

# The great rememberer

## Eastman celebrates Berio

by Josh Mailman

"Questions, hypotheses, call them that. Keep going, going on, call that going, call that on." So begins Samuel Beckett's novella *The Unnamable* (1958), part of which is quoted in *Sinfonia* (1968), the centerpiece of the Eastman School's festival of Italian composer Luciano Berio's music.

It's strange that Beckett — a playwright and novelist who had little to do with music — could unwittingly provide such an apt description of the engaging experience of listening to, or performing, contemporary music. According to festival organizer Robert Morris, chair of Eastman's Composition Department, Berio has tended to avoid formal prose description of his own music.

"This has made his music not so easy to categorize and possibly dismiss," Morris says. "Ironically, perhaps this is why Berio's music has not been thought to be passé or 'modern.'"

The 77-year-old Italian's music speaks for itself. Berio "has emerged as perhaps the most influential composer in Europe and, to a degree, in North America," Morris says, "much greater than the other major composers of his generation, such as Stockhausen and Boulez."

Much of the appeal of Berio's music rests in its interaction with language. Musicologist Seth Brodsky, one of the speakers scheduled to discuss the composer's work at the April 29 symposium that begins the festival, addresses this interaction. "In a great interview with Umberto Eco, Berio says that language and music 'must each have their autonomy,'" Brodsky says. "But [Berio] then goes on to say that when music sets language, 'music must have the upper hand.' At moments like this, I think you can see a Romantic soul through the avant-garde cracks: a composer who still believes, like Schumann, that music speaks the best secrets of our language; that at the heart of language — and of all activities — there is music."

Quotation of other composers' music is among the most striking and humorous features of Berio's *Sinfonia*, which will be performed May 2. The collage of these quotes forms more than a pastiche; it's a compassionate commentary that cherishes past works of musical and literary culture. This creates a unique situation for the performers.

"When the quotes come, we must make it sound like the original," says Brad Lubman, who will conduct *Sinfonia*. "I think of conducting whichever piece Berio's quoting — Mahler's 2<sup>nd</sup> Symphony, Debussy's *La Mer*, Ravel's *La Valse*, Stravinsky's *Le Sacre*. I don't plan it that way, it just happens."

(Lubman's first experience conducting *Sinfonia* is an amusing tale, in which, on the spur of the moment, he filled in for Berio himself, who was delayed on an airplane all day.)

If *Sinfonia* is a commentary on past music and literary texts, then the uproarious a cappella vocal work *A-Ronne* (from *A to beyond Z*) is a commentary on the sound and history of language. Another piece to be performed during the festival, *Visage*, explores the human voice through electronics. *A-Ronne* (1975), *Visage* (1961), *Korot* for eight cellos (1998), and



Where music and language meet: Luciano Berio.

*Sequenza IXa* (1980) for solo clarinet will be featured in a May 1 concert.

Though many of Berio's greatest works explore the possibilities of quotation, language, the human voice, and electronics, he's also a profound innovator of instrumental composition, as witnessed in his series of solo *sequenzas* for virtually every instrument. Some of these have been expanded, by Berio, into a concerto format.

The May 2 concert features three of his virtuosic, concerto-like works: *Chemins IV* (1975) for oboe and ensemble, *Points on a Curve to Find* (1974) for piano and ensemble, and *Corale* (1981) for solo violin, two horns, and string orchestra.

Berio somehow manages to tap the kinetic energetic possibilities of the solo instrument. "I love the energy of this piece," says Courtney Orlando, the violin soloist in *Corale*, "the energy of the opening bars, the energy between myself and the orchestra, the energy created by the constant motion of the piece"

Berio's music says as much about language as any language can say about music. Yet his music also says much about our musical past.

How will Berio's own music be regarded in the future, though? *New York Times* writer Paul Griffiths, who will speak at the pre-concert talk on May 2, calls Berio "the great rememberer."

Perhaps that is how we will think of Berio and his music in the decades to come. ■

Two concerts will take place as part of the Eastman School of Music's festival of Luciano Berio's work. On Thursday, May 1, the ensembles Ossia and Tarab will perform chamber, vocal, and electronic works at Kilbourn Hall, 26 Gibbs Street, at 8 p.m. On Friday, May 2, concertos and *Sinfonia* will be performed by Musica Nova and Eastman Philharmonia at Eastman Theatre, 26 Gibbs Street, at 8 p.m. (pre-concert talk at 7 p.m.). Both concerts are free. For more info, call 274-1100 or visit [www.rochester.edu/Eastman/html/recentnews/berio\\_festival.html](http://www.rochester.edu/Eastman/html/recentnews/berio_festival.html).

## John Graham and Musica Nova

**CLASSICAL NEW MUSIC** To new music enthusiasts, **John Graham**

is known from days of yore as the guru of that viola voodoo: He premiered and recorded many of the most demanding works by contemporary American composers. On Sunday he premieres Brakel's *Deploration* for electric viola, amplified harpsichord, and computer-generated sound. Berio's *Naturale... on Sicilian melodies* (1985) combines viola and percussion with recordings of fruit and fish vendors from the streets of Sicily. Completing the program are J.S. Bach's viola da gamba sonata in D and Britten's mesmerizing *Lachrymae*, Op. 48 (1950), based on Dowland's *Flow my Tears*.

Two magical works on the program offered by conductor **Brad Lubman**, soprano **Heather Gardner**, and **Musica Nova** are not to be missed: Enter the eerie mystical world of Giacinto Scelsi's *Khoom* (seven episodes of an unwritten tale of love and death in a distant land) (1962) and experience the exploding granite of Webern's *Six Orchestral Pieces*, Op. 6, (1909) from the dawn of the atonal avant-garde. Let's hope the remaining works, Felder's *partial [dis]res[s]uration* and Lieberman's *Concerto for Four Groups*, live up to the magic.

Graham's concert is on Sunday, November 16, at 3 p.m. (\$5); Musica Nova's is on Wednesday, November 19, at 8 p.m. (free). Both are in Kilbourn Hall, Eastman School of Music, 26 Gibbs Street. 274-1100 Rochester

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## Thomas Rosenkranz

**CLASSICAL** Pianist **Thomas Rosenkranz** seems to have taken on the most

fiendish 20th-century piano repertoire as his personal mission; his performance of Rzewski's mammoth and ferocious *The People United Will Never Be Defeated* in Rochester in 2001 was particularly memorable. His playing lit up the hall like fireworks.

Rosenkranz spent last year living in Paris on a Presser Foundation grant studying Olivier Messiaen's piano cycle *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant Jesus* with the composer's wife, Yvonne Loriod. Though Messiaen composed *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant Jesus* (Twenty Views of the Infant Jesus) relatively early in his career, in 1944, it remains not only one of Messiaen's great masterpieces, but also one of the great masterpieces of the 20th century.

In *Vingt Regards*, Messiaen created a rich musical tapestry. So don't let the religious title turn you off if you're not religious. Not only does Messiaen weave the sacred sounds of plainchant and church bells into the fabric but also the exotic secular sounds of palindrome rhythms, Indian rhythms, colorful harmonies, and bona fide bird calls. Monday evening presents a chance to acquaint yourself with Messiaen's masterpiece as Rosenkranz performs eight works from *Vingt Regards* in a solo recital.

The concert is on Monday, May 3, at Christ Church, 141 East Avenue, 7:30 p.m. Free. 454-3878, [www.thomasrosenkranz.com](http://www.thomasrosenkranz.com).

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