompter' – with the same two-faced, double-edged ambiguity that Venerdì shows here: 'As I (/) am (/) can I / Love you (/) as you (/) are / [...] / I will sing if you will cry.'

## 3

'I don't know what people see in Shakespeare', two old ladies are reported to have said to one another when, during Queen Victoria's reign, they first set foot in a theatre: 'It's nothing but quotations!' What would they have said had they ventured into Covent Garden on 9 February 1989, to attend Graham Vick's brilliant production of an opera which seems to issue from the deep subconscious of some over-eager radio listener. Every style of every period from every country merges to form an unstable but tenacious babble of sounds in which fitful reminiscences of Mahler and Monteverdi, Mozart and Berg, Beethoven and Berio can occasionally be discerned. The silent Messenger, who keeps trying to bring a message to Prospero, harks back to Berio's *Opera* of 1969–71, which in turn quotes the Messaggera from Monteverdi's *Orfeo* of 1607. Prospero sits on a chair as the curtain rises because: (1) Franz Kafka noted in his diary on 5 November 1911, 'I am sitting in my room, i.e. the noise headquarters of the whole apartment; I hear all the doors slamming, etc.'; because (2) this diary entry was central to a semiotic essay by Roland Barthes and Roland Havas on the difference between 'listening' and 'hearing';<sup>3</sup> because (3) Calvino drew Berio's attention to this essay in 1977 when they were both in search of a subject for a new opera; and, finally, because (4) Calvino turned all this into the story of a king who is reduced to sitting inside his palace and listening to the voices around him, voices with which he now attempts to communicate. (Berio, of course, found the story too much in the style of the nineteenth century and rejected it accordingly, whereupon Calvino published it in *La Repubblica* on the Saturday following the first performance of *Un re in ascolto*.<sup>4</sup>) But there is also the phenomenon of non-quotation. Whenever he hears the story of the man who becomes all ears, the educated Englishman

<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes and Roland Havas, 'Ascolto', *Enciclopedia Einaudi* (Turin, 1976), I, 982–91. The original French was published in Roland Barthes, *L'Obvie et l'Obtus* (Paris, 1982), 217–30 and was translated into English by Richard Howard as 'Listening' in *The Responsibility of Forms* (New York, 1985), 245–60.

<sup>4</sup> Italo Calvino, 'Un re in ascolto: Racconti dell'estate', *La Repubblica*, 13 August 1984.

inevitably thinks of H. C. Earwicker, or Here Comes Every Man, and the 240 variations on his name in Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, a work whose system of inventing new words had served as a model for Berio and Calvino in their previous opera *La vera storia* (1982). (This earlier work, incidentally, is a gigantic quotation from *Il trovatore*.) And yet the motif B – C – E (in the German system of notation H – C – E) is one which does *not* occur at any point in Prospero's arias.

Quotation is more than a mere device in *Un re in ascolto*. It also embodies that loss which typifies all mannerist art, namely the inability or disinclination to create an independent style, even though such individuality needs to be asserted with the greatest possible force. To lend an ear to yesterday's style is Prospero's error, an error which Berio sets to music with matchless critical skill. When Prospero dies with the words 'un ricordo al futuro' on his lips, his music reveals his memory to be a lie.

Among the work's leading characters there is one who represents the quotation as such, in other words, second-hand experience: the Mime. Like almost all the others, he has to make do with a job description, since Berio – by his own admission – is 'not interested in personal relations'. At the same time this business of description takes account of the way in which people are reduced to their occupation, a process which only composers may still be able to avoid today. The Mime's very name reminds us of Aristotle's theory of imitation: he mimics and re-cites, through gesture, but does not create anything new himself. He, too, is a reminiscence, in this case of the narrator Marco Polo in Calvino's *Le città invisibili* (1972):

In order to help Kublai Khan gain a purchase on history, the poet gave him an *alter ego* who not only confronts and negates the representative of an historically self-contained world, but who also helps a person out of the entanglement of a past that has grown objectively real. Even Dante needed someone to guide him out of the dark wood. Together with Virgil he sets off on his journey through the nine circles of Hell. And Faust, without Mephistopheles, would have been a mere ghost among ghosts. Marco Polo rouses the Emperor from his waking sleep in Sleeping Beauty's palace. He has of course to break down an outer and inner stiffness, a process in which he is helped by being a stranger. Having none of the empire's languages at his command, he has to point to objects in order to explain his experiences. He articulates his feelings through gesture and mime. And this simple metaphorical language awakens Kublai Khan's imagination, allowing him to hear and see once again.<sup>5</sup>

The Mime, too, takes Prospero by the hand, leading him – with the help of explanatory gestures – through an enchanted realm, the fragments of which are represented by the rehearsal (Concertato I), just as all work in the theatre is a 'memory of the future'. But Prospero confuses him. This Mime is not the same as the Ariel whose address to Prospero in Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror* is interwoven with painful memories of the break-up of the poet's relationship with Chester Kallman: 'Stay with me, Ariel, while I pack, and with

<sup>5</sup> Dietrich Simon, Afterword to Italo Calvino, *Die unsichtbaren Städte* (Munich, 1977), 195–6 (German translation of *Le città invisibili*).

your first free act / Delight my leaving [. . .] Sing, Ariel, sing.' When Berio's Prospero quotes this passage from Auden in Duetto III, he confuses two fundamentally different things. If he fails in his search for a work of art which will satisfy every claim, it is for the simple reason that he himself is incapable of forming any relationship. 'How lovable is man as long as he remains a man', we read in Menander. It is a belief which may also imply that if a man would be loved by the Muses, he must in turn love his fellow men. This, at least, would seem to be one of the possible conclusions to be drawn, however negatively, from *Un re in ascolto*.

The opera is, so to speak, performed backwards: never is Prospero more remote from his dream, never are the actors further from mastering their roles than at the end, when everything sinks through the 'wellshaft of time'. After the interval, the scene gradually changes. According to the libretto, 'the separation between Prospero's room and the stage is less clear, and gradually disappears altogether': the reality of the actors' dressing-room supersedes, as it were, the ideality of the rehearsal. Prospero's shrewish wife appears, accompanied by her legal adviser; the Doctor has to rescue his patient from the 'helpful' attentions of artistic bureaucrats. Prospero becomes a self-quotation: reduced to a stage property, he sits enthroned at the centre of the stage, while the monstrous products and accessories of his artistic imagination turn him, with his sceptre, crown and royal mantle, into a caricature and a fool. Art devours its progenitor. Perhaps it is only now that he begins to hear what Auden's Caliban – unbelievably cultured, but uselessly so, since his culture is geared to what Auden termed a 'Christian concept of art' – has to say at the end of *The Sea and the Mirror* when, in the well-turned phrases of a Henry James, he admits,

Now it is over. No, we have not dreamt it [. . .] There is nothing to say. There never has been, – and our wills chuck in their hands – There is no way out. There never was, – it is at this moment that for the first time in our lives we hear, not the sounds which, as born actors, we have hitherto condescended to use as an excellent vehicle for displaying our personalities and looks, but the real Word which is our only *raison d'être*.

## 4

It is curious that, in a work whose every layer contains allusions to and quotations from *The Tempest*, dreams play so subordinate a role. The *azione musicale* plays with the 'stuff that dreams are made on' – in other words, with operatic conventions – and yet it does not involve dreams as such. This may be bound up with the fact that, as Ivanka Stoianova has trenchantly observed, Barthes and Havas 'were visibly too unmusical to be able to assert that "In dreams, the sense of hearing is never solicited. The dream is a strictly visual phenomenon"'.<sup>6</sup> It was, of course, from their essay that Calvino drew the

<sup>6</sup> Ivanka Stoianova, 'Luciano Berio: Chemins en musique', *La Revue musicale*, 375–7 (1985), 368.

inspiration for his palace king, a monarch wholly immersed in the atmosphere of a sunless daydream, just as *The Tempest* may first and foremost be a fearful vision visited on Prospero in the leaden midday heat of a Mediterranean day.

This absence is all the more striking in that Berio drew on a three-act Singspiel entitled *Die Geisterinsel* (*The Spirit Isle*) for large sections of his libretto – a libretto which owes many of its ideas and much of its structure to the composer. The text of *Die Geisterinsel* was a collaboration between Friedrich Hildebrand zu Einsiedel (1750–1828), a lord-in-waiting at the court of Duke Carl August of Saxe-Weimar, and Friedrich Wilhelm Gotter, a civil servant from Gotha, best remembered today for his Singspiel texts. Based in turn on Einsiedel's 1778 adaptation of *The Tempest*, it was written in 1790/91 and published posthumously in 1797 under Gotter's name alone. To quote Berio, it is

an uncommonly clever libretto which, even allowing for all the formal conventions of eighteenth-century opera, is capable of keeping a firm hold on all the different strands of this complex Shakespearean metaphor [...] As far as we know, Gotter sent the libretto to Mozart (a few days before the latter's death), and the composer must have been highly impressed by it.<sup>7</sup>

The library in Gotha, however, contains a letter from Gotter to Einsiedel dated 15 December 1791 in which the former writes, 'all the more willingly do I agree to your suggestion that the entire piece be sent to Mozart without delay'.<sup>8</sup> But Mozart had died on 5 December and so never received the libretto.<sup>9</sup> If it impressed anyone, it was not Mozart but Goethe, who, never at a loss for praise, described the text as 'a masterpiece of poetry and language [...] I cannot conceive of anything more musical'.<sup>10</sup> On the basis of this widespread error, Berio could legitimately regard himself as Mozart's executor, a belief which prompted Sylvia Greenberg (Soprano II at the Salzburg première of *Un re in ascolto*) to remark, 'I like these notes, especially when I find them in *Die Zauberflöte*'.

It was in fact as *Die Zauberflöte Part II* that *Die Geisterinsel* was first conceived. Nine years have passed since Prospero and Miranda landed on the island.

<sup>7</sup> Luciano Berio, 'Dialog zwischen dir und mir', 1984 Salzburg Festival Programme Book for *Un re in ascolto*; translated into English by Francesca Franchi and reprinted in the 1989 Covent Garden Programme Book.

<sup>8</sup> Werner Deetjen, 'Der Sturm als Opernlibretto', *Shakespeare-Jahrbuch*, ed. W. Keller, 64 (1928), 77–89.

<sup>9</sup> Gotter's and Einsiedel's libretto was set to music by Friedrich Fleischmann (1766–1798) and first performed in Weimar, at Schiller's instigation, on 19 May 1798, produced by no less a figure than Goethe. The text was first published in 1797 under the title 'Singspiel in drey Acten aus Gotters nachlaß' in vols. 8 and 9 of Schiller's *Die Horen*. It is quoted here from Friedrich Wilhelm Gotter, *Gedichte III* (Weimar, 1802). Carl Ditters von Dittersdorf was originally intended as the composer: the choice of possible composers also included Schwenke, Grétry, Mozart, Wranitzky, Joseph Haydn, Schulz and Himmel. Fleischmann's 1798 setting was followed by versions by Johann Friedrich Reichardt and Johann Rudolf Zumsteeg, both also dating from 1798. The libretto was reprinted in 1889, which suggests its continuing appeal.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Deetjen (see n. 8), 88. From Caroline Schlegel, *Briefe aus der Frühromantik*, ed. Erich Schmidt (Leipzig, 1913), I, 436.

Their guardian spirit, the good fairy Maja, has just died and the wicked witch Sycorax, Caliban's mother, threatens to return during the night – when Prospero is powerless – and reclaim control of the island. Prospero is on the point of warning Miranda, but as soon as he recounts the prophecy, its magic spell begins to take effect and Miranda's eyelids close: 'Enchanted sleep / Doth waft around thee with her gentle breeze.' Miranda: 'I hear the murmur of the ocean's deep / Upon thy lips, like distant sough of trees.' While Miranda sleeps, Ariel commandeers a ship and, at the beginning of Act II, sets Ferdinand on the island, where he immediately falls in love with Miranda and she with him. Prospero insists on testing Ferdinand, who has to chop wood, while Caliban, plotting to overthrow Prospero and lasciviously imagining the rape of Miranda, wins over Trinculo and company. When the curtain rises on Act III, the lovers have been separated and are condemned to counting pieces of coral; the ground opens up and Sycorax – 'to be played by the leading Tragic Actor' – comes into view, followed by Maja – 'played by the leading Tragic Actress' – who, emerging from her tomb, triumphs over the evil spirit in a pantomime that was to provide the model for the orchestra's Air in *Un re in ascolto*. Prospero unites the lovers and peremptorily turns his attackers into stone, whereupon Caliban throws himself into the sea, and the Boatswain whom Prospero had once marooned on the island returns, overcome by remorse, to accompany Prospero back to Milan following the downfall of the city's former tyrant. The work ends with Prospero breaking his magic wand and freeing the spirits who had formerly served him.

## 5

The system of quotations and levels of quotation from which *Un re in ascolto* is made up can best be illustrated by means of a diagram (see Table 1). The two acts of the *azione teatrale* are constructed strictly out of numbers: Aria I – Duetto I – Concertato I, etc. Prospero's arias form the skeletal framework of the structure (only Aria V is given to the Protagonista). The duets and *concertato* numbers (in other words, the crowd scenes) are interpolated between the arias. The joke resides in the contrast between the conspicuous simplicity of the opera's structure and the confusing heterogeneity of its musical styles and levels of action.

It is also easy to illustrate the provenance of the various texts. We are dealing with (1) poetic texts by Italo Calvino alone or (2) working notes jotted down by both authors, together with quotations from (3) Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror* and (4) Gotter/Einsiedel's *Die Geisterinsel*, plus (5) fictitious quotations from a contemporary world in Concertato III. (At the Salzburg première this piece was sung in six different languages.) And lastly there is (6) Shakespeare's *Tempest*, the background against which all this takes place and without a knowledge of which the piece cannot be unravelled. But it is precisely this aspect that is characteristic of our culture, namely, that 'a mere name, thrown into the arena, becomes a play on its own, needing no further word'. During the



Table 1

|       | Prospero | Women | Venerdi | Regista | Chorus etc. | Orchestra |                       |
|-------|----------|-------|---------|---------|-------------|-----------|-----------------------|
| Act I |          |       |         |         |             |           | Aria I                |
|       |          |       |         |         |             |           | Duetto I              |
|       |          |       |         |         |             |           | Concertato I          |
|       |          |       |         |         |             |           | Audizione I           |
|       |          |       |         |         |             |           | Duetto II             |
|       |          |       |         |         |             |           | Concertato con figure |
|       |          |       |         |         |             |           | Serenata              |
|       |          |       |         |         |             |           | Aria II               |
|       |          |       |         |         |             |           | Audizione II          |
|       |          |       |         |         |             |           | Duetto III            |
|       |          |       |         |         |             |           | Aria III              |
|       | Act II   |       |         |         |             |           |                       |
|       |          |       |         |         |             |           | Concertato III        |
|       |          |       |         |         |             |           | Air                   |
|       |          |       |         |         |             |           | Audizione III         |
|       |          |       |         |         |             |           | Aria IV               |
|       |          |       |         |         |             |           | Aria V                |
|       |          |       |         |         |             |           | Concertato IV         |
|       |          |       |         |         |             |           | Aria VI               |
|       |          |       |         |         |             |           |                       |
|       |          |       |         |         |             |           |                       |
|       |          |       |         |         |             |           |                       |

  

|         |       |        |
|---------|-------|--------|
| Calvino | Auden | Gotter |
|---------|-------|--------|

late 1970s and early 1980s, when *Un re in ascolto* was written – and even if, as will become clear later, the work makes a determined attempt to distance itself from that period – the idea of intactness meant taking seriously the brokenness of the work of art; dismemberment had to serve as a dialectic attempt to salvage its vanished aura. In the case of opera, representation on stage (albeit a mere dialectical aid) served as both the aim and purport of the whole. This idea finds expression in a text first published in 1980 by the Austrian novelist Gert Jonke (the first-person narrator, who is himself a composer, has lost his way and now finds himself in the attic of a conservatory, being accused by his brother):

You've not chalked up any more notable successes since then and you've not written anything notable that comes near your orchestral works in quality. The only exception is your opera, to which you've given a highly original title for an opera, namely, *Opera*, and on which you've expended every effort and simply worn yourself out. Of course you've offered the work to all the better opera houses, my brother said, but however highly they valued the piece and however witty the features, articles and reflections that they wrote about it in all the leading music journals, the dramaturges you sent it to were not in a position to accept it for performance. It's unperformable, simply unperformable! What you've depicted and through-composed in this opera are both the impossibility of opera in general and the impossibility of your own opera in particular; you've shown it to be something that can't be depicted, so that to depict such a thing at all is bound up with any number of insuperable difficulties for conventional opera folk, in other words, impossible; as a result, your over-sensitivity has turned into a lack of respect towards both yourself and your art, and the only thing that can help you now, said my brother, is a proper, regular job which stops you thinking about yourself, so that you don't end up destroying yourself!<sup>11</sup>

## 6

But let us return once again to the system of quotations in *Un re in ascolto* and examine it in its overall context. Prospero's arias are by Calvino alone and derive from the tale of the palace king. This part of the original libretto was left untouched by Berio. When the women accuse Prospero in their Audizioni, they quote from Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror*. Similarly, one half of Venerdi's split personality draws on Auden's texts. Sharing little more than his name with Defoe's Man Friday, Venerdi is a composite of the Caliban of *Die Geisterinsel* and Auden's Stage Manager, who speaks the Prologue to the Critics. (Other clearly identifiable influences include the theatre manager in Goethe's *Faust* and the Animal-Tamer in *Lulu*, a work which is also quoted musically.) The characters in the various Concertati also quote from Gotter/Einsiedel's *Geisterinsel*, as do virtually all the rehearsal texts, although it is still not possible to claim with any certainty that the work being rehearsed is therefore *Die Geisterinsel*. The Regista, in turn, either rehearses the performers (using appropriate quotations) or else (as in Duetto II) reflects the creative

<sup>11</sup> Gert Jonke, 'Gradus ad parnassum', *Schule der Geläufigkeit* (Reinbek, 1980), 166.

debate between Berio and Calvino *à la recherche d'une pièce à établir*. Concertato III, which 'is slowly transformed into a spontaneous funeral wake', is a mixture of fragmentary words and quotations from various sources, and represents an attempt to introduce a mundane level into the piece. Prospero himself is also bound to Calvino's text linguistically (but not, thanks to his omnipresence, scenically). At the beginning of Concertato III he quotes the Sailors' closing chorus from *Die Geisterinsel*:

venti e onde, e soli e stelle,  
fate che si raggiunga lo scopo, amici.

[Winds and waves, and suns and stars, / help us arrive at the goal, friends.]

The equivalent lines in Gotter/Einsiedel read:

Winde und Wogen,  
Seid uns gewogen!  
Sonne und Sterne!  
Laßt es uns glücken!

[Winds and waves, / our enterprise bless! / Sun and stars! / Grant us success!]

Even in the 'Mormorio della foresta' of the Tre Cantanti it is clear that Berio aims to create an acoustic stage picture, in this case a forest which is spatially evoked in a stunning and readily imaginable image. The clearest expression of this is the regular surging rhythm of the cry 'Ascolta!' with which the Prospero of *Die Geisterinsel* had sought to prevent his daughter from falling asleep. Here it becomes the magic image of that sea through which the stage – 'la scena è un'isola', according to the stage directions – is first transformed into an island.

By using *Die Geisterinsel* as a source of set pieces in an operatic tradition which, not least because of a lack of suitable scenery, had had to rely on the chorus and orchestra to provide atmospheric or topographical descriptions, Berio merely adds to an existing stock which he uses solely for ironic or contrastive purposes. Substantive motifs are not taken up: the idea of enchanted sleep, for example, would have been an obvious one to develop, not least because of the link which Gotter and Einsiedel had made with a magic threat. This, of course, assumes that *Un re in ascolto* is not to be interpreted in such a way that Prospero succumbs at the end to the magic of noises and that the witch Sycorax is behind the process of increasing unification in the vocal parts (Concertato IV), a process diametrically opposed to Prospero's initial insistence that even the voices of the supporting cast should be multilayered. Sycorax, after all, represents those pre-civilising forces that ruled over the island before Prospero arrived to assert his territorial and cultural claims. One is inevitably reminded here of Berio's credo, 'Music is everything one listens to with the willingness to hear music':<sup>12</sup> one of the many levels of interpretation in *Un re in ascolto* involves the emancipation of noise as an artistic medium, noise

<sup>12</sup> Luciano Berio, *Entretien avec Rossana Dalmonde* (Rome 1981), ed. and trans. M. Kaltenecker (Paris, 1983), 21.

understood as the antithesis of the fully articulated *bel canto* line. Perhaps this is why the last of the Sopranos rushes in as a 'survivor' – the survivor of a vocal culture that has outlived its usefulness as Prospero dozes in dull-witted sleep.

We should not be sitting here now, washed, warm, well-fed, in seats we have paid for [Auden's Caliban informs his audience] unless there were others who are not here; our liveliness and good-humour, such as they are, are those of survivors, conscious that there are others who have not been so fortunate, others who did not succeed in navigating the narrow passage, others [...] from whom, only the other day, Fortune withdrew her hand in sudden disgust.

## 7

But what can *this evening's* audience do to help the Prospero of Berio's and Calvino's *Un re in ascolto*? Should they applaud or not? If the authors' aim was to give operatic expression to the semiotics of listening and to represent on stage that type of listening which (following Barthes and Havas) can engage in a vital – or at least an essential – process of communication with the noises around it, they have achieved that aim in a way that is as impressive as it has been inadequately acknowledged here. *Un re in ascolto* provides a catalogue of those visual and auditory forms of expression which demand or produce that act of decipherment described by Barthes and Havas as the 'second type' of listening. In the process Berio and Calvino offer the ear and, hence, the mind more than lavish provender: they are encyclopædists of the deceptive riddle that has to be deciphered. Even the hidden protagonists of this labyrinthine game, Ariel and Caliban, can derive their names from those of composer and poet. And the same is true of the title of the work: as is clear from Duetto II (which quotes from the correspondence between Berio and Calvino) *re* is associated with Berio (cf. the musical reading of the principal figure plus its retrograde), while the words *in a(s)colto* recall Calvino (a retrograde form which, like the first and last sentence of *Finnegans Wake*, becomes entwined around itself). More striking still, the very title of the work contains its own interpretation, wholly in the spirit of that sixteenth century so beloved of Calvino: listening is a Letter of Uriah, bringing disaster to the person bearing it:

|               |           |           |               |                             |
|---------------|-----------|-----------|---------------|-----------------------------|
| L u c i a n o | B e r i o | I t a l o | C a l v i n o |                             |
| x             | x         | x x x     |               | = Ariel                     |
|               | (x)       |           | x x x x x     | = Caliban                   |
| x             | x         | x x       | x x x x x     | = <i>Un re in a(s)colto</i> |
|               |           |           | x x x x       | = URIA(H)                   |

But by dispensing with action (as Berio himself has maintained), by renouncing characters with any name beyond the generic, and by creating a montage of disparate operatic elements from a long process of historical evolution, have the authors created a form of music theatre which deserves the expression 'music theatre' precisely because its content transcends its form – and does so, moreover, not only within a stage action? I believe the answer is 'no', which is why I

have consistently referred to *Un re in ascolto* as an opera, a term which says nothing about the quality of the work but merely describes it *generically*. The action remains within the four walls of the theatre. Prospero's request for applause – a request which, first voiced on 1 November 1611, breaks through the layers of reality and illusion and which, ingeniously interpreted by Berio and Calvino, became the starting-point for their *azione musicale* — finds no echo in *Un re in ascolto*: we applaud the artists and, with them, the end of an illusion.

(Translated by Stewart Spencer)