

Berio's *Duetti per due violini*: An introduction

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ABSTRACT

This article is the summary of a workshop on the violin duets of Béla Bartók and Luciano Berio, and the pedagogical implications of the works. Bartók's *Forty-Four Duos* are based on folk melodies, and in this workshop, we explored how the text of certain melodies are recreated using tone-painting in the music. Luciano Berio's 34 *Duetti* were inspired by the *Duos* of Bartók, and each duet focuses on a specific technique or concept in twentieth-century music. Like Bartók did with his *Duos*, Berio also intended his pieces to be performed by children as well as professionals. In addition, Berio's duets are each inspired by a person, story, or event. All duets refer to a person with their surname, including Béla [Bartók] (no. 1), Pierre [Boulez] (no. 14), Edoardo [Sanguinetti] (no. 20), Vinko [Globokar] (no. 22), Igor [Stravinsky] (no. 28) or Lorin [Maazel] (no. 33). In this workshop we explored how Berio recreates these inspirations in his music.

KEYWORDS

Bartók, Luciano Berio, violin duets, music pedagogy

1. PREFACE

In September 2017 I was honored to be invited by László Vikárius to give a workshop on Luciano Berio's *Duetti* at the International Musicological Symposium "Bartók and the Violin" in Budapest. At the time I had already been working for more than three years on a project

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involving Berio's *Duetti*, which included a CD, masterclasses, workshops, and concerts.¹ Shortly after my presentation in Budapest, László approached me about writing this article. Although I am flattered and grateful to have the opportunity to present my work here in written form, I feel the need to stress that I am first and foremost a violinist, and do not come from a musicological background. My approach to the *Duetti* has always been that of a performer, and my thoughts and research on the pieces have always been done from the point of view of someone who must, in the end, interpret them. I therefore ask the reader to excuse an approach which always has its end goals in the practical sides of performer rather than that of the scholar. However, since I have developed the highest respect for these pieces through the years, and have given now countless performances of them with well over 100 different violinists, I did think it would be worthwhile to share some of my experiences and thoughts on what is in my opinion some of the best violin music with pedagogical purposes we have.

2. HISTORY OF COMPOSITION

Luciano Berio's 34 *Duetti per due Violini* were written in the period from 1979 to 1983. The pieces stem from a conversation the composer had one evening with violinist and teacher Leonardo Pinzauti, in which Pinzauti lamented that "other than those [duets] of Bartók (BB 104), there are not enough violin duets today."² Berio proceeded to write 34 duets in the following four years, and although these duets are clearly in Berio's own style and idiom, they are much indebted to Bartók's own set of 44 violin duets.

Much like Erich Doflein's request for Bartók to write "real music" aimed for young students,³ Berio's duets are short musical masterpieces also intended "for school violin teaching."⁴ Each duet focuses on one or two musical and technical challenges, and serves to introduce twentieth-century musical concepts to students. Some duets (e.g., nos. 1, 12, 24) challenge the students by introducing different manners of sound production to the student such as *sul ponticello*, *sul tasto*, *aspro*, or "*pppp quasi senza suono*." Other duets (nos. 26 and 33) involve complicated left hand pizzicato techniques. Still others (nos. 2 and 4) present rhythmic challenges of mixed meters in various combinations of counting (e.g., $\frac{3}{8} + \frac{3}{8} + \frac{3}{8}$, or $\frac{1}{16} + \frac{1}{16}$, or $\frac{1}{16} + \frac{1}{16} + \frac{1}{16}$).

Since each duet is very short, violinistic techniques are used as a basis for the musical motives of the piece, the structural development of a duet, or modes of expression in a duet. This means that finding musical expression in these techniques is in fact what gives character to the whole piece. In Duet no. 26 for example, the second violin combines the open A and D strings, with a left-hand pizzicato A and a drone D in the right hand (Example 1). This serves as the basis for the accompaniment and evokes the basic sound world of the duet. These sounds can be thought

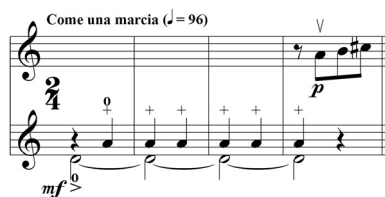
¹László VIKÁRIUS, CD liner notes to Bartók, *Sonata for Solo Violin, 44 Duos*, Barnabás KELEMEN & Katalin KOKAS, trans. by Richard ROBINSON (Budapest: BMC Records, 2006).

²Luciano BERIO, *Duetti per due violini (author's note)*. Retrieved 20 December 2017 from <http://www.lucianoberio.org/node/1371?237685848=1>. See further Universal Edition work introduction to Berio's *Duetti per due violini*, retrieved 29 January 2018 from <https://www.universaledition.com/composers-and-works/luciano-berio-54/works/duetti-per-due-violini-2177>.

³VIKÁRIUS, CD liner notes to Bartók: *Sonata for Solo Violin, 44 Duos*.

⁴Luciano BERIO, "Preface," in *Duetti per due violini (1979–1983)* (Wien: Universal Edition, 1982; UE 17757).





Example 1. Duet no. 26, second violin part, bb. 1–3



Example 2. Duet no. 4, bb. 1–6

of to imitate a rosined wheel and vibrating bridge of a hurdy-gurdy, or perhaps, a tin drum and fiddle. Finding the right sound for this will make or break a performance of this duet. In Duet no. 4, extreme rhythmic complexities ($\frac{3}{8} + \frac{3}{8} + \frac{3}{8}$ and $\frac{3}{8} + \frac{3}{8}$ in the first 2 bars) are actually heard by the listener as an imitation of a folk-like manner of rubato. This gives the audience a very different experience than the performer – while the performer is doing his or her best to count a very precise notation, the audience instead hears an expressive rubato in a very simple melody (Example 2).

3. THEATER

Central to any study of the *Duetti* is Berio's idea of theater in music. He speaks of his theatrical ideal as bringing together opposite ideas, and having these opposites combine to make a third idea.⁵ For Berio, the ideal theatrical element in music consists of bringing together these opposites in order to create a scene which had not existed before. In an interview with Rosanna Dalmonte, he speaks directly of this, saying that:

[I]t is that of taking two simple and banal behaviors, such as “walking in the rain” and “typing” and putting them together in such a way that they transform and produce by morphogenesis a third behavior, which we don't understand because we have not seen it before and because it is no longer only the combination of two banal behaviors.⁶

⁵Luciano BERIO, *Intervista sulla musica*, a cura di Rossana DALMONTE (Bari: Giuseppe Laterza & Figli, 1987), 158.

⁶BERIO, *Intervista sulla musica*, 113.



It is therefore imperative to a successful performance of these works that each voice sounds individually, in its own character. Each line should have its own individual integrity, with the combination of two lines creating a third expression, audible to the audience. Duet no. 24 is perhaps a perfect example of this – Berio asks the second violin to play an accompaniment line *sempre molto al ponticello*, whereas the first violin plays a Sicilian folk song melody *ordinario*, but *con sordino*. The combined effect of *sul ponticello* in the second violin and *con sordino* in the first violin suggests to the audience the sound of an old scratchy record playing softly in the distance.

Throughout the entire duet cycle Berio frequently asks for the two players to play in completely different manners from each other. He asks for differences in tone color, dynamics, articulation, and tempo. In Duet no. 1, the first violin begins *sul tasto* while the second violin begins *sul ponticello*. In Duet no. 17, both violinists are given different dynamics for the majority of the piece – the second violin is asked to play *mp sempre e impassibile*, while the first violin (playing a much more melodic and ornamented line) is marked *pp con sordino* (Example 3). Many duets call for a mute to be used by only one player (e.g., nos. 13, 17, and 24). In Duet no. 2, the second violin plays an accompaniment rhythm which imitates a drum-like dance of $[\frac{3}{8} + \frac{3}{8} + \frac{3}{8}]$, while the first violin plays a melody which phases against that, sounding as a $[\frac{2}{8} + \frac{3}{8} + \frac{3}{8} + \frac{3}{8}]$. And in Duets nos. 22 and 27, the first and second violin are given different metronome markings from each other. Even when writing in more traditional manners in the *Duetti*, Berio still adheres to this principle of independence. In some cases, what would naturally be considered to be the “accompaniment” line is instead marked by Berio to be played much louder than the “melody.”

This theatrical ideal is also one of the central ideas separating Berio’s music from earlier classical music which might be more familiar to young students. In music of Mozart, Schubert, or Mendelssohn, for example, prominent melodies are usually enhanced by accompaniment lines and textures which exist to serve the melody. However, in the *Duetti*, as in many other modern works, it is not always clear which line is melody and which is accompaniment. In Duet

molto espressivo e come parlando
sempre alla punta e vibrando solo ad ogni cambio d'arco.
 (con sord.)

pp
a metà dell' arco

mp *sempre e impassibile*

Example 3. Duet no. 17, bb. 4–5⁷

⁷BERIO, *Duetti per due violini* (1979–1983).



no. 17, a D-major scale played by the second violin, although less melodically interesting and less expressively performed, will by definition of the way it is written be the more prominently heard voice. The independence, individuality, and combination of voices are what give expression to the piece. This idea of melodic and rhythmic independence is central to much twentieth-century music and can also be compared to the loss of point perspective in twentieth-century painting. Whereas in earlier periods of art, the viewer was asked to direct their focus towards one point on the canvas, with the loss of perspective the viewer is instead invited to see the entire canvas as a field, to see any point as a possible central focal point (as in cubism, for example), and can therefore find central points of expression and meaning on any point of the canvas.

4. INSTRUCTION FOR PERFORMERS

Berio's original intention was to have his 34 duets be "volume 1" of a multi-volume "kaleidoscope,"⁸ with each set consisting of at least 20 duets, although he was not able to realize this goal.⁹ He intended these pieces for study by young students and had specific ideas about their performance, saying that

Some ... can be played by beginners, others ... by more advanced pupils, together with their teachers ... If the Duets are performed in front of an audience, it is preferable to involve a large number of players of different age and proficiency. All the players (at least 24) will be seated on stage: Each pair will stand up only when it is its turn to play. There should not be any pause between each duet. In a concert performance Duet 20 (EDOARDO) should be played last by all performers under a conductor.¹⁰

Duet no. 20 also contains seven brief solos in the first violin part; Berio asks that each of these solos is played by a different performer.¹¹

In my workshops and performances I have divided the difficulty of each duet part into easy, intermediate, and difficult categories. In some cases both the first and the second violin parts fall into the same category (no. 28, for example, is "easy" for both players, whereas no. 33 is "difficult" for both). In other duets one part is significantly more difficult than the other (no. 3 has a difficult first violin part and an "intermediate" second violin part; no. 17 has an "intermediate" first violin part and an "easy" second violin part). One can assume that the age of the performer should be related to the difficulty of the duet – in other words, the "easy" duets should be played by young students on smaller violins, the "intermediate" duets by more advanced students, and the "difficult" duets by teachers, professionals, and the most advanced students. I have recorded and performed the duets in this manner and I have found that there is indeed a musical logic to this approach.

⁸BERIO, *Duetti per due violini* (author's note).

⁹Universal Edition work introduction to Berio's *Duetti per due violini*.

¹⁰BERIO, "Preface," in *Duetti per due violini* (1979–1983).

¹¹BERIO, "Preface," in *Duetti per due violini* (1979–1983).



However, Berio does not state the age or level a student needs to be in order to play specific duets. This means that although many of the easiest duets do benefit in their expression from being interpreted by young students playing on smaller violins, equally valid interpretations of these “easy” duets can be given by older, more advanced players. One of the most interesting aspects of these pieces is how different they can sound when played by different performers. In Duet no. 17, the second violinist plays almost exclusively a one octave D-major scale for the entire piece. It goes without saying that this duet has an entirely different emotional effect if the second violinist is a child playing on a small violin or a seasoned performer playing on a full-sized instrument. And the pedagogical intentions of this duet remains regardless of age or level of performer – indeed, we violinists continue to practice and search for improvements in our D-major scales for our entire lives!

Berio’s compositional choices in these pieces and his instructions for their performance imply that one of the central ideas behind a performance of the *Duetti* is a feeling of equality among all players. Although some performers might be more experienced than others, each violinist contributes a sound and interpretation which is unique in a performance of the entire duet cycle. This variety and individuality of sound add to the flow of dramatic tension in a complete performance of the cycle. The sound created by a seven-year-old violinist playing on a 1/4 sized violin is necessarily different from that of a professional with over 20 years of performing experience playing on a full-sized instrument. Neither player is capable of imitating the other, and any attempt to do so would sound contrived. The best that young and old players can do in these works is to strive for the most convincing interpretation of which they are capable.

5. DEDICATIONS

Each duet is named after a friend, colleague, or composer whom Berio admired. Of the dedications, he states:

[B]ehind every duet there are personal reasons and situations: with BRUNO (Maderna), for instance, there is the memory of “functional” music which we often composed together in the fifties; MAJA (Pliseckaja) is the transformation of a Russian song, whereas ALDO (Bennici) is a real Sicilian song; PIERRE (Boulez) was written for a farewell evening: it develops from a small cell of his ... *Explosante fixe* ...; GIORGIO FEDERICO (Ghedini) is in memory of my years at the Conservatory in Milan. And so on ... These Duetti are for me what the *vers de circonstance* were for Mallarmé: that is, they are not necessarily based on deep musical motivations, but rather connected by the fragile thread of daily occasions.¹²

Following, I have outlined some of my thoughts surrounding Berio’s source materials for the dedications to show how varied this “fragile thread of daily occasions” can be.

Duet no. 1 – BELA

An obvious place for the cycle to begin, since Berio almost certainly chose this dedication as an homage to Bartók’s *Forty-Four Duos* for two violins. Although I have found no direct quote of Bartók’s music in this duet, the opening rising and falling of a second (D¹–E¹) in the second violin is

¹²BERIO, *Duetti per due violini* (author’s note).



perhaps reminiscent of the rising second (E^1 – F^1) in Bartók's Duet no. 10 ("Ruthenian Song"), Berio's use of the first violin's circling around the modes of E and B is reminiscent of Bartók's same duet. And the bi-modality of Berio's duet is probably influenced by Bartók's Duet no. 11 ("Cradle Song"), a very important work in Bartók's set, since it is the first in that set where both violins play in a different modality, and one of the few in which Bartók asks the first and second violin to play at different dynamic levels (*mezzoforte* and *piano*, respectively).

Duet no. 6 – BRUNO

Berio says that this duet has "the memory of 'functional' music which we [Berio and Bruno Maderna] often composed together in the fifties." Berio and Maderna often collaborated on television and radio music in the 1950s in order to earn extra money, which by his own account was always lacking at this point in his life. He speaks of this time in an interview with Rossana Dalmonte in which he and Maderna were working together.

We started writing scores for whatever radio or television program, director, or theater thought to have needed us . . . we collaborated on "functional" scores at an astronomical speed. Bruno, already plump, seated at my Milanese table, occupied himself with the strings and "fixed sounds" (which is what he called the guitar, piano, celesta, and glockenspiel in the orchestra). I, on my feet at his back, occupied myself with the wind instruments. We understood each other so well that it was enough to give one glance at the other's pencil to instantly understand where he was going. We were always late with our deadlines and I remember one astonished copyist watching us finish a composition together in this way. He left with his mouth half open, wide eyes, and blank stare: he resembled a caricature of Ghedini. What I wanted to say is this: in these occasions of absolute musical cynicism, we always found a way of searching for something, experimenting, and naturally, of learning something.¹³

The functional music is not only represented in the traditional harmonies, phrasing, and structure of this duet, but the memory of them writing at "astronomical speed" in which they composed, the idea of them running back and forth to glance at the scores with which they were busy, is reflected in the back-and-forth *crescendi* played by the two violins in the opening of this duet.

Duet no. 10 – GIORGIO FEDERICO

In 1945 Berio enrolled at the Conservatory in Milan, and three years later began studying composition with Giorgio Federico Ghedini. Ghedini's style was very much in the Neo-Baroque tradition, and as a composition teacher he became one of the "major influences of Berio's early career."¹⁴ This duet is said by Berio to be a memory of his conservatory days in Milan. Ghedini's own Neo-Baroque influences are here reflected by the chorale-like structure of this piece. The "Baroque" inspiration for the piece is perhaps even more accentuated by the focus on the bass line which is marked to be played stronger than the melody line. One can almost imagine Ghedini telling his students that the bass line is the basis and most important line in all Baroque music, and deserves special attention.

Duet no. 17 – LEONARDO

The inspiration for this duet stems from Berio's conversation with Leonardo Pinzauti lamenting the lack of good violin duets, other than those of Bartók.¹⁵ Pinzauti's work as a violin teacher probably

¹³BERIO, *Intervista sulla musica*, 68–69.

¹⁴David OSMOND-SMITH, *Berio*, Oxford Studies of Composers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 4.

¹⁵BERIO, *Duetti per due violini (author's note)*, cf. also Universal Edition work introduction to Berio's *Duetti per due violini*.



inspired Berio to make this one of the simplest duets for the second violin (the student’s part). Berio underlined this point by having the second violin part consist almost entirely of a D-major scale up and down from D¹ to D², five times. It was indeed of this duet that Berio was speaking when he said:

Very often, as can be heard, one of the two parts is easier and focuses on specific technical problems, on different expressive characters and even on violin stereotypes, so that a young violinist can contribute, at times, even to a relatively complex musical situation from a very simple angle – the playing of a D-major scale, for instance.¹⁶

Duet no. 24 – ALDO

The source material for this duet is Berio’s favorite Sicilian song, “E si fussi pisci.”¹⁷ Berio himself made many arrangements of the song (including an arrangement for solo viola which was given to Aldo Bennici, the dedicatee of this duet). Copies of the manuscript of these arrangements are available at the website of the Centro Studi Luciano Berio online.¹⁸ In addition, a recording of Berio singing the folk song and accompanying himself at the piano is also available on the Centro Studi website.¹⁹

The text of the folk song is in a heavy Sicilian dialect:

| | |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <i>E si fussi pisci</i> | [If I were a fish |
| <i>lu mari passassi</i> | I would cross the sea |
| <i>e si fussi aceddu</i> | And if I were a bird |
| <i>'nni tia vinissi</i> | I would come to you |
| <i>e vucca cu vucca</i> | And mouth to mouth |
| <i>ti vurria vasari</i> | I would like to kiss you |
| <i>e visu cu visu</i> | And face to face |
| <i>parrari cu 'ttia</i> | I would like to talk to you.] |

Duet no. 28 – IGOR

Dedicated to Igor Stravinsky, the A-minor tonality and main musical motive of this duet (repetitions of the tones D,¹ E¹) are both derived from Stravinsky’s *Five Easy Pieces for Piano Duet*. They also share a strong resemblance to the “violin” motif from *A Soldier’s Tale*, which has a similar section also in A minor. The allusion to Stravinsky’s *Five Easy Pieces* is strengthened by the fact that this is one of the easiest duets in a technical sense, and can therefore be played by some of the youngest students.

¹⁶BERIO, *Duetti per due violini* (author’s note).
¹⁷Luciano BERIO, *E si fussi pisci*. Retrieved 29 January 2018 from the website of Centro Studi Luciano Berio: <http://www.lucianoberio.org/node/1852>.
¹⁸Retrieved 14 November 2018 from <http://www.lucianoberio.org/node/1852> as well as <http://www.lucianoberio.org/node/1854>.
¹⁹Retrieved 14 November 2018 from <http://www.lucianoberio.org/node/1887>.



6. PEDAGOGICAL APPLICATIONS

Over the past few years I have led many masterclasses and workshops of these pieces with violinists of all levels. This has given me the opportunity to see the effect these pieces have on students, many of whom have had little to no prior opportunities to play twentieth-century music.

Whenever possible I have asked that even the youngest students already be far beyond the technical level demanded by these pieces. This usually results in the student coming in to the first rehearsal already having a firm command of the notes in the piece, and then being surprised that there is still much work to be done. When this happens, students can use these pieces to push their own limits as performers – to find sounds that are not necessarily beautiful but are still very expressive, to extend their range of articulation, and to approach chamber music as an impromptu conversation between equals, rather than an exercise in following a teacher.

Generally, students responded enthusiastically to the *Duetti*, even if they lacked prior experience with twentieth-century music. The duets' firm link to the past, their historical, folk, and other influences make them accessible to students. Because of this accessibility students are able to absorb strange techniques, complex meters, and dissonances more easily than they might with other modern repertoires.

As a professional performing the *Duetti* with students, these workshops have also transformed my own playing, performance skills, and musicianship. It has been my responsibility when performing with children to find each student's individuality and add my voice to that, rather than to force them into my own idea of what the piece should be. This is a subtle but important shift from one's normal approach of striving towards a perfect and ideal interpretation in one's inner ear. When playing with students or amateur violinists, our normal ideal of a perfect performance is not valid in the same way. What is possible, however, is finding an individual voice and communicating that voice to the audience. I have since applied this way of thinking to my other chamber music performances, which has helped me enormously.

What I also discovered, which surprised me at first, is that the individual personalities of players are most audible when players are at the highest *and* lowest levels. Both the most seasoned professionals and the youngest students tend to play with recognisable and individual sounds, and have more variety of approaches than intermediate level violinists. With the oldest and most experienced players the reasons for this are obvious: experienced players have had the most time to find their own voice on the violin and develop their own musical personalities. The youngest students, on the other hand, have had the least time to work beyond personal habits of playing and holding the instrument that they quickly develop in the first years. Because of this, their own personalities shine through all the more. A young violinist who has not yet mastered a truly legato bow change will have his or her own very recognizable and unique articulation. A student who is still developing the basics of vibrato and who can only vibrate at one speed and one width will also have a very specific and individual color present in their sound. The next step in these youngsters' musical education will be to learn the tools that every violinist must have in his or her repertoire: mastering not only the basics of sound production, but also developing a wide variety of colors, articulations, and dynamics. It is only after students learn these tools that they can reach the final goal: to decide at will which tool to use, and perhaps most importantly, when to break the "rules" they have learned from their teachers.



CONCLUSION

Berio intended that the *Duetti* introduce concepts of twentieth-century music to violin students. However, I have found that the *Duetti* also serve as a great introduction to twentieth-century music for inexperienced concertgoers. The pieces are very accessible, and for many different reasons. Berio's friend Lele D'Amico once described him as a musical "omnivore,"²⁰ and his interest in all types of music – jazz, folk, dodecaphonic, Baroque, electronic, and more – is audible in these duets. The short length of each piece assures that even audience members with the shortest attention spans can listen to an entire work without losing their concentration. Since each duet uses a different combination of twentieth-century compositional techniques, audiences are given many different examples of what kinds of sounds are common in twentieth-century music. Because of these quick changes in style, monotony is never an issue. Many of the *Duetti* still use tonal or modal harmonies (no. 10 is triadic and written as a chorale in three voices, no. 17 drifts between G minor and D major, nos. 24 and 26 are in D major, no. 28 in A minor). Familiar harmonies therefore allow audiences to absorb new concepts and sounds while still listening to chords they understand. And there are theatrical elements of a live performance which add visual and auditory excitement for the audience member. Since a different combination of violinists performs almost every duet, audience members are given an opportunity to hear and compare each performer's individual qualities. Audiences therefore learn not only about what kinds of variety exist in composition, but also about what kinds of variety exist in interpretation. And since violinists of all ages and abilities are asked to collaborate as equal partners on stage, audience members are asked to value each performer's individuality and efforts as people and musicians, and not only on their technical skill as instrumentalists.

These ideas of equality and collaboration are perhaps best supported by a quote from Berio's "remarks to the Kind Lady of Baltimore," a speech where he struggles to give an answer to a question that had once been posed to him after a lecture: "Mr. Berio, how do you relate your work to life?" He attempts many replies to this question, and by his own account, none of his answers fully capture the relations behind his music and life. However, his ideas imply a spirit of discovery and humanity which lies at the heart of these duets. In one of his many attempts at an answer, he states:

I was only able to answer that I didn't know precisely . . . I said that in any case a complex tissue of relations exists and that whatever we do – not necessarily music – is an attempt to uncover a part of it and to become more aware of what we are and where we are.²¹

²⁰BERIO, *Intervista sulla musica*, 110.

²¹Luciano BERIO, *remarks to the Kind Lady of Baltimore*, retrieved 29 January 2018 from <http://www.lucianoberio.org/node/35905?1574735542=1>.

