

Placanica, Francesca

B. M., Università della Calabria, Italy, 2003  
M. M., University of Newcastle upon Tyne, UK, 2005  
M. M. Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX, 2007

Cathy Berberian: Performance as Composition

Advisor: Professor Donna Mayer-Martin

Master of Music conferred December 15, 2007

Thesis completed October 15, 2007

Cathy Berberian is widely known as the “Muse of Darmstadt” because of her interpretations and premieres of the avant-garde school’s vocal output. Her connection with avant-garde music is also acknowledged because of her marriage to Luciano Berio and her role as a model for his early vocal works.

The couple was based in Milan from 1950 to the early Sixties (the time of their separation), a period in which the city was experiencing a feverish cultural and musical awakening after the dark years of Fascism and World War II. Milan, with its *Studio di Fonologia Musicale*, became the obligatory stop for composers traveling from Europe and the United States to Darmstadt. Composers often stopped over the couple’s home to share projects and thoughts about the “New Music.” Berberian not only assisted Berio in his progressive acquaintances with members of the Darmstadt School, but the American singer also was the irreplaceable linguistic bridge that allowed the intellectual exchange between American and European composers to happen. Furthermore, her vocal and histrionic skills also inspired composers, such as John Cage, to eventually tailor new compositions based on her peculiar voice.

In most cases, Berberian was an active element of the compositional process, putting her voice, body and mind at the composer’s service. A convinced believer in the possibilities of the human voice, she carried on the theory of “New Vocality,” which extended the boundaries of vocal production,

introducing noises and sounds not traditionally classifiable as musical. Berberian looked at performance as an extraordinarily intense creative act, and invited modern singers to train towards a fully artistic experience on stage, incorporating in their performances dance, theatre and visual arts. Her intent was to lead a new generation of interpreters in becoming the “composers of their own performance,” looking at it as “an open work.”

Although Berberian’s contribution to the musical milieu of the second half of the century is generally recognized, the specificity of her research and the impact of her path-breaking performance practices are not totally acknowledged. Previous scholars have discussed the works that she premiered, but they conceive Berberian as the mere vehicle of the completed work, therefore neglecting her unique contribution to the compositional process. On the contrary, recent gender scholarship has attempted to rescue Berberian from this secondary role by crediting her in the authorship of many compositions. Although this latter perspective is certainly legitimate, neither approach considers the multifaceted nature of her contributions.

My thesis offers a more empirical approach to Cathy Berberian’s achievements in music. I have based research on unedited primary sources currently preserved in Berberian’s private archive (Cathy Berberian Los Angeles Archive, CBLA), and maintained by Berberian’s daughter, Cristina Berio. These materials, to which I gained access with Berio’s kind consent, are part of a huge collection containing hundreds of professional and personal letters, original scores, and journals and notebooks, in addition to a lengthy interview released by Berberian for biographical purposes in 1981 and recorded on twenty-three tapes. With the help of these materials, such as handwritten annotations, sketches, and drawings, I have been able to observe Cathy Berberian’s “compositional process” of her performances, and trace her conception of the performing act as a “total art work.” This is the intent with which she addressed both newly composed pieces and her interpretation of early and classical music. I believe

that my study opens another possible path toward the evaluation of Berberian as an independent creative musician.