

A Drama of Paralanguage: Luciano Berio and Cathy Berberian’s Visage

Misty Choi ✉

Hong Kong College of Technology

✉ Corresponding author: mistychoi@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Received: June 26, 2022

Accepted: August 22, 2022

Published: September 22, 2022

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.48293/IJMSTA-90>

Keywords:

Music and Language

Electroacoustic music

Berio

Cathy Berberian

Studio di Fonologia Musicale

ABSTRACT

This essay examines the paralinguistic features of Luciano Berio and Cathy Berberian’s half-improvised electroacoustic work *Visage* (1961). The peculiarity of the vocal expression in the work is its substantial use of vocalics, such as laughing, sobbing, screaming, and crying, so that the work appears to be a textless drama imbued with emotions, or a “portrait of woman” in all her aspects.¹ While the work invokes the issue regarding whether the incorporation of textless vocal expressions in radiophonic music can be treated as an intersection between music and language, this paper suggests viewing the issue from the perspective of paralanguage and the affective meaning associated with it. Paralanguage refers to the “non-linguistic and non-verbal communication behaviour in human interaction that modifies meaning and conveys a speaker’s feeling and emotion.”² By evoking natural and affective meaning through paralanguage, other electroacoustic materials form various relations with the paralinguistic expressions. The essay concludes that the “pseudo-language” Berio and Cathy were experimenting with was a system to restructure the arbitrary and non-arbitrary relations between sound and meaning, so that conventional semantic meaning is unlocked through the evocation of a “theatre of the mind” in the audience’s imagination.

Copyright © 2022 Author *et al.*, licensed to IJMSTA. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>), which permits unlimited use, distribution and reproduction in any medium so long as the original work is properly cited.

1 Introduction to the paper

The electroacoustic work *Visage* (1961) was Luciano Berio’s last production in the Studio di Fonologia Musicale. The work is a vocal drama constituted of Cathy Berberian’s textless vocal expressions. Voice, text, and drama had been the areas of exploration in Studio di Fonologia Musicale. Even for radio dramas from some decades earlier, as Rudolf Arnheim observed, radio drama music was thought to support a unitary sound culture that would promote sensitivity towards musicality of language and sound in general.³ The blending of noise, language, and music was one of the greatest artistic achievements in radio, in which spoken language and natural noises were elevated to the level of imagination. In the 1950s, Berio complained that although the artistic value of radiophonic music had been established for thirty years, it still lacked an eventual “radiophonic grammar.”⁴ One of the Milan Studio’s original goals, henceforth, was to establish a connection between the production of sound and its organization.⁵ This essay examines how Berio designed a system to express sound and meaning in the electroacoustic

¹ Roger Smalley described *Visage* as “Berio’s entrancing vocal and electronic ‘portrait of woman’ in all her aspect.” Roger Smalley, “Berio *Sinfonia; Visage*. Swingle Singers,” in *The Musical Times*, vol. 111, no. 1524 (Feb., 1970), 166.

² Swati Johar, *Emotion, Affect and Personality in Speech: The Bias of Language and Paralanguage* (Cham: Springer, 2016), 3.

³ Rudolf Arnheim, *Radio*, translated by Margaret Ludwig and Herbert Read (London: Faber & Faber, 1936), 27–51.

⁴ Berio stressed this mission in two essays: “Note sulla musica elettronica” (1957) and “Sulla musica elettronica” (1957), in *Scritti sulla musica* (Turin: Einaudi, 2013), 196, 211.

⁵ Berio, “Prospettive nella musica,” 180–181.

drama, *Visage*, from the perspective of paralinguage and voice. It suggests that restructuring the relations between voice, language, and drama was the composer's proposal of the "radiophonic grammar" to convey meaning through sound.

2 Paralinguage in *Visage*

Berio's goal for *Visage* was to establish "a means to find musical equivalents of linguistic articulations" through musical and acoustic processes, including "sound phenomena that do not fit pre-established codes."⁶ The peculiarity of the work is that a variety of vocal gestures are adopted by Cathy, who "improvise[d] a pseudo-language in order to communicate emotion."⁷ The experimentation of "pseudo-language" attracted the discussion of music and language by Gilles Deleuze, who suggested that Berio create a "secret neuter language" in *Visage* and that the synthesizer as well as the instrument attain equal status to the voice.⁸ Stefano Oliva further explored Deleuze's idea by suggesting that *Visage* illustrates the "deterritorialization of the linguistic elements through the expressive power of the voice."⁹ He particularly connected Deleuze's idea of "faciality" to Berio's belief that voice absorbs and reflects all aspects of language. To Deleuze, language is more than its faciality traits (its surface), but crystallizes all redundancies and recaptures signifying signs.¹⁰ The imagery of face echoes Berio's mention of Roman Jakobson's example on face and language: when a missionary tried to convince a tribesman not to go around naked, the tribesman pointed to the missionary's face and said that he was naked too, since in his culture face is all over the body.¹¹ This example, as Oliva correctly pointed out, is connected to Jakobson's seminal model of the poetic process which, apart from the message itself, also includes addresser, addressee, context, contact and code as literary functions in relation to communication.¹² To Berio, voice explores and absorbs the full face of language—a suggestion of the literal meaning of *visage*. He explained the title "visage" refers to "un volto sonoro, vocale, musicale di una personalità."¹³ Berio even went so far as to probe if music or voice, with their expressivity, could be considered as code of codes [codice di codici] in communication.¹⁴

So, if all aspects in the voice involve language, how does the textless *Visage* (except for the word "parole" in the middle of the work) convey message, or more precisely, what is this "secret neuter language" described by Deleuze? It is notable that the work was banned from broadcasting for its sexual connotation,¹⁵ which means it *does* evoke universal meaning perceived by the audience. Without the use of text, *vocal gesture* comes to the fore in the listening process. This essay suggests examining vocal gesture along with paralinguage in the field of communication. The emotions in Cathy Berberian's vocal expressions such as crying, laughing, and the intonation, stress, and pace of an unknown language are universal so that they can be easily felt by the audience. These nonverbal components are considered as paralinguage in communication science. Discourses on paralinguage began in 1958 after the linguist George Trager's study, the same year as Berio's previous electroacoustic work *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* and three years before *Visage*.¹⁶ Berio was no stranger to this concept. Paralinguistic vocal action was mentioned briefly by the composer in his essay "Del gesto vocale" (1967). He explained that paralinguistic vocal actions are conventionally connected to specific emotions and should be considered as aspects of universal vocal expressions.¹⁷

All voices must contain some paralinguistic properties. Paralinguage refers to vocal qualities including pitch, rhythm, tempo, articulation, and resonance of the voice, i.e. the non-linguistic components in verbal communication. On the other hand, it includes also nonverbal vocalics in daily life such as sighing, belching, swallowing, or snoring etc.¹⁸ Cathy's vocal gestures in *Visage* encompass both types. Her vocal gestures are assimilated into the musical flow in which electroacoustic music has been

⁶ The author's note of *Visage*. <http://www.lucianoberio.org/visage-authors-note> (accessed Aug 24, 2022).

⁷ Cathy's description is cited in David Osmond-Smith, "The Tenth Oscillator: The Work of Cathy Berberian 1958–1966," in *Tempo*, vol. 58, issue 227 (2004), 2–13, citation at 8.

⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis-London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 332.

⁹ Stefano Oliva, "Music and Language? Deleuze, Guattari and Berio on *Visage*," in *La Deleuziana*, no. 10 (2019) "Rhythm, Chaos and Nonpulsed Man," 223–231, citation at 227.

¹⁰ Cited in Oliva, "Music and Language?," 228.

¹¹ Berio, *Interviste*, 268–69; Berio, "Del gesto vocale," 60; Berio, *Remembering the Future* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 50.

¹² Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, edited by Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1960), 350–377.

¹³ Berio, *Interviste*, 281.

¹⁴ Luciano Berio, *Interviste e colloqui*, edited by Vicenzina Caterina Ottomano (Turin: Einaudi, 2017), 59.

¹⁵ Osmond-Smith, "The Tenth Oscillator," 9.

¹⁶ See George L. Trager, "Paralinguage: A First Approximation," in *Studies in Linguistics* no. 13 (1958), 1–12.

¹⁷ Luciano Berio, "Del gesto vocale" (1967), *Scritti*, 58–70, at 65.

¹⁸ See Mark L. Knapp and Judith A. Hall, *Nonverbal Communication in Human Interaction* (Boston, MA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2014), 330.

created to imitate these vocal gestures. According to Cathy, Berio “wanted to work within a parabola from the failure of communication, through trivial conversation, to serious emotion, and ultimately to song.”¹⁹ Sounds that involve diverse sound-meaning relations in this piece include: 1) vocal gestures suggestive of aphasia and other daily vocal gestures; 2) stream of nonsense phonemes resembling a specific language; 3) pure electroacoustic sound; 4) the only meaningful word in the piece (“parole”); and 5) vocalics that are sung in a melodic line as an aria similar to a Jewish prayer.²⁰ These five types of sound are not independent from one another but are often overlaid and expressed in a sound continuum. The sound fragments juxtapose with one another in various ways. For instance, around 8:00, Cathy’s vocalics appears to be close to the synthesized sound before her voice is assimilated electronically. On the other hand, the expressivity of Cathy’s vocal expressions gradually directs the sound narrative into an aria sung in an unknown language from 13:55.

3 “Zero Degree” of Vocal Gesture

Paralanguage is intuitive in nature and occupies a space where writing does not reach—yet it is still rooted in human discourse. The search for natural human nonverbal expressions is reminiscent of the years when Berio explored the Saussurean conception of arbitrariness between signifier and signified.²¹ The Saussurean conception is reflected in *Visage* when the composer challenges the audience with the relations between sound and meaning. The utterance of meaningless phonemes invites us to match them with words we know in existing languages. The only codified expression in the piece—“parole”—is a word familiar to Italian audiences. But the word ironically is rather detached from the context of the wordless vocalics. It also provides little information in terms of the general structure except for its semantic meaning that involves an arbitrary signified-signifier relation. Conversely, the sexual connotation of the vocal situation (around 6:25-7:37) renders the work to “say the unsayable.”²²

Paralinguistic qualities and vocalics reveal a speaker’s emotional state. The intonation, stress, pitch, and pauses add a layer of emotion in Cathy’s “imaginary language,” i.e., nonsense utterances that appear to be a language in the work. Meaning evoked by the vocal gestures in *Visage* is not referential, but affective. The use of paralanguage in *Visage* is consistent with Berio’s semiotic approach: the intuitive expression bypasses the arbitrary connection between signifier and signified that the composer always challenged, and it probes the origin of language and humanity’s instinctive reaction to language. The involuntary voice, as Mladen Dolar describes, is a “pre-cultural, non-cultural voice [that] can be seen as the zero-point of signification, the incidence of meaning, itself not meaning anything, the point around which other—meaningful—voices can be ordered.”²³ This “pre-cultural” voice echoes the use of onomatopoeia in Berio’s previous work *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)*. As suggested by Delia Casadei, the use of onomatopoeia allows *Thema* to embody a place that can be traced back to a primal scene of the origin of language, a place without linguistic restrictions but with an infinite potentiality for signification.²⁴ Even for the Studio di Fonologia Musicale in which *Visage* was created, it was a belief shared by the founding members, including Berio, that by phonological analysis of the vocal and musical expressions in different cultures the relations among them in the ancient time are uncovered.²⁵

The use of the “pre-cultural” vocal gesture to explore the natural intended meaning of sound is not surprising. Paralanguage turns the relation between sound and meaning to the “zero degree,” a state in which the relation is nonarbitrary and natural.²⁶ Based on the paralinguistic elements, new relations are established along with the electroacoustic sound materials. The synthesized sounds are cut into short fragments which form a dialogue with the vocal gestures. These fragments of

¹⁹ Cited in Osmond-Smith, “The Tenth Oscillator,” 8.

²⁰ Berio explained that the last part of *Visage* refers to a Jewish prayer. See Berio’s interview (1993) with Flo Menezes, in Berio, *Interviste*, 286.

²¹ Berio was studying Ferdinand de Saussure’s *Cours de linguistique générale* in 1956. The study of linguistics was particularly related to electroacoustic music, which offered a new musicality by changing the conception and analytical method of music. He later introduced Saussure’s book to Umberto Eco when they collaborated in the radio programme “Omaggio a Joyce—Documenti sulla qualità onomatopoeica del linguaggio poetico”.

²² Osmond-Smith, “The Tenth Oscillator,” 9.

²³ Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2006), 26.

²⁴ Delia Casadei, “Milan’s Studio di Fonologia: Voice Politics in the City, 1955–8,” in *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, vol. 1441, issue 2 (2016), 403–43, citation at 439.

²⁵ Castelnuovo’s letter to Berio in 1956, cited in Scaldaferrì, *Musica nel laboratorio elettroacustico*, 68.

²⁶ Berio borrowed the term “zero degree” in his writing to describe that phoneme, without inherent meaning by itself, is the “zero degree” of language. Luciano Berio, “Eugenetica musicale e gastronomia dell’impegno” (1964), in *Scritti*, 378–386. The idea of “zero degree” of language was proposed by Roland Barthes as a natural and neutral writing free of conventional literary tropes. See Roland Barthes, “The Utopia of Language,” in Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (trans.), *Writing Degree Zero* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 84–88.

electroacoustic music, as described by Berio, are similar to phoneme unit in language, encompassing consonants and vowels.²⁷ By means of variations and comparisons, similar sound fragments relate to those that are familiar to the listener so that meaningful relationships are created among the sound fragments through a nexus. The process is similar to a concentric structure in which the paralinguistic evokes affective meaning, i.e. the “zero degree” of signification, before it forms a network of meaning with other sound materials.

Indeed, Cathy’s vocalics and imaginative language contain a wide variety of consonants and vowels. The sound quality of the vocal gestures is reconsidered as sonic structures, similar to the parameters of electroacoustic music. By breaking down sounds into sonic structures, it is easier to rearrange sonic materials according to their similarities and form a new structure which is primarily directed by sound properties. According to Berio,

Vowels and consonants must no longer be considered as sound and noise [...], but as relatively periodic and relatively complex sonic structures. And it is no longer a question of a text that must be set to music, but rather of specific sound qualities in different association with the meaning. Once the elements are separated, the relationships between sound and meaning can be recomposed: the division between speech and music becomes fictitious.²⁸

The narrative of *Visage* is sound-centered. Through the electroacoustic procedure, the relationships between sound and meaning are redeployed: whether conventional semantics of language (i.e. “parole”), similarities between vocal gestures and electroacoustic fragments, the aphasic situations at the beginning of the work, or the erotic allusions that “say the unsayable.” These “articulated meanings”²⁹ invite the audience to reconsider the arbitrariness of sound and sense and, furthermore, the nature of language.

4 Imagining Meaning

If the vocal gestures are devoid of referential meaning, how can the audience find the work obscene unless the emotive effect equals that evoked from sex? The episode involved is the alternation between Cathy’s moaning, laughing, and crying and the electroacoustic sound that suggests violence, which is suggestive of an obscene drama induced by the audience’s imagination. As Richard Causton suggests, visual aspects of the drama in *Visage* are forced to appear in the audience’s mind alongside their musical experience, personality, and the written program.³⁰ Audiences tend to associate something foreign to them with the things they are familiar with. The electroacoustic sound in the work does not evoke meaning per se unless the listeners connect it to a sound they know, e.g. sounds from daily lives or Cathy’s affective vocal gestures that are so universal. The work is perceived as a drama of sexual violence primarily due to Cathy’s vocalics, which then direct the audience’s imagination through the act of listening. Such an active meaning-seeking process by the audience is considered as the “theater of the mind” by the composer.³¹ Meaning-making takes place after perceiving the paralinguistic qualities of Cathy’s voice. Other sounds are then perceived according to the variations and differences of what the listener is familiar with. These variations and differences constitute episodes of a continuous sound dramaturgy. The “shadow of meanings”³² infuses in layers between something familiar and unfamiliar. Starting from the affective meaning of paralinguistic, audiences seek meaning from relations between human and dehumanized, affective and nonaffective, recognizable and unrecognizable using their imagination. The whole work becomes a dramaturgy through connecting the sound materials. In this way, the work allows indeterminacy in addition to a system of connecting human voice and synthesized sound, which echoes the proposal of open work by Berio’s friend and collaborator Umberto Eco around the same time. In fact, the transmission of message that is constituted by something familiar and unfamiliar is closely related to information science that Eco’s open work originated from.

²⁷ Berio, “Intervento al dibattito Musica sperimentale e musica radicale” (1961), in *Scritti*, 370–377, especially at 371.

²⁸ Berio, “Del gesto vocale,” 64.

²⁹ Berio, “Del gesto vocale,” 64.

³⁰ Richard Causton, “Berio’s ‘Visage’ and the Theatre of Electroacoustic Music,” in *Tempo*, 194 (Oct., 1995), 15–21.

³¹ Luciano Berio, “Testimonies,” in *Nuova musica alla radio: esperienza allo studio di fonologia della Rai di Milano 1954–1959*, edited by Veniero Rizzardi and Angela Ida De Benedictis (Rome: Rai Libri, 2000), 230.

³² The author’s note of *Visage*. <http://www.lucianoberio.org/visage-authors-note> (accessed Aug 24, 2022).

5 Conclusion

Through restructuring sound and meaning, sounds become suggestive in the decoding process, and the conventional semantic meaning of language is unlocked. The meaning of sound depends on the context among other sound fragments and the projection of something familiar by the audience. Therefore, the “pseudo-language” Berio and Cathy were experimenting with is not exactly a language, but rather, a system of relating sound and meaning in a sound continuum, i.e. the “radiophonic grammar.” Berio challenges the audience with the familiar and the unfamiliar in *Visage*—sounds from daily life and their uncanny juxtapositions and imitations. The difference between the familiar and unfamiliar directs the audience to look toward their linguistic knowledge, daily life experience, and emotive experience to interpret “meaning,” which is endowed to the sound by the intuitive comparison with voice.

References

- [1] Barthes, R. (1967). *Writing Degree Zero*. (New York: Hill and Wang).
- [2] Berio, L. (1956). Prospettive nella musica. Ricerche e attività dello Studio di Fonologia Musicale di Radio Milano. In Ida De Benedictis, A. [ed.] (2013), *Scritti sulla musica* (Turin: Einaudi), 180–195.
- [3] Berio, L. (1961). Intervento al dibattito Musica sperimentale e musica radicale. In IDA DE BENEDICTIS, A. [ed.] (2013), *Scritti sulla musica* (Turin: Einaudi), 370–377.
- [4] Berio, L. (1964). Eugenetica musicale e gastronomia dell’ “impegno”. In IDA DE BENEDICTIS, A. [ed.] (2013), *Scritti sulla musica* (Turin: Einaudi), 378–386.
- [5] Berio, L. (1967). Del gesto vocale. In IDA DE BENEDICTIS, A. [ed.] (2013), *Scritti sulla musica* (Turin: Einaudi), 58–70.
- [6] Berio, L. The Author’s Note of *Visage*: <http://www.lucianoberio.org/visage-authors-note> (accessed Aug 24, 2022).
- [7] Casadei, D. (2016). Milan’s Studio di Fonologia: Voice Politics in the City, 1955–8. *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* **144**(2): 403–443.
- [8] Causton, R. (1995). Berio’s *Visage* and the Theater of Electroacoustic Music. In *Tempo* 194(Oct): 15–21.
- [9] Cavarero, A. (2005). *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press).
- [10] Connor, S. (2014). *Beyond Words: Sobs, Hums, Stutters and Other Vocalizations*. (London: Reaktion).
- [11] Deleuze, G., Guattari, F. (1987). *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. (Minneapolis-London: University of Minnesota Press).
- [12] De Saussure, F. (1959). *Course of General Linguistics*. (New York: Philosophy Library).
- [13] Di Luzio, C. (2006). Sanguineti e Berio suono—voce—gesto. In *Poetiche* **VIII**(3): 342–56.
- [14] Di Scipio, A. (2000). Da un’esperienza in ascolto di phonè e logos: Testo, suono e struttura in *Thema* (Omaggio a Joyce) di Berio. In *Il Saggiatore musicale* **2**(2): 325–59.
- [15] Dolar, M. (2006). *A Voice and Nothing More*. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press).
- [16] Eco, U. (1989). *The Open Work*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
- [17] Ida De Benedictis, A. (2004). *Radiodramma e arte radiofonica: storia e funzioni della musica per radio in Italia*. (Turin: EDT srl).
- [18] Jakobson, R., Halle, M. (1960). Closing Statement Linguistics and Poetics. In Sebeok, T. [ed.], *Style in Language* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press), 350–77.
- [19] Karantonis, P. et al. [ed.] (2014). *Cathy Berberian: Pioneer of Contemporary Vocality*. (Surrey: Ashgate).
- [20] Knapp, M., Hall, J. (2021). *Nonverbal Communication in Human Interaction*, 9th ed. (Boston, MA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning).
- [21] Menezes, F. (1990). *Un essai sur la composition verbale électronique Visage de Luciano Berio*. (Modena: Mucchi).
- [22] Novati, M., Dack, J. [ed.] (2009). *The Studio di Fonologia: A Musical Journey 1954–1983 Update 2008–2012*. (Milan: Ricordi).
- [23] Oliva, S. (2019). Music and Language? Deleuze, Guattari and Berio on *Visage*. *La Deleuziana: Online Journal of Philosophy* **10**: 223–231.
- [24] Osmond-Smith, D. (1991). *Berio*. (New York: Oxford University Press).
- [25] Osmond-Smith, D. (2004). The Tenth Oscillator. The Work of Cathy Berberian 1958–1966. In *Tempo* **58**(227): 2–13.

- [26] Ottomano, V. [ed.] (2017). *Luciano Berio: Interviste e colloqui*. (Turin: Einaudi).
- [27] Poyatos, F. (1993). *Paralanguage: A Linguistic and Interdisciplinary Approach to Interactive Speech and Sound*. (Philadelphia: John Benjamins).
- [28] Restagno, E. [ed.] (1995). *Berio*. (Turin: EDT).
- [29] Rizzardi, V., Ida De Benedictis, A. [ed.], (2000). *Nuova musica alla radio: Esperienze allo Studio di Fonologia della RAI di Milano 1954–1959*. (Rome: Rai Eri, 2000).
- [30] Scaldafferi, N. (1997). *Musica nel laboratorio elettroacustico: Lo Studio di Fonologia di Milano e la ricerca musicale negli anni cinquanta*. (Lucca: Libreria Musicale Italiana).
- [31] Stoianova, I. [ed.] (1985). *Chemins en musique*. (Paris: Richard-Masse).