

Participation in the modernist music experience: Assessing the critical reception of Luciano Berio's *Voci* (1984) within the framework of cognitive, psychological, and cultural theories

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Disciplinary background A. During the 1980s and 1990s, several critics described modernist music as too 'difficult' and too 'complex'. This is due to the fact that listeners lost the familiar tonal markers that guided them through their listening of 'pure music', including the recognition of harmonic progressions, motives, themes, and their transformations as well as musical form. This paper examines the cognitive side of music processing to delineate the strands of musical modernism described as 'difficult' and 'complex' in Luciano Berio's *Voci* (for viola and 2 instrumental groups).

Disciplinary background B. To decipher meaning in *Voci*, this study analyses the musical content within the framework of psychologist Patrick Juslin's iconic, intrinsic, and associative code levels. Music critics need to describe and interpret a work within their own conceptual parameters, then evaluate the music within current cultural values, beliefs, and perceptions. To explain the wide-ranging critics' reviews of *Voci* in newspapers and magazines from North America, the United Kingdom and Australia, I draw on reception theory as outlined by cultural theorist Stuart Hall.

Abstract

Ongoing performances and recordings of Berio's *Voci* within the commercial music market is dependent on its overall positive public and critical reception. This paper aims to chronicle and ascertain the significant factors that contribute to the critics understanding/misunderstanding of *Voci*.

Critical reception is inextricably linked with the commoditisation of music. Therefore, critics are vital to how people participate in classical music experiences. Critics not only help fill concert halls, they also help people interpret and understand music both familiar and obscure. A music critic also needs to assume the position of being more knowledgeable, discerning, coherent, and articulate than the average reader. On a commercial level, the critics' role is to supply information to the music consumer without personal biases, prejudices, or cultural intimidation. This study demonstrates that a person's cultural background shapes his/her tastes, preferences, customs, beliefs, and values.

During the 1980s and 1990s, several critics discussed the validity of the modernist aesthetic and disapproved of the stance taken by modernist composers regarding their ambivalent attitudes of their listening and purchasing public. As an example of the open resentment towards modernist music amongst newspaper critics of the mid-late twentieth century, I draw on the scathing commentary of Albert Goldberg (Los Angeles Time) and Donal Henahan (New York Times). Both critics did little to enhance the reception of *Voci* and to shape public opinions on, as well as encourage their readers to participate in the modernist music experience. I argue that the biases and prejudices of Goldberg and Henahan intentionally undermined an objective review of Berio's music to the public. However, by the twenty-first century, attitudes towards the merits of *Voci*, and modernist music in general did change. This paper addresses that divergence. I draw on critics of the early twenty-first century who all present a more balanced and objective viewpoint to the reader.

Interdisciplinary implications. This contribution has important implications for better understanding, interpreting, and evaluating the musical content of *Voci*. This study provides listening strategies to

enhance the reception of *Voci* that may also be applied to other works of the same ilk. A wider acceptance of modernist music from the music listening public will promote continued concert performances and new recordings to ensure a recognised place for Berio's music in the concert repertoire of the twenty-first century.

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