



A SINFONIA

Preparing Luciano Berio's whirling tour-de-force for amplified singers and orchestra

KENDRA BROOM, mezzo-soprano, is a student in the opera program and one of the eight singers for *Sinfonia*.

CONNER GRAY COVINGTON, conducting fellow, prepared the orchestra before the arrival of guest conductor Ludovic Morlot.

ZACHARY MOWITZ is principal cello of the Curtis Symphony Orchestra.

SUSAN NOWICKI, vocal studies faculty and pianist, prepared the vocal scores for rehearsal and coached the singers.

PHOTOS BY PETE CHECCHIA

One year ago, as Curtis planned a performance season informed by the groundbreaking Darmstadt school of composition, a tantalizing idea surfaced: Could Curtis present Luciano Berio's *Sinfonia*?

This kaleidoscopic, complex masterwork is rarely performed for a reason: It's tough to put together. Singers join the orchestra, offering sung and spoken texts from many sources—in various languages—that overlap and tumble into one another. The orchestra parts are just as complex, drawing on a multiplicity of musical styles and inspirations. Add amplification of the voices and two different venues, and the planning for preparation, rehearsal, and performance could easily become overwhelming.

So Curtis embraced the challenge.

From research last summer, to coaching and rehearsing singers through the fall, to putting it all together with the orchestra in January, four individuals deeply involved in the preparation reflect on the eight-month-long process that led to performances at Verizon Hall in Philadelphia and Carnegie Hall in New York, as part of the Darmstadt all-school project.

SUSAN NOWICKI Confidence is that feeling you have before you fully understand the situation.

Last spring I eagerly accepted the task of preparing eight singers for the *Sinfonia* performance. I have prepared and performed numerous contemporary pieces in the course of my career, I am a big fan of Berio, I was familiar with the piece in a general way, and I felt up to the challenge.

My confidence quickly evaporated as details became clear. A rumored piano reduction was, sadly, nonexistent. Vocal parts would not be available until months after I wanted to start rehearsals with the singers. The guest conductor would be arriving three days before the concert. And look what else was on the program: Mahler One! Expletives flowed!

As I took several deep, cleansing breaths, I assessed my available resources: a full score that often required a magnifying glass to decipher the complex detail of Berio's idiosyncratic and inconsistent notation; several theoretical analyses of the piece; and multiple wonderful recordings (though it would take several attempts to follow along without getting lost). The density of the score also frustrated my attempts to recreate much of it at the piano.

It was becoming clear that this was the biggest challenge I'd ever faced. How would I present a reasonable representation of the piece, keep everyone on track, and still have enough brain space to hear everything that was going on?

Solution: Delegate! I contacted my wonderful colleague and fellow vocal studies coach, Donald St. Pierre. We planned to split up the score to create an ad hoc, two-piano version to accompany rehearsals beginning in the fall. But what about materials for the singers?

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Learn about performances related to the all-school project at

www.curtis.edu/Darmstadt



IA DIARY



With the gracious assistance of the Center for Berio Studies, we had vocal parts in hand by the time September arrived.

KENDRA BROOM

I first heard that I would be singing Berio's *Sinfonia* during my first week at Curtis. I distinctly remember running down the hall, full of excitement, to pick up my score—and then feeling increasingly confused as I turned the pages. The piano reduction was missing, there were musical notations I had never seen before, and the text looked unintelligible. I was apprehensive, but I soon understood that *Sinfonia* is a work of art that becomes more and more rewarding the deeper you delve into it.

I decided that I would need to analyze the text and music, to grasp the form as a whole and find coherence within the piece. The music appears nebulous at first, but it's very structured and often grounded in third-based chords. Similarly, the texts have been carefully interlaced. The movements are united through themes of water, death, and resurrection—with excerpts from Claude Lévi-Strauss's anthropological study *Le cru et le cuit* ("The Raw and the Uncooked") on the origins of water and Samuel Becket's *The Unnamable*, with its nameless narrator trapped in a state of conscious mortality. At the end of the first movement, we repeat the words "héros tué" (killed heroes), then segue to the second movement's tribute to Martin Luther King, comprising phonetic sequences based on his name. The third movement is built on the Scherzo of Mahler's Second Symphony, which originated in a song about St. Anthony's sermon to the fish, and is full of musical quotes: Debussy's *La Mer*, the drowning scene from Berg's *Wozzeck*, Ravel's *La Valse*. All of the text has been chosen with great purpose, and discovering those details made this project more exciting than I would have dreamed of.

SUSAN NOWICKI

Initial rehearsals in the fall were painstaking. The singers arrived abuzz about the prospect of embarking on this adventure. After some explanations of notation, we delved into the opening of the piece: an *cappella* entrance on an eight-note polychord that leads to a second chord of four notes. These two chords form the harmonic foundation of the first movement, and they recur in the fifth movement as well. It was not long before eyes began to glaze over, and everyone left the rehearsal somewhat shell-shocked. (They still recall the time we spent an hour on two pages.)

The strategy was to find opening pitches from the orchestra's tuning A. I knew we were on our way when I played an A at the beginning of a rehearsal of the women; their nonchalant body language said it all as they leaned back in their chairs, legs crossed, heads tilted, and

Above from left: *Sinfonia* singers Kendra Broom and Anastasiia Sidorova, fitted with microphones, rehearse with the Curtis Symphony Orchestra under conducting fellow Conner Gray Covington.

A page of the *Sinfonia* score

Susan Nowicki coaches the *Sinfonia* singers, joined by Conner Covington and pianist Donald St. Pierre.

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—Kendra Broom

ALL-SCHOOL PROJECT



nailed the opening chord—no sweat. On another occasion, as we began to push a section towards the very fast performance tempo, the combination of concentration and mounting elation was palpable. There were even some smiles as we cruised toward the final double bar.

KENDRA BROOM During the first few weeks, we discussed performance practice, and Susan Nowicki, our fearless leader, walked us through some of the more difficult passages. The fifth movement, in particular, includes a breakneck stream of consonants that we very slowly brought up to speed. Throughout the process, we layered individual and group rehearsals, both to maintain the clarity of the eight voices and to learn to blend our instruments together. On any given day, we could be rehearsing alone, in pairs, within vocal group (altos and sopranos), or as a full ensemble. I remember a December rehearsal with the four-hand, two piano reduction that Susan and Don St. Pierre had worked tirelessly to construct, Conner Covington as our conductor, and all eight voices singing through the third movement, almost up to tempo. It was the first moment when I thought, “Okay, we can do this.”

Then I remembered that we still had to incorporate the microphones.

CONNOR COVINGTON *Sinfonia* is probably the most dense, complex piece that I’ve ever studied and conducted. Confronting it for the first time was quite daunting, but I began by reading all that I could find on the piece. I found some resources online in which Berio himself discusses some of his ideas and vision for the piece, and these helped me understand his musical language and his fascinating choices of texts for the singers.

Needless to say, trying to wrap my head around the complexity of the score and struggling to discern the meaning behind the piece was a challenging task. In November I joined the singers’ rehearsals with their wonderful coaches, Susan Nowicki and Don St. Pierre, which gave me an opportunity to ease myself into the piece with a smaller group rather than having to try to lead the process with the full orchestra from the beginning.

ZACHARY MOWITZ Before the Thanksgiving break I had taken a Berio score and my part from the orchestra library to look over in my extra bit of free time. I play a good deal of chamber music with Abi Fayette, this year’s concertmaster, and she mentioned that it would be good to start trying to understand the challenges we would be up against in a few months’ time, presenting *Sinfonia* alongside the Mahler First Symphony.

She couldn’t have given me better advice. I didn’t actually start practicing the part right away. Instead, listening and slowly figuring out how to decipher the score gave me a great head start on internalizing this wonderfully complex work. The most important thing I accomplished during this score study was simply finding what I could rely on rhythmically throughout the piece—just so I would always have something to fit the cello part into, especially if we ever got lost. (I soon discovered how much I had been overlooking the percussion in the orchestra.) With this kind of work behind me, going into the first

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—Susan Nowicki



rehearsal I felt less frightened than curious about what this amalgamation of instruments, sounds, and styles would sound like from within the orchestra.

SUSAN NOWICKI My original goals were to have a full run-through of the piece with the singers before the holidays, and to have one rehearsal with microphones. Neither happened, but I felt optimistic in the final weeks of preparation, privileged to be working with these versatile singers who produce great results no matter what comes their way, and thrilled to take part in the production of this monumental piece.

CONNOR COVINGTON In January, as school resumed after the holidays, I led separate brass and string sectionals before putting it together with the entire orchestra. Thanks to the intense preparation, the first full orchestra rehearsal went surprisingly smoothly. The singers observed without participating, to get a sense of how their parts fit in to the whole. At the next rehearsal the singers joined in, and the process continued to progress at a solid pace. Adding microphones for the singers and achieving the right volume levels for them created some new issues, but these were solved relatively quickly.

ZACHARY MOWITZ Somewhat to my astonishment, the orchestra quickly pulled things together in reduced tempi, and when the singers joined us, they knew their parts so well that it helped us put everything together. The real struggle came in the performance halls. We not only had to adjust to an acoustic different than that of the cozy Gould Rehearsal Hall, but we also had to adapt to two very different halls right after one another—with one full rehearsal in Verizon Hall and only a two-hour “sound check” in Carnegie Hall, only 30 minutes of which could be spent on *Sinfonia*. At this point, curiously enough, all the work we did on the Mahler kicked in to influence the Berio.

Our guest conductor, Ludovic Morlot, arrived three days before the first performance, and the first thing he said in rehearsal was this, more or less: Play the Mahler as you would chamber music; listen, listen, listen, and pay little attention to me. But for Berio, find a super-awareness of rhythm, both internally and in your connection to the baton. The more we rehearsed and the more rhythmic precision and confidence we gained, the more I felt a new level of listening within the orchestra, because we weren't simply counting our beats but were aware of an overarching texture, albeit a very fluid and erratic one, that we were each a part of in a very integral way.

And so, by the time we got to Carnegie and Mr. Morlot raised his baton for that first wondrously enigmatic bar, I found myself moving my chair out so I could see Abi on the other side—just as I might in one of our quartet performances in Field Concert Hall—preparing for an endeavor that would take all the sensitivity and hyper-awareness I could muster. ◊

Above from left: Susan Nowicki coached the *Sinfonia* singers from a complex score combining a two-piano reduction of the orchestra parts with the eight vocal lines.

Conner Covington led rehearsals of the orchestra and singers in January, leading up to the arrival on campus of guest conductor Ludovic Morlot. Here he confers with concertmaster Abigail Fayette.

Ludovic Morlot conducts *Sinfonia* at Carnegie Hall. Principal cello Zachary Mowitz is to the conductor's right.

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—Zachary Mowitz