

# Milan's Studio di Fonologia: Voice Politics in the City, 1955–8

DELIA CASADEI

## Milan: at the threshold

ON 21 February 1957, the young German music critic Fred Prieberg set off to Milan to visit Italy's first electronic music studio, the Studio di Fonologia, nested within the Radiotelevisione Italiana (RAI) headquarters on corso Sempione. The resulting essay, entitled 'Elektronische Musik in Mailand' ('Electronic Music in Milan', 1958), is one of the earliest accounts of the studio to have been written by an outsider.<sup>1</sup> In it, Prieberg describes the output of the studio's two founders, Luciano Berio and Bruno Maderna, from the year of its foundation, 1955, until 1958.

From the point of view of the studio's nominal focus on phonology (and thus on aspects of the human voice), this is an obscure period. No extensive work on the human voice had been carried out there by the time Prieberg visited. Berio's *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* (1958), the first major composition from the studio to use a sampled human voice, was then just being sketched (Prieberg mentions it at the end of his essay). Prieberg therefore interprets the word 'Fonologia' in the studio's title as signalling not a concentration on voice, but a string of early sound experiments unconnected with musical purposes.<sup>2</sup> Two years later, the studio's composers would produce the extended

Email: [odradek1725@gmail.com](mailto:odradek1725@gmail.com)

I wish to thank the School of Arts and Sciences at the University of Pennsylvania and the American Musicological Society for supporting my research through their respective Dissertation Completion Fellowships in 2014. Although no archival material is used in this article, I am grateful to Maddalena Novati for welcoming me into the Studio di Fonologia's archives in Milan in 2012, thus marking the beginning of my research on the topic of this article. I am much indebted to Carolyn Abbate, Jairo Moreno and Roger Parker for their feedback at various stages of the article's ideation and numerous drafts. Lastly, I wish to thank the peer reviewers for their helpful and thorough comments on this article.

<sup>1</sup> Fred K. Prieberg, 'Elektronische Musik in Mailand', *Musica ex machina: Über das Verhältnis von Musik und Technik* (Berlin, 1960), 137–50; also in Italian as 'Musica elettronica a Milano', *Musica ex machina*, trans. Paola Tonini (Turin, 1963), 146–61. All translations from the German are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Prieberg strikingly translates the studio's name as something completely unrelated to phonology – namely as 'Studio für musikalische Schallkunde', which translates as 'Studio for the Musical Science of Sounds'. See Prieberg, 'Elektronische Musik in Mailand', 138: 'Zunächst diente es freilich weniger der Musikals vielmehr allgemeinen elektroakustischen Versuchen – daher die Bezeichnung "Studio für musikalische Schallkunde"' ('In the beginning the studio was certainly not used to make music so much as electroacoustic experiments of a general nature, hence the name "Studio for the Musical Science of Sounds"').

experiments with recorded voice (more precisely, Cathy Berberian's voice) that ushered the institution's name into anglophone musicology. Among these experiments the most famous is surely Berio's *Visage* (1961).<sup>3</sup>

Yet Prieberg's account is striking in that it gives careful thought to another issue that is rarely considered in recent musicological accounts of the studio: the nature of its belonging to Milan. Prieberg begins the essay by recalling at length his train journey towards the city:

I sat on the fast train to Milan, the flatlands behind Como flying past me. Gradually, the white chain of the Alps, which had emerged north-west like a giant set of white teeth, disappeared in the fog. Suburbs, slums, industrial areas. The metropolis took in the train with open arms. Milan. The masses thronged in the small streets and large boulevards. Cars honked incessantly and proceeded in flocks, riding at breakneck speed between buses and trams, restrained and frightened by the traffic lights; men and more men, all in a hurry, all going somewhere. One might have doubted whether Milan was really in Italy, when out of a street corner – as if awakened by a romantic legend – a tanned man in peasant clothing emerged from the crowd. He was blowing into an ancient shawm and was carrying a white bird in a small wooden cage.<sup>4</sup>

Such descriptive detours are highly unusual for Prieberg. Indeed, this account of the urban landscape is a strange moment in his rich output of essays on electronic studios. 'Elektronische Musik in Mailand' forms part of a collection of studies of electronic experiments in cities as disparate as Tokyo, New York, Warsaw and Paris; none of the essays – apart from the one on Milan – is introduced with a description. Prieberg's evocation of the city, then, is hardly a rhetorical flourish, but rather something of an allegory, a means towards a political commentary that rises closer to the surface as the description develops. Is Milan, Prieberg wonders, really part of Italy? Is it not rather a freak occurrence on the plains beneath the Alps?

<sup>3</sup> See Flo Menezes, *Un essai sur la composition verbale électronique Visage de Luciano Berio* (Modena, 1993); Richard Causton, 'Berio's *Visage* and the Theatre of Electroacoustic Music', *Tempo*, 194 (1995), 15–21; and Steven Connor, 'The Decomposing Voice of Postmodern Music', *New Literary History*, 32 (2001), 467–83.

<sup>4</sup> 'Ich sass im Schnellzug nach Mailand, die Ebene hinter Como flog vorbei. Allmählich verschwand die weiße Kette der Alpen, die sich wie ein riesiges Gebiss im Nordosten herangeschoben hatte, im Dunst. Vorstädte, Elendsquartiere, Industrieviertel. Die Metropole nahm den Zug mit offenen Armen auf. Mailand. In engen Gassen und auf ausladenden Boulevards drängten sich die Massen. Autos hupen unaufhörlich und strebten rottenweise, von den Verkehrsampeln aufgescheucht und angehalten, in halsbrecherischer Fahrt heran und davon, Autobusses und Strassenbahnen dazwischen; Menschen und wieder Menschen, alle in Eile, alle mit einem Ziel. Man hätte daran zweifeln können, dass Mailand in Italien liegt, aber dann schritt an einer Strassenecke – wie hergeweht aus einer romantischen Legende – ein braungebrannter Mann in bäuerlicher Kleidung durch das Gewühl, der eine antike Schalmei blies und einen kleinen Holzkäfig mit einem weißen Vogel bei sich trug.' Prieberg, 'Elektronische Musik in Mailand', 137.

Prieberg's geopolitics of Milan was hardly a new idea in 1957. He is here combining an inherited German Romantic perspective on Goethe's 'Land wo die Zitronen blühen' with the long-standing local rhetoric of Milan's precarious belonging – as an Austrian-dominated city with high ambitions to compete with Paris and London in the European cultural circuit – to the Italian nation-state. Milan's showy urban modernity, a token of its constant attempt to emancipate itself as a central European urban centre, clashes here with the symbolic, near-Arcadian imagery of Italy fashioned during the French Enlightenment and German post-Enlightenment. The clash between modernity and pre-modernity, and between the northern city and the central European literary discourse about Italy, is laced with a complex politics. The Italian literature scholar Roberto Dainotto recently – and boldly – argued that southern Europe, and Italy especially, served as a means of maintaining symbolic ties, and yet also substantially warding off the south-eastern Mediterranean, understood as at once the point of origin of modernity and an embarrassing pre-modernity that needed to be overcome. For Dainotto, it was Montesquieu who crystallized the thought that 'as colonies of the Oriental world of Islam, the civilizations of Spain and Italy did not constitute an integral part of Europe but were its negative south'.<sup>5</sup> Goethe's lemon blossom and Prieberg's 'tanned' peasant uphold this order of things: Italy is defined as a place both aesthetically exquisite and incapable of truly belonging to Europe's modern core.

With this symbolic network in mind, we might note that the peasant evoked by Prieberg is overlaid with sonic signifiers – notably the first ones we encounter in what is, after all, an essay on a musical institution. These signifiers are both related to voice: the bird, most obviously, but also the shawm, which Prieberg describes in terms of the peasant's exhalations.<sup>6</sup> Even the landscape around Milan is complicit in this imagery, for the Alps are described as a set of teeth in a mouth whose cavity can only be the Po flatlands that lie beneath the mountain, the plain which Milan was built to dominate. Curiously, Prieberg refrains from describing any sound outright; it is almost as if the medium of the written letter had discreetly stopped short of approaching its limit – a carnal orality made of breath, of teeth, of animal sound. We, the readers, are provided neither with birdsong nor with a mention of the shawm's reedy snarl, but are rather left suspended between the anticipated sonority of the apparition and its literary rendition. The peasant may have been summoned to reassure Prieberg (and us with him) that Milan is truly an Italian city (at least by the diktats of German Romanticism), but he does not quite deliver; he is silent, still,

<sup>5</sup> Roberto M. Dainotto, *Europe (in Theory)* (Durham, NC, 2007), 6.

<sup>6</sup> I am referencing the idea of wind instruments as a way of disabling – or alternatively channelling – the voice by engaging the player's breath. See Carolyn Abbate, *In Search of Opera* (Princeton, NJ, 2003), 79: 'Flute and pipes, played with the mouth, entail an absolute suppression of the voice. They are wind instruments that substitute for singing, with melody but no words.'

as immaterial as a ghost. And it is now that the studio finally makes an appearance. Prieberg continues:

The giant headquarters of the Italian Radio is an off-white building block, far taller than the surrounding houses, but itself only a toy building block at the feet of the steel radio tower, crowned with glass and antennae. The doors to the lobby opened and closed constantly. One had the feeling of entering an ostentatious factory building. Nowhere more than in Milan does one have so clearly before one's eyes the rationalization of predominantly intellectual labour.<sup>7</sup>

Offered up as a cinematic jump cut from the peasant musician, the image of the studio shares some essential cues with that of the apparition we just left: white, evoked in relation to the peasant's bird, coats the building's outer walls; the juxtaposition of the peasant with the caged songbird he carries resonates with the juxtaposition of the houses on corso Sempione with the white headquarters of the RAI building; there is even a symmetry between the mesh of the birdcage and the steely web of the radio tower. More than a jump cut, Prieberg's turn to the studio is a slow dissolve, something close to a ghostly superimposition: these two figures – the peasant with his sonic paraphernalia; the host institution of Milan's electronic avant-garde – point us towards a cluster of unresolved tensions between sound, voice, city, national identity and European geopolitics.

My article delves into the historical connections between city, voice and the Studio di Fonologia's early years, providing an intellectual and political foundation to the better-known abstract work on the recorded voice of the early 1960s. I argue that the peculiarity of the Italian electronic avant-garde in the 1950s resided not only in its combination of electronic and sampled sound materials and in its attention to the voice, but also in the way the focus on voice reflected concrete anxieties and hopes with regard to the political uses of language in Milan's changing cityscape, intellectual history and media presence. In order to do this, I will centre my argument in the two compositions that – perhaps not coincidentally – frame the output covered in Prieberg's essay. Although vastly different from one another, these two compositions use speech and voice to portray urban public spaces. The first is Berio and Maderna's 'radio portrait' of the city of Milan, entitled *Ritratto di città*; the second – a more abstracted take on the sonority of urban spaces – is Berio's *Thema*, a composition based on James

<sup>7</sup> 'Das riesige Funkhaus des Italienischen Rundfunks ist ein weisslicher Gebäudeblock, der die anderen Häuser weit überragt, aber gleich einem Bauklötzchen zu Füßen eines stählernen, von Dezimeter spiegeln und Antennengekrönten Sende- und Empfangsturmes liegt. Unaufhörlich öffneten und schlossen sich die Windfangtüren der Vorhalle. Man hatte das Gefühl, in eine pompöse Fabrik einzutreten; wohl in keinem Funkhaus hat man die Rationalisierung überwiegend geistiger Arbeit so deutlich vor Augen wie in Mailand.' Prieberg, 'Elektronische Musik in Mailand', 137.

Joyce's famous literary rendition of the busy Ormond Hotel in early twentieth-century Dublin in *Ulysses*.

Prieberg's long-winded introduction is replete with images that belonged to a thick symbolic network in mid-century Milan. The reason for the RAI headquarters' odd physiognomy against the surrounding cityscape is that it was built at the point at which, along the boulevard-like corso Sempione and past the ancient walls, the city would have slowly begun to taper towards its north-western edge. One has to wonder whether Prieberg could have known that corso Sempione – and its continuation, viale Certosa – was an urban artery with near mythic associations in the minds of twentieth-century Milanese. After the opening of the new city cemetery (the Cimitero Maggiore) in 1895, along the city's north-western periphery, corso Sempione had become a crucial part of the route that most poignantly joins the city to its outside – the journey of the dead.<sup>8</sup> By 1906, this route had been inscribed into the urban transport system: the city authorities created a tram route that crossed the city diagonally from the south-eastern city gate (Porta Romana) to the Cimitero Maggiore in order to transport coffins from crowded minor local cemeteries to the new one; locals had nicknamed the tram 'La gioconda' ('the joyous one').<sup>9</sup> He was more likely to know that it was in the north-western periphery of Milan – the districts of Bovisa and Quarto Oggiaro, a stone's throw from cemetery and charterhouse – that the early flows of migration from the southern rural provinces were accommodated in what became the city's first industrial slums. The hurried construction of barracks and mass housing estates for workers in Quarto Oggiaro began in 1954, yielding by the early 1960s the towering housing estates that would become emblematic both of the city's industrial power and of the ghostly existence of its burgeoning and impoverished labour force, huddled around – in grim irony – the gathering place of the city's dead.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The most famous literary rendition of the journey between the cemetery and the city centre is the long poem 'Caporetto 1917', written by the Milanese dialectal poet Delio Tessa in 1919. In the poem, Tessa portrayed the talk and shifting mood of a tram full of people returning to the city after visiting their dead at the Cimitero Maggiore on All Souls' Day in 1917, while the Battle of Caporetto is being fought in the north-east of the peninsula by Italians against German and Austro-Hungarian troops. The poem was published in the collection *L'è el dì di mort, alégher!* (Milan, 1932).

<sup>9</sup> On 'La gioconda', see Francesco Ogliari, *Milano in tram: Storia del trasporto pubblico milanese* (Milan, 2006). The history of the cemetery's location in relation to city boundaries (particularly the shift from inner-city local cemeteries to external large cemeteries) is noted in Michel Foucault's famous unpublished essay 'Of Other Spaces: Utopia and Heterotopia', trans. Jay Miscowiec, available at <<http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf>> (accessed 2 May 2014). Foucault postulates that the modern city contains spaces that present alternative versions of the city itself. To him, the cemetery – particularly in its out-of-city-bounds, nineteenth-century incarnation – is one such space.

<sup>10</sup> John Foot notes how 'Milan had, historically, "expelled" its workers en masse to its endless urban fringe'. *Milan since the Miracle: City, Culture and Identity* (Oxford and New York, 2001), 53.

In Prieberg's enigmatic description, the flash-like appearances of both the peasant and the radio headquarters seem to mark the Studio di Fonologia's emergence at something of a geopolitical threshold, a state of belonging and non-belonging. This threshold is the uneasy place of Milan's aggressive urban modernity within the Italian state, manifested at street level as the city's shifting relationship to its outside: the rural outskirts disappearing, as throngs of migrant workers crowd the city's periphery. These rural, often southern workers arriving in the city were largely dialect-speaking and alienated from their Milanese surroundings geographically, linguistically and even – thanks to pervasive discriminatory attitudes against southerners – racially. They were the carriers of the accursed south from which Milan was – particularly after the Second World War – trying to unmoor itself.

Within this network, Prieberg's simultaneous evocation and negation of voice – the breath, the shawm, the caged bird – takes on political significance as the aural marker of the city's edge, the threshold between what is city and what is not; what is modern and what is not; what is northern and what is not. Voice becomes the 'present absence' (to follow Derrida) signalling the northern city's existence as a geopolitical threshold, its liminal status as a reluctant, hyper-modern part of the European South, caught between voice and reason, between urbanity and subalpine flatland, an industrial powerhouse powered by the labour of the very southern peasants it wishes to leave behind. Dismiss as it might the studio's reference to phonology (the science of joining *phonè* to *logos*, voice to language/reason), Prieberg's description raises a fundamental unanswered question.<sup>11</sup> In mid-century Italy, what has phonology to do with Milan's modelling of urban modernity, and why – in the political economy of this particular city – does it join together avant-garde music and state-owned radio?

### The Milanese voice in *Ritratto di città*

In order to shed light on the significance of voice in the project of the Studio di Fonologia, we can now address the first of our case studies, *Ritratto di città*, a radio documentary created by Berio and Maderna in 1954, the year before the official opening of the studio, and thus long before phonology was announced as a titular

<sup>11</sup> The concept of threshold here is derived from the work of Giorgio Agamben, who theorizes the formation of sovereign power in the state as a moment of threshold where the boundary between animal life and human life, inchoate voice and rational language, is suspended. Agamben famously charged the distinction between *phonè* and *logos* as the moment of political differentiation between bare life and political life. That he should clasp sonic phenomena and politics together through voice in this way is a testament to the deep and complex ties between voice and politics in the history of Italian thought. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer: Il potere sovrano e la vita nuda* (Turin, 1995), trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen as *Homo sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Palo Alto, CA, 1998).

research area.<sup>12</sup> *Ritratto* is the first piece discussed by Prieberg in his survey of the studio's output, and was in all likelihood also the first piece he was shown by Berio at the studio. Indeed, although *Ritratto* was never broadcast or released commercially, some scholars have considered it to be the studio's opera prima. It consists of a narrative text written by Roberto Leydi – soon to become one of the country's leading ethnomusicologists – and musical commentary composed by Berio and Maderna. Leydi's text describes contemporary Milan over the course of an entire day. Berio and Maderna provide a musical commentary of synthetic sounds, pre-recorded street noise (mainly of trams and bells) and collages of speech fragments. The documentary has a key place in the history of the studio, included as it was in Berio and Maderna's pitch to RAI executives for an electronic music studio. Despite the obvious care that went into its craft, then, *Ritratto* had no claim to the supposed self-sufficiency of high art, but instead embodied the overlap of the emerging project of the Studio di Fonologia with the aesthetic and linguistic concerns of state-owned radio in Milan. This relationship to place is apparent in the very title and subject matter of the piece. *Ritratto* was both the first and the last piece either composer would dedicate to the city that hosted their electronic experiments.

One of the immediately striking aspects of *Ritratto*'s representation of Milan is the extent to which – despite its utilitarian *raison d'être* as part of a sales pitch – it rejects the trope of the electrified modern metropolis. Rather than exalt the city's bustle, the text of *Ritratto* lingers at the city's temporal and spatial thresholds: the hush that descends at the turning point of night and dawn; the evanescent ceiling cast by fog; the potato fields that lie beyond the city's edge. Rather than mark its urban traits, the author and the composers bring the city into sight and hearing through the phenomena that render it blurry and indistinct. In this respect, *Ritratto* departs from celebrations of the synergy between technological advance, urbanization and music that had had such a rich history in Milan since at least the late nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> The most famous incarnation of such celebratory modernity was of course Milanese Futurism. Luigi Russolo, author of the most famous futurist manifesto for music, 'The Art of Noises', had in fact composed his own *Risveglio di città* (1913), a piece whose only remaining written trace consists of

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, *Ritratto di città* was created soon after Berio had submitted a first proposal for an electronic music studio to the general director of RAI, Filiberto Guala. The proposed name for the studio at the time was Centro Sperimentale di Ricerche Radiofoniche (Centre for Experimental Radiophonic Research), a name that sounds close to the Groupe de Recherches de Musique Concrète. This chronology of the first proposal in relation to *Ritratto* is pointed out by Angela Ida De Benedictis in her 'Opera prima: *Ritratto di città* e gli esordi della musica elettroacustica in Italia', *Nuova musica alla radio: Esperienze allo Studio di Fonologia della RAI di Milano, 1954–1959*, ed. Veniero Rizzardi and Angela Ida De Benedictis (Rome, 2000), 27–56.

<sup>13</sup> Recent research is indeed pushing back this history of Milanese celebrations of modernity into the nineteenth century. See, for example, Gavin Williams, 'Excelsior as Mass Ornament: The Reproduction of Gesture', *Staging the Scientific Imagination*, ed. Benjamin Walton and David Trippett (Cambridge, forthcoming).



its first page: a set of staggered entries for orchestra and Futurist noise-making machines, the *intonarumori*. Indeed, the title of *Ritratto di città* is probably a variation on this precedent, one that, significantly, replaces the word 'risveglio' (awakening) with the seemingly more static and reflexive 'ritratto' (portrait, representation).<sup>14</sup>

*Ritratto* is 29' 33" long, and consists of a male narrating voice (performed by two alternating speakers, Nando Gazzolo and Ottavio Fanfani) interpolated with – and very rarely underscored by – musical inserts ranging in duration from just a few seconds to nearly three minutes. The sound materials that make up *Ritratto* are raw, often coarsely thrown together via the very basic apparatus available to the composers at the time. It consists – aside from the narrating voices – of three brief collages of recorded speech (attributed to Berio), some lengthier interludes using only synthesized sound (the materials for which were loaned to Maderna by the Phonetics Institute in Bonn) and simple manipulations (mostly speeded-up playback) of a prepared piano. The arch of the documentary is gentle – it follows the unfolding of the day and night without ever reaching an apex. An opening section (duration: 4' 30") on night-time and silence is followed by an evocation of the start of the working day and the cold fog typical of Milan (6' 8"). The documentary then skips ahead to the sombre end of the working day, tapers off into an early-evening visit to a ghostly housing estate, and then to Milan's duomo, its organs and worshippers (8' 40"). The subsequent section – devoted to nightlife – is significantly shorter (2' 27") and followed by a lengthy section on the ghosts that haunt the city's central station and its canals (6' 20"), which closes by re-evoking the advent of silence at the turning point of night and day.

The opening of *Ritratto* – and indeed the narrative arch of the whole documentary – could be seen as an inversion of *Risveglio*'s opening. Whereas in *Risveglio* the initial silence is but the ground upon which staggered entries of *intonarumori* and orchestral instruments quickly crowd (a performance of the bustle of the awakening cityscape),

<sup>14</sup> Much could be said about the relation between 'risveglio' and 'ritratto' as historical modes of thinking about Milan, modes that are less than half a century apart. For one, the awakening of the city evoked by Russolo implies a certain organic cohesiveness in the city, the movements of a body politic whose noises implied an aggressive modernity and an aestheticization of burgeoning industry as a tool for war. This beautification of war as the apotheosis of the body politic was long ago diagnosed as an element of Fascism by Walter Benjamin in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility' (1936). More specifically, Susan Buck-Morss notes that the structure of spectacle in Fascism is a tripartite one – matter (*hyle*), agent, observer – in which the masses of spectators are both the matter acted upon and detached observers, a dual role that obscures the fact that they have no agency with a kind of aesthetic pleasure. I can imagine *Risveglio*'s *intonarumori* within this structure, in which the listener is both the sonic matter worked into action and the observer of the rising of the city, but not its prime mover. See Susan Buck-Morss, 'Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered', *October*, 62 (1992), 3–41, esp. pp. 30–3. In contrast, *Ritratto*, with its insistence on the wedging of representation between the subject and the object of observation, and its constant emphasis of the mediating role of the senses, could be said to return, in a way, a perceptual – and thus implicitly political – agency onto its listener.



in *Ritratto* silence is not only the ground but also a key poetic figure. The first moments of *Ritratto* thus consist of a narrator reciting:

È molto difficile spiegare come succeda e perché succeda, è anche difficile sorprenderlo, scoprirlo. Parlo naturalmente di quel minuto, o di quell'ora, o di quel secondo, non importa, in cui ad ogni nuovo risveglio di mattino, la città si ritrova tutta, improvvisamente e con sorpresa, coperta di silenzio.

(It is very difficult to explain how it happens and why it happens, and it is also difficult to catch it by surprise, to discover it. I am talking of course about that moment, or that hour, or that second – it doesn't matter which – when, at every new morning awakening, the whole city finds itself – unexpectedly and unbelievably – enfolded by silence.)<sup>15</sup>

Leydi's text drew specifically on authors such as Alfonso Gatto and Delio Tessa who, in the 1930s, wrote about Milan as a ghostly, sensorially elusive place.<sup>16</sup> Gatto and Tessa, two writers of strong anti-Fascist leanings, were writing in an anti-positivistic vein precisely as a response to contemporary noisy celebrations of urban progress. *Ritratto* is intriguing because it brings this literary tradition – via musical commentary and narrators – into both the aural and the oral realms. The subject of an extended opening meditation, silence is here defined as an atmosphere of tense expectation that pervades the city at the turning point from night to day: an atmosphere that is thick, almost tactile, and also sonorous. As the narrator speaks of the imminence of silence, bells appear on the soundtrack, and the final word of the opening paragraph – 'silenzio' – is followed by a short electronic interlude. Silence is not as an acoustic reality determined by the lack of sound, but as a mode of perception: an act of hearkening.

The association of the idea of silence with listening was very much a landmark of avant-garde musical thinking in the mid-1950s. Six years prior to *Ritratto*, Pierre Schaeffer had worked out a new aesthetic programme for electronic music – the famous *musique concrète*, constituted by edited sequences of sampled sounds heard away from their context and source. Recording technology – the sampling of sounds divorced from their origins – was understood by Schaeffer to encourage listening for intrinsic sonic properties. By 1966 he would famously theorize this mode through phenomenological terminology.<sup>17</sup> Following Edmund Husserl, he coined the term 'reduced listening', a mode in which visual and aural contexts are bracketed away (in the same way as the Husserlian *epoché*). In aural terms, the *epoché* was obtained by

<sup>15</sup> Roberto Leydi, 'Ritratto di città: Studio per una rappresentazione radiofonica', *Nuova musica alla radio*, ed. Rizzardi and De Benedictis, 328–39 (p. 328). In this anthology, the editors present each essay both in the original Italian and in English translation; I have, however, occasionally modified the English translations provided in order to highlight certain poetic figures that are key to my argument. All other translations from the Italian are my own unless otherwise specified.

<sup>16</sup> See De Benedictis, 'Opera prima', 45.

<sup>17</sup> The text in which Schaeffer began to write in overtly phenomenological terms is his *Traité des objets musicaux* (Paris, 1966).

the composer actively *silencing* – via editing – any trace of the location and context of the sample. Silence was also crucial – albeit in a radically opposite fashion – to John Cage, who maintained that silence was not an absence of sonic stimuli but a renewed attention to the inescapable sonority of one's surroundings. Both Schaeffer and Cage – the latter notably for his *4' 33"* (1952) – would have been familiar figures in the Darmstadt avant-garde that Berio and Maderna inhabited in the early 1950s.<sup>18</sup>

It is in relation to these emerging modalities of listening – to which I shall return in the next section – that *Ritratto* most prominently displays its relation to the modernism of its day. And yet the silence mentioned in *Ritratto* does not quite perform either of these modalities of listening. Silence in the documentary involves neither abstracted sonorous objects nor rediscovered sonorous surroundings. The format of the radio documentary allows the focus to remain firmly on the voice of the narrator, who, by reciting Leydi's text, performs something of a naming ritual, defining and explaining the meaning of Milan's 'silence' over the course of several minutes. The incantatory role of the speaking voice becomes especially apparent at the climax (and conclusion) of the opening section:

Il silenzio si impadronisce senza violenza della città inconsapevole. Spegne con un soffio gelato le ultime voci, ormai pallide e opache: il grido della civetta sul tetto antico di San Simpliciano, il fischio remoto di un treno sperduto in uno scalo alle soglie della città, i sogni agitati di sospiri degli adolescenti, le parole difficili e dure di un tardivo mercato d'amore, gli alterchi degli ubriachi, il pianto angoscioso dei lattanti negletti, l'estremo saluto degli amanti. Per un minuto, un'ora o un secondo, non importa, la città smarrisce, nel tacere inspiegabile d'ogni voce, anche il senso e il peso e la dimensione della sua terribile esistenza sonora. Sul pulsare segreto e interiore del suo ritmo biologico, inarcata e tesa fin quasi a spezzarsi in ogni minima particella dell'aria, la città aspetta...

(Silence gently overpowers the unknowing city. It extinguishes with icy breath the last voices, now pale and opaque: the screech of the owl on the ancient roof of San Simpliciano, the distant whistle of a train lost in a station at the threshold of the city, the sighs of dreaming adolescents, the difficult, harsh words of a late-night sex market, brawls of drunkards, the anguished cries of neglected infants and the final goodbyes of lovers. For a minute, an hour, or a second – it doesn't matter which – the city loses, in the inexplicable hushing of all voices, the sense and weight of its terrible sonic existence. Pulsating with its own secret biological rhythm, arched and tense to breaking point in every particle of air, the city waits...)<sup>19</sup>

Leydi's text describes silence not as the dwindling of noises commonly associated with the city (the buses, trams and cars of Prieberg's description), but as tied to the absence of the human voice. And yet as the focus narrows down to voice and its absence, the narrator's low, forlorn speech is set into high relief by an electronic drone; the narrator's utterances grow more prominent, more emphatic, as he lingers on the

<sup>18</sup> It is significant that Cage's 'Lecture on Silence' would be published in *Incontri musicali*, the academic journal of the Studio di Fonologia; see John Cage, 'Lecture on Nothing', *Incontri musicali*, 3 (1959), 128–49.

<sup>19</sup> Leydi, 'Ritratto di città', 329.

description of the last traces of human speech. The linguistic ritual surrounding the word silence – its repeated naming – ends with a peculiar twist: a voice growing more prominent as it declares the extinction of all human utterances.

The end of the section on silence – five minutes, a quarter of the way into the documentary – introduces a key aspect of the poetics of *Ritratto*: the foregrounding not just of the narrator's voice, but also of the way this interacts with the frequent descriptions of the human voice within the recited text. As mentioned previously, *Ritratto*'s text is – rather unusually – spoken by two alternating narrators. Their timbre and delivery are audibly different: Gazzolo's voice is a resonant baritone, his prose carefully paced, slightly breathy, his tone almost plaintive; Fanfani speaks at a faster pace, matched by clipped delivery and a nasal timbre. Gazzolo recites most of the text (including the opening section on silence); Fanfani appears only twice, for the rare segments that describe the city's activities. The division of speaking labour has the unusual effect of turning the speaker's voice – typically a diaphanous carrier of narration – into a more noticeable material entity.<sup>20</sup>

Fanfani's first segment seals the end of the section on silence, which ends with an insert of tram and percussion sounds interpolated with a vocal collage of 'commuters', a mixed-gender group somnolently uttering the phrase 'un'altra giornata' ('another day') in a slow, fugal stretto. The collage, announcing the start of the city's daily activities, presents us with voices whose dull delivery clashes with the night-time wails whose hushing the narrator has just described. The opening of Fanfani's ensuing segment ('secretly awaited noise, deep animal breath ... empty ambition prepares [...] the feverish clamour of the new day'<sup>21</sup>) and his near martial efficiency in delivering the text mark the end of the threshold state of night, silence and mysterious voices; we, the listeners, are led back into the daytime.

Yet Fanfani's segment turns quickly back onto matters of the human voice. This swerve in subject matter is a moment of self-conscious rhetoric – the listener is now presented with the prospect of a turning point, the ultimate discovery of the Milanese voice: 'Ma al primo rompere del sole attraverso lo sbieco delle strade, al primo dissolversi impaurito della nebbia, sulle grida dei cani e sui gemiti dei gatti riemerge la voce dell'uomo' ('But as the first rays of sun fall askew on the streets, as

<sup>20</sup> The two voices are not only audibly different but carry different sets of associations. Gazzolo was 15 years younger than Fanfani, and had inherited the profession from his parents (his father was a famous actor and voice-over specialist, his mother a radio presenter). His low, forlorn, precisely enunciated voice, moulded by a slightly pleading intonation, responded closely to the affect required of the new radiophonic voices. Gazzolo subsequently had an extremely successful career as an actor who moved between theatre, cinema, radio and TV. Fanfani, on the other hand (despite a few important appearances on broadcast media), had his most successful years as a theatre actor and leading diction coach for Milan's Piccolo Teatro in the 1950s and 1960s. His nasal, clipped delivery betrays a vocal training emerging from wartime Italian radio.

<sup>21</sup> 'Fragore segretamente atteso, profondo respiro animale ... vuote ambizioni preparano [...] l'esaltato clamore della nuova giornata'. Leydi, 'Ritratto di città', 330.

the fog begins fearfully to melt away, the voice of man rises again above the howling of dogs and the moaning of cats').<sup>22</sup> The 'voice of man' possesses a power to break silence – one piercing the screen of fog and darkness that veils the city. However, the provenance of this reassuring, indigenous urban voice is temporarily withheld from the listener. All we know is that this voice must be different from those we have heard thus far – those of the two narrators and the chorus of commuters. Indeed, whereas all previous vocal utterances are obviously scripted, a triumph of good enunciation, the Milanese 'voice of man' in *Ritratto* might be unscripted, resonant and attached to locale – inflected with Milanese dialect; perhaps even a singing voice.

However, what follows the anticipation of the rise of the 'voice of man' is instead an insert, a collage of fragments in Italian bureaucratic jargon: 'Vostro gentile riscontro ...'; 'Il ragioniere Rossi ...'; 'Estratto conto, quietanza ...'; '47.5255'; 'Entrate'; 'Libretto'; 'Riferendoci alla vostra del ...' ('Your courteous reply ...'; 'Accountant Rossi'; 'Bank statement, receipt'; '47.5255'; 'Entries'; 'Cheque book'; 'With reference to yours of ...').<sup>23</sup> The mythical voice of man turns out to be nothing more than fragments of accountants' and bank clerks' voices. Reported writing, not speech, produces our much-anticipated human utterance. The extent to which this is a trumping of the expectations raised by the narrator lies in a combination of factors. Not only is this the voice of someone reading out loud, rather than speaking, but the text being read is hardly in a traditionally expressive lexicon. The voices of the accountants are not sampled from city streets, either, or even from an office. Instead, the sharpness of the recording and pronunciation suggests a studio recording. Lastly, although the speech of these characters does not betray the diction of a trained actor, it is unrealistically accent-free and devoid of intonation. It is as if the speech had been processed so as to shed any phonological link to the material context of its utterance.

This refusal to attach voice to place produces a ghostly human presence, and yet the commentary – now back to Gazzolo's resonant baritone – insists in presenting this insert as a true incarnation of the city. 'In [the accountant's] dull eyes [...]', we are informed, 'one can then read with surprise the true story of the people of Milan.'<sup>24</sup> We are thus confronted with a peculiar paradox regarding Milanese voices: the renunciation of orality and inflection is not – as Enlightenment theories of the origin of language famously maintained – the result of the impact of modernization on an original mother tongue. Voice does not lose its resonance because of lost ties to the site of its origin; on the contrary, a speaking voice's ruptured appearance – its dullness, lack of resonance and inflection and obvious literary tarnish – inescapably ties it to

<sup>22</sup> Leydi, 'Ritratto di città', 330.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* The words in this quotation are not part of Leydi's text, but are the transcribed text from Berio and Maderna's vocal inserts, which is here included as part of the documentary text.

<sup>24</sup> 'Nei suoi occhi opachi [...] leggiamo allora la storia sincera della gente di Milano.' Leydi, 'Ritratto di città', 331.

its place of origin, an origin that consists of rupture. It is the seemingly disembodied nature of the bank clerk's voice that concretely anchors it in Milanese ground.

We can interpret this shift from the original presence of a pre-modern, pre-urban voice to the idea of rupture, tarnish or ghostliness as the very origin of voice at a higher symbolic and political voltage. Remember that *Ritratto* was created by an ethnomusicologist and two composers bent on proving – to a room full of executives – just how radiophonic musical production could be mobilized towards Milan's bid to become the beacon of Italy's post-war modernization. One of the ways in which *Ritratto* was deliberately of its time was, as we have seen, its refusal to frame itself as a paean to the city's violent bustle; but another gesture that is key to *Ritratto* is its rejection of nineteenth-century literary tropes of Italian vocalicity. These tropes were the aural equivalent of Goethe's lemon blossom and even Prieberg's quaint barefoot peasant. From Rousseau's praise of Italy as the land of an original voice that was both music and language to Mme de Staël's pronouncement that Italy was a country whose language was too sonically pretty really to evolve into high literature, voice had been both the natural resource of Italy and the aural marker of the country's failure to access an enlightened modernity.<sup>25</sup>

As we shall see, Berio was more than familiar with Rousseau's account of the origin of language, if not with de Staël's writings, and it is unlikely that a scholar such as Leydi – highly aware of the discourse surrounding Italian vocal production – was unaware of either text. *Ritratto* deftly subverts this Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment discourse about presences and origins of the Italian voice by putting forward the Milanese voice not as a discoloured copy of an original orality, but as the product of an original rupture, a 'present absence' that has, in fact, been there from the very beginning. The turn towards Derridian terminology is here deliberate: in 1967, Jacques Derrida would perform a deconstruction of Rousseau's *Essai sur l'origine des langues* in order to advance a similar argument against the understanding of writing – and of the articulation of voice into speech – as a rupturing of an original 'voice'.<sup>26</sup> Yet, some 13 years earlier, the same folding of writing, orality, presence and absence was being worked out on the far less elevated intellectual ground of an RAI sales pitch. It would, of course, be excessive to say that *Ritratto*'s authors were actively rehearsing

<sup>25</sup> There is no space to delve deeper into this heritage here; the two texts referenced are Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Essai sur l'origine des langues* (Geneva, 1781) and Madame de Staël's essay 'Sulla maniera e l'utilità delle traduzioni', *Biblioteca italiana*, January 1816, pp. 9–18. I draw from the analyses of these authors by Dainotto in *Europe (in Theory)*, as well as from Gary Tomlinson's analysis of de Staël in 'Italian Romanticism and Italian Opera: An Essay in their Affinities', *19th-Century Music*, 10 (1986–7), 43–60.

<sup>26</sup> This was the famous triptych consisting of *De la grammatologie* (Paris, 1967), *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris, 1967) and *La voix et le phénomène* (Paris, 1967). *De la grammatologie* takes to task Rousseau's theory of the origin of language, in which the linguistic sign causes the splitting of an originally united sign and signifier, and the subservience of voice to *logos*; *La voix et le phénomène* also deconstructs the relationship of voice to ideologies of embodiment and presence, albeit from the vantage point of Husserl's phenomenology of language in the *Logische Untersuchungen* (Leipzig, 1900–01).

a philosophy of voice. Although it may seem that *Ritratto* was imagined and woven into fairly rarefied symbolic networks (concerning the representations of Milan, or of the Italianate voice), it is key to remember that these networks held political and even pragmatic significance in view of the emerging aesthetic and linguistic parameters of the early days of Italian state radio.

More than Rome, Milan at mid-century was the fulcrum of the Italian media, and particularly of radio. Part of the political project of the new state radio was to fashion a language for broadcasting that was both cleansed of associations with the Fascist regime and intelligible to as wide a sector of the national population as possible. This project was, in the case of Italy, hampered by extreme linguistic fragmentation: local dialect, rather than the Italian language, was often prevalent among inhabitants of the peninsula in the early 1950s.<sup>27</sup> This factor, combined with widespread illiteracy, made it impossible for Italy to partake of what Walter J. Ong termed 'second orality' (the renewed hearkening to speech in the era of electrified media): the Italian language was, to a large extent, an idiom spoken by the urban middle classes.<sup>28</sup> The radio speech inherited from the Fascist regime was pompous and overwrought, a tongue that sounded irreducibly foreign to the majority of its listeners. Yet local dialect (common in regional radio stations) was banned from state radio not only because of intelligibility, but because, as Tullio De Mauro noted in 1962, dialects had political connotations: they signalled an impoverished rurality that the urbanized state-owned radio did not wish to represent.<sup>29</sup> By the mid-1950s, Milan's multiplying factories attracted mass immigration, leading to the shaping of the city's periphery that Prieberg observed on his train journey. Remnants of dialect, the signs of rural poverty scattered around the peninsula, were folded into the rising northern metropolis in the form of the cheap labour necessary for its expansion. It is within this context that Milan now found itself at the centre of a political project of the highest order: the city was to be the site of both the production and the dissemination of an oral tradition for the national language.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> In his seminal study *Storia linguistica dell'Italia unita* (Bari, 1962), Tullio De Mauro gathered the following statistics regarding literacy rates in 1951: 14% of the population was illiterate, with northern regions boasting rates as low as 3% and southern regions (Sicilia, Puglia, Basilicata and Calabria) going as high as 32%. Yet De Mauro also dwells on the fact that an ability to read and write often did not translate into spoken practice, thus establishing an area of 'potentiality' for spoken Italian that remained unfulfilled into the 1950s. De Mauro eventually concludes (p. 131) that in 1951 'more than four-fifths of the population habitually used dialect, and nearly two-thirds used dialect as the idiom for speaking on all occasions in social life'. The data on literacy rates are on pp. 90–9.

<sup>28</sup> The concept of 'second orality' is developed most famously in Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (New York, 1982).

<sup>29</sup> De Mauro expands on the unwitting role of neo-realist cinema in framing dialects as idioms related to misery, provinciality and backwardness; see his *Storia linguistica dell'Italia unita*, 124.

<sup>30</sup> The period of Milan's role as the fulcrum of state-owned media coincided roughly with the 15 years of radiophony that preceded the advent of television in 1954; by the mid-1950s, Milan would give way to Rome. The brief period of Milan's primacy in the media is documented in Ada Ferrari's *Milano e la RAI: Un incontro mancato? Luci ed ombre di una capitale in transizione (1945–1977)* (Milan, 2002).

Sets of rules for the composition of radiophonic texts were written by radio journalists and famous writers alike: Carlo Emilio Gadda published an instruction manual (*Norme per la redazione di un testo radiofonico*) one year prior to *Ritratto*, in 1953, encouraging simple syntax and the avoidance of both specialized lexicons and colloquialisms;<sup>31</sup> and the journalist Riccardo Bacchelli published a similar set of rules, *L'oratoria della radio*, in 1952.<sup>32</sup> Of course, the adaptation of the Italian language to the radio had begun some 30 years previously at the EIAR, the Fascist regime's radio station that was finally dismantled in 1946.<sup>33</sup> Under scrutiny in the new state radio was not only grammar, but also timbre and delivery. The historian Ada Ferrari writes of radio journalists being subjected to 'draconian rules: a rigid protocol imposed a radiophonic diction halfway between perfect pronunciation and common speech'.<sup>34</sup> The injunction seems far too vague (where, exactly, was the mid-point between colloquial speech and pristine diction?) to be the subject of a rigorous rule. Behind it lies the search for something Roland Barthes would describe as 'the grain of the voice', the audible, warm trace of the fleshy organs of speech. More specifically, what is at play is a particular characteristic of Barthes's grain: its inextricable kinship with the mother tongue. Barthes famously found grain exclusively in bodies 'speaking [their] mother tongue'.<sup>35</sup> And yet his opening example of a 'grainy' voice is a Russian church bass, despite the fact that Barthes did not speak Russian. The affect of the materiality of the mother tongue can, he seems to assume, be picked up even when we are linguistic outsiders, a presence effect that lends familiarity to that which is linguistically other in relation to us. I would argue that we find in the directives for Milanese radiophonic voices an *ante litteram*, pragmatic and ideological version of Barthes's contradictory linguistic credo – the search for a certain affect to be grafted onto a language proposed, rather than acquired, as a nationwide practice.<sup>36</sup> At stake was nothing less than the

<sup>31</sup> It may seem unlikely that Gadda, who was by all standards a writer of rather experimental, modernist prose and a cultivator of the mixing of dialectal expressions with erudite turns of phrase (see, for instance, his famous *Quel pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana*, published in 1957), could become a champion of utilitarian, straightforward prose. In fact, Gadda had been working for RAI's Third Programme since 1950, and believed the radio to be a medium that allowed for modes of communication radically different from those of literature. In many ways, he seemed to think that radio was to take on the political function that national popular literature was to have had according to Antonio Gramsci: that of facilitating a common language for the new republic.

<sup>32</sup> Both Gadda and Bacchelli are mentioned in Ferrari, *Milano e la RAI*, 89. Original references are as follows: Carlo Emilio Gadda, *Norme per la redazione di un testo radiofonico*, first published anonymously as a pamphlet for internal circulation at the RAI (Turin, 1953), 1–18; Riccardo Bacchelli, 'L'oratoria alla radio', *L'approdo letterario*, 1 (1952), 50–1.

<sup>33</sup> On this point, see Gianni Isola, *L'ha scritto la radio: Storia e testi della radio durante il fascismo, 1924–1944* (Milan, 1998), 45.

<sup>34</sup> Ferrari, *Milano e la RAI*, 89–93.

<sup>35</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Grain of the Voice', *Image, Music, Text* (London 1977), 179–89 (p. 182).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.



projection of the flesh of a speaking body that would represent, and eventually speak to, the ideal citizen of Italy's first republic.

It is within this political domain that *Ritratto*'s odd staging of the voice – the narrators' voices, the definition of silence, the elusive and ultimately disappointing 'voice of mankind' – makes most sense. Italy would, of course, reach a more homogeneous linguistic identity (thanks to the diffusion of radio and especially television) as early as a decade after *Ritratto*. Yet this work marks the emergence of the ideology of a common tongue, the unique way in which the enactment of what was then a linguistic abstraction becomes nothing less than a landmark of Milan, a voice deeply rooted in its terrain. One of the most powerful literary renditions of this paradox had come only two years prior to *Ritratto*. Pier Paolo Pasolini, who came to be one of the foremost novelists, film directors and cultural critics of post-war Italy, worked on literary renditions of dialect – and bemoaned dialect's progressive disappearance in favour of a homogeneous common tongue – all his life. In an essay of 1952 devoted to dialect poetry produced in Rome and Milan, Pasolini remarked how a prominent author of Milanese dialect poetry seemed to be possessed by a language he did not quite control:

Quasi che la lingua da lui usata sfuggisse a un certo momento ai suoi controlli, alle sue intenzioni (spesso così scoperte) e facesse un poeta che non è mai regredito nel parlante un 'tipo' creato da essa: non un Milanese ma il Milanese – sia un uomo del popolo o della borghesia – come fantasma linguistico.<sup>37</sup>

(Almost as if the language he used escaped, at one moment, from his control, from his (often openly declared) intentions and made him – a poet who never regressed into a collective speaking subject – into a 'character' produced by his own language: not *a* Milanese but *the* Milanese – be it a man of the people or of the bourgeoisie – as a linguistic ghost.)

Leydi, Berio, Maderna and Pasolini make of the flawed utterances of their imagined Milanese nothing less than a defining trait. What Berio and Maderna staged with the strangely barren voices in *Ritratto*, then, was a link by way of contortion, an impossible bind between embeddedness within locale, on the one hand, and linguistic abstraction, on the other. By the diktats of state radio, to speak of Milan while in Milan was to speak in a voice cleansed of regional signifiers, a tongue that was nobody's mother tongue. And yet the same voice also had to be charged with a grafted grain – a reminder of abstract speech's provenance from a particular body, from an urban ground concretely determined by lack of inflection. The phonologically stripped word amounts to the ghostly remainder of a state-wide spoken tongue naturalized as a Milanese orality, a site of production represented as a linguistic site of origin. It is to this vocal and linguistic order of things that *Ritratto* ultimately belongs.

<sup>37</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, 'Roma e Milano', *Passione e ideologia* (1952) (Milan, 1960), 60–92 (p. 79).

It is perhaps not surprising that in much scholarly discourse on the Studio di Fonologia up until the late 1990s – starting with Prieberg himself – *Ritratto* has been cited as the studio's opera prima. This position has been debunked by recent work, which has rightly pointed out *Ritratto*'s coarse assemblage, its pre-dating of the studio's official opening and its functional *raison d'être* as evidence sufficient to cleave it from the studio's successive work on the voice.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, it would be incorrect to bundle *Ritratto* into the same category – that of self-sufficient art composition – as later work on the voice carried out at the Studio di Fonologia. However, precisely because it is was never intended to be approached as an autonomous aesthetic object, *Ritratto* speaks with great precision about the conditions of possibility for the Studio di Fonologia as a linguistic, aesthetic and political project. To be sure, Berio and Maderna's linguistic and aesthetic parameters shifted, predictably, towards an embracing of the non-semantic aspects of human speech once they started working on bona fide electronic compositions based on sampled human voices. As I mentioned earlier, however, *Ritratto* would also be their last piece overtly to feature the site of its production, Milan. *Thema* is centred on a particular place – the Ormond Hotel's bustling lunch hours in 1904 Dublin – that in every way seems distant from 1950s Milan. Subsequent works like *Invenzione su una voce* (1960) and *Visage* (1961) would not be centred in a place or a time. But the ghost of *logos* – an anxiety about the conditions of possibility of linguistic exchange – continued stubbornly to haunt the production of the studio. As I will argue in the rest of this article, this same twisted structure, this same bind between linguistic abstraction and commitment to locale, would feature in the studio's mission statement and, eventually, in the first successful electronic composition for voice produced at the studio – Berio's *Thema*.

### 'Musical phonology' in Milan

The Studio di Fonologia Musicale della RAI opened its doors in the RAI headquarters on Milan's corso Sempione in June 1955. The name of the studio – which unusually juxtaposes a linguistic discipline with music – has been attributed to one of its head engineers, Gino Castelnuovo; whether or not Castelnuovo was responsible for this, by 1956 the complexities of the term 'phonology' had worked their way into the studio's aesthetic programme.<sup>39</sup> The writer and literary critic Umberto Eco, who worked as a writer for RAI TV in the 1950s (and began frequenting the studio assiduously when

<sup>38</sup> This argument is made by Angela Ida De Benedictis in 'Opera prima'.

<sup>39</sup> The attribution of the studio's name to Castelnuovo was made in Nicola Scaldaferrì, *Musica nel laboratorio elettroacustico: Lo Studio di Fonologia di Milano e la ricerca musicale negli anni cinquanta* (Lucca, 1997), 67.

collaborating with Berio on *Thema* in 1957), tells of the presence of key texts on 'phonology' on the studio's bookshelf:

La mia copia del *Cours de linguistique générale* di Saussure è quella che ho rubato allo Studio di Fonologia, ma poi devo aver rubato anche il Trubeckoj. Questo per dire che all'epoca, in cui non sapevo nulla di problemi linguistici e fonologici [...] allo studio ci si occupava di queste cose.<sup>40</sup>

(My copy of Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* is one I have stolen from the Studio di Fonologia Musicale, and I must have stolen also [Nikolay] Trubetzkoy. This is just to give you a sense of how, at the time, the focus of the studio was on linguistic and phonological matters [...], about which I knew nothing.)

It seems unlikely, however, that Eco got a chance to raid the studio's library before he began working with Berio in 1957, leaving us to wonder how long Saussure and Trubetzkoy (whose *Principles of Phonology* of 1939 is probably the text to which Eco is referring) had been on the shelf before his arrival – and who, exactly, had read them.

If we backtrack to 1956, for instance, we can hear the ghost of Saussure in the official mission statement for the studio, penned by none other than Berio himself. The statement mentions 'un'attività di ricerca tuttora in preparazione, riguardante la memoria e la qualità di uno stimolo sonoro [...] i rapporti tra audizione e fonazione, con speciale interesse alla voce cantata' ('research activities that are in preparation, concerning memory and the quality of sonic stimulus [...] the relationships between audition and phonation, with a special focus on the singing voice').<sup>41</sup> The words 'audition' and 'phonation' – terms straight out of Saussure's *Cours* – hint at Berio's familiarity with structural linguistics. Yet more striking is the peculiar reading of Saussurean linguistics Berio performs here. Phonation, for Saussure, was an understanding of voice as a performance of a linguistic signifier, and nothing more; inflection, accent and other aspects of the specific vocal utterance have no causal impact on signification. The fact that Saussure famously did not make *parole* a cohesive and systematic part of his study of language has long been critiqued – by scholars of the voice such as Mladen Dolar – as a dismissal, or, as Dolar puts it, even as a symbolic murder of the voice's sonorous dimension.<sup>42</sup> For Saussure – so the story goes – *phonè* had to be flattened into a diaphanous carrier of *logos* to become the subject of a systematic theory of language.

<sup>40</sup> Luciano Berio, Umberto Eco and Roberto Leydi, 'Luciano Berio, Umberto Eco, Roberto Leydi rievocano lo Studio di Fonologia a quarant'anni dalla fondazione', *Nuova musica alla radio*, ed. Rizzardi and De Benedictis, 216–35 (p. 222).

<sup>41</sup> Luciano Berio, 'Prospettive nella musica', *Elettronica*, 3 (1956), 108–15 (p. 108).

<sup>42</sup> Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA, 2006), 19: 'The inaugural gesture of phonology was thus the total reduction of the voice as the substance of language. Phonology, true to its apocryphal terminology, was after killing the voice – its name is, of course, derived from the Greek *phonè*, voice, but in it one can also quite appropriately hear *phonos*, murder. Phonology stabs the voice with the signifying dagger; it does away with its flesh and blood.'

Recent work by scholars such as Patrice Maniglier has begun to bring back to our eyes and ears the complexity of Saussure's understanding of *parole* not as a brute datum to the senses with no inherent linguistic valence, but as an order of linguistic phenomena that could not be reduced to mere causality, hinting at modes of conceptual relations far beyond both causality and dichotomy. It seems, in other words, that the *Cours* had already anticipated some of the very critiques to which it would be subjected by post-structuralist thinkers of the 1960s.<sup>43</sup> But such evaluations of Saussure were certainly not part of the intellectual discourse surrounding Berio's early days at the studio – years in which, in fact, post-structuralist critiques of Saussure were beginning in France. This is to say that Berio's juxtaposition of 'phonation' – intended as a voice fully subservient to the signifier – with singing and music is a striking and (for the times) unorthodox interpretation. In order to make sense of this clash between structural linguistics and an interest in *melos*, we need to remember that for Berio 'phonation' went hand in hand with an attention to listening – that is to say, 'audition' as well as the qualities of 'sonic stimuli' independent of semantics. There is, then, a phenomenological slant to Berio's linguistics, but one that does not – as is the case with Schaeffer's phenomenology – toss *logos* out of the equation. A sung text is a phonation that does not relay transparent signifiers – intelligible words – but an indefinable something else, something that is neither a melody beyond words nor functional speech, a moment of suspension between *phonè* and *logos*. Phonology, then, might be taken here not as the default disappearance of voice into sign, but rather the study of the process by which the sounds of words – sung, inflected with accent or intonation – are produced, heard, parsed and eventually brought to signify.

Yet it is important to remember that these terms, and particularly the term 'phonology', could be manipulated so freely by Berio only because their meaning was, at least in the texts Berio was using, itself unstable. Maniglier points out that for Saussure, phonology was 'the study of the mechanism of our [speech] organs',<sup>44</sup> a discipline concerned with the most carnal aspect of language production. It is striking that Saussure should give this nearly physiological definition to a word, 'phonology', which unlike 'phonetics' has *logos* built into it. Nowadays, our understanding of phonetics versus phonology relies on the Prague linguists, and is a reversal of Saussure's definition. The difference between the two terms had most famously been discussed by Trubetzkoy in his *Principles of Phonology*, the very text that – in Eco's account – flanked Saussure's *Cours* on the studio's bookshelf. For Trubetzkoy, whereas phonetics concerns itself with cataloguing phonemes, mere physiological attributes of the voice, phonology approaches phonemes in their functional relation to a particular

<sup>43</sup> See Patrice Maniglier, *La vie énigmatique des signes: Saussure et la naissance du structuralisme* (Paris, 2006). The key point about abandoning causality between sounds and signifiers in favour of the more complex concept of equivalences is explored in Chapter 2, 'L'immaterialité du langage', esp. pp. 80–1.

<sup>44</sup> Saussure as quoted and discussed *ibid.*, 101–2.

language.<sup>45</sup> So to which phonology – Saussure’s or Trubetzkoy’s – did Berio adhere? I would argue that his writings and, most of all, his compositions, show that he in fact conceived of phonology as the passage-work between the voice as a sonorous and physiological phenomenon and the inescapable linguistic life it is afforded as an auditory phenomenon. Music serves as the means to stretch this gap between *phonè* and *logos* into a phenomenological encounter. Words misshapen by singing, misheard, misspoken, their meaning lost and reappropriated, are reclaimed from the limbo of structural linguistics and afforded a new life not as mere sound, but precisely in their quality of being stretched towards, and yet already beyond, semantics. This is a musical phenomenology that is always twisted back towards *logos*, inflected by a desire to align the sound of words with semantic – and indeed political – intelligibility.

The studio’s insistence on the linguistic discipline of ‘phonology’ has often been understood to have borrowed from its German predecessor, the Institut für Phonetik und Kommunikationsforschung at Bonn University. During the early 1950s, the Bonn Institut was led by composers such as Robert Beyer, Herbert Eimert and Werner Meyer-Eppeler, and it conducted in-depth research into speech-writing and speech-synthesis techniques, providing impetus for the more famous electronic music studio at the Westdeutscher Rundfunk. Maderna had close relations with the Bonn Institut, to which he turned for one of his earliest electronic experiments, and whose materials he borrowed in order to compose the soundtrack to *Ritratto di città*. Yet the peculiarity of Italian anxieties about voice at mid-century lies in the minor but crucial shift between the two institutions’ titles: the change from the ‘phonetics’ of Bonn to the ‘phonology’ of Milan, with the cipher of *logos* built into it and yet strangely receding.<sup>46</sup>

Given the concern with the distribution and acquisition of language typical of Milan and of Milan’s RAI at mid-century, Berio’s reimagining of phonation is hardly an idle aesthetic concern. His evocation of phonology leads us into intellectual lineage and epistemic genealogy of the studio’s attention to the aurality of speaking and singing. Let us return to Berio’s mission statement quoted above. Immediately after evoking Saussure, Berio writes that the focus on the singing voice ‘si collega in parte con altri oggetti di ricerca riguardanti la musica popolare lo studio della quale, in questi ultimi tempi, ha subito un radicale rinnovamento sia nei concetti che nei

<sup>45</sup> See Nikolay Trubetzkoy, *Fundamentals of Phonology* (1939) (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, 1969), 3–4: ‘The “study of sound”, that is, the science concerned with the elements of the signifier, has therefore always formed a special branch of linguistics, carefully differentiated from the “study of meaning”. [...] Accordingly it would be advisable to institute in place of a single “study of sound” two “studies of sound”, one directed towards the act of speech, the other toward the language system. [...] We designate the study of sound pertaining to the act of speech by the term *phonetics*, the study of sound pertaining to the system of language by the term *phonology*.’

<sup>46</sup> The point about the difference between phonetics and phonology and its significance in Berio’s work has been made in Flo Menezes, *Luciano Berio et la phonologie: Une approche jakobsonienne de son oeuvre* (New York, 1993). Understandably, given the prevalently analytical nature of his work, Menezes does not connect this difference to broader cultural concerns.

metodi' ('is connected in part to other research goals concerning folk music, the study of which has, in recent times, undergone a radical renewal both on a conceptual and a methodological level').<sup>47</sup> The *éminence grise* behind this statement is none other than Alan Lomax, whose field recordings of Italian traditional songs date back to the years 1954–5; Lomax's demonstration of the use of portable electronic technology for the purposes of building an archive of oral traditions had been seminal for the emergence, in those same years, of Italian ethnomusicology as an academic discipline.<sup>48</sup>

Lomax had a direct relation with the Studio di Fonologia: in 1954, he had corresponded with Berio regarding experiments with the sonograph – a device that converted sound into phonetic notation. The written classification of sounds into phonemes – away from semantics – carried out via the sonograph was indicative of Lomax's analytical method with regard to field recordings, a method he would make public in 1959 as his now renowned 'cantometrics'. Although we cannot here delve into a review of Lomax's work, it is worth mentioning a key detail. Cantometrics – a complex set of parameters for the sketching of relations between the contours of individual and collective singing and the political ordering of the society to which that singing belonged – famously renounced semantics and language as a core concern in favour of a physiological attention to voice. Lomax's interest in speech-writing technology was aligned far more with Trubetzkoy's 'phonetics' than with 'phonology'; yet beyond that, it would also become the means of formulating vocality's unmediated relationship to the body politic at large, without the middleman of language. The systematic analysis of speech and song as mere sound – which was a necessary part of cantometrics – was also an aspect of the sometimes colonizing flavour of Lomax's 'samplings'.<sup>49</sup> It is, on the one hand, not surprising that Berio should have been interested in Lomax's research: the technologically mediated

<sup>47</sup> Berio, 'Prospettive nella musica', 108. In Italian post-war intellectual circles, the term 'musica popolare' indicated, quite literally, a music of 'the people' intended, ideologically, as a subalternity composed of the working class and rural populations. It was therefore considered to be an oral tradition and something quite distinct from commercial pop.

<sup>48</sup> Lomax's assistant during his field trips to Italy, Diego Carpitella, became one of Italy's leading ethnomusicologists. Carpitella was also part, in 1959, of a multidisciplinary team of scholars led by the famous anthropologist Ernesto De Martino; they went to Apulia to conduct fieldwork, and produced a seminal text on tarantism. See Ernesto De Martino, *La terra del rimorso: Contributo a una storia religiosa del Sud* (Milan, 1961).

<sup>49</sup> This is, necessarily, a very cursory assessment of Lomax's project. It is important to note that recent and innovative scholarship has re-evaluated the actuality of cantometrics precisely because of its creation of a means of talking about voice in non-aestheticizing terms, of connecting it to politics without forgoing its flesh-like qualities. Perhaps, then, more than preliminarily excising language from voice as an object of analysis, it would be fairer to say that Lomax created a way of naming and analysing a plethora of paralinguistic phenomena about the voice, thus effectively creating a language for vocal phenomena rather than taking an interest in the relation of language and voice at the level of phenomenon. On this topic, see Elizabeth Travassos, 'Ritos orales, cantometrics y otros pasos en dirección a una antropología de la voz', *A contratiempo*, 14 (2009), available at <<http://www.territoriosonoro.org/CDM/acontratiempo/?ediciones/revista-14/articulos/ritos-orales-cantometrics-y-otros-pasos-en-direccin-a-una-antropologa-de-la-vozspan-class-hotspot-on.html>> (accessed 20 August 2015).

reduction of speech to sound would become an integral aspect of his poetics by the time he started working on *Thema* in 1957. Yet, on the other hand, Lomax's preliminary methodological renunciation of language as a parameter differs fundamentally from Berio's unwavering interest in the transformation of sounds into signifiers: for him, sounds were to be heard in a tense state of potentiality towards intelligible language – *logos*, again, as the ultimate (but not necessarily immediate) destination of phonological attention. The comparison between Lomax and the Studio di Fonologia's project – and their differing, but somehow complementary relationship with language – can also be understood in terms of engagement with locale. Lomax could work on the voice as he did because of exclusive interest in rural milieux with relatively homogeneous speaking practices; the studio's interest in language implied, as I have argued, a focus, aurally and politically, on the city. The apparent dichotomy between the two – and even the implied distinction that sets up the country as the historical predecessor of the city – has long been shown to mask a deep entwinement.<sup>50</sup> In Raymond Williams's famous analysis of this issue, the country is presented as the originary myth that grounds the city, which is its ideological offspring and a way of masking the flows of labour that connect the two. Williams writes of English commentary upon English urbanization and rurality, but to apply the analysis to Lomax and Berio means bringing in a further element of geopolitics. Lomax, an envoy from the wealthiest state among post-war Western powers, saw Italy as the south of Europe, a rural periphery of urbanized central Europe; the cosmopolitan Milanese avant-garde both internalized this view – which dates back to the French Enlightenment – and fought against it by making their symbolic milieu intensely urban.<sup>51</sup>

In the intellectual communities of post-war Milan, the relationship between speech and politics had been brought to the fore by the work of one of the most important intellectual influences on the Italian post-war, Antonio Gramsci – which drew on his training as a linguist. The founder of the Italian Communist Party (1921) as well as the author of a monumental political history of the Italian peninsula, Gramsci had died in prison in 1937. His *Prison Diaries* were published posthumously by the Turin editor Einaudi in 1948, and in them he famously drew a direct connection between Italy's lack of a nationally spoken language and its political failures, including, of course, Fascism. Gramsci's impact on Italian anxieties regarding language lay with his critique of Italian politics, which hinged on the question of intelligibility, a critique that included a brief but striking condemnation of one of the most celebrated exports of nineteenth-century Italy – *bel canto* opera:

La musica verdiana, o meglio il libretto e l'intreccio dei drammi musicati da Verdi sono responsabili di tutta una serie di atteggiamenti 'artificiosi' di vita popolare, di modi di

<sup>50</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford, 1975).

<sup>51</sup> For an analysis of the constitution of Europe's southern states as a periphery of enlightened civilization during the French Enlightenment and German post-Enlightenment and idealism, see Dainotto, *Europe (in Theory)*.



pensare, di uno 'stile' nella vita della gente. [...] I romanzi d'appendice e da sottoscala (tutta la letteratura sdolcinata, melliflua, piagnolosa) prestano eroi ed eroine, ma il melodrama è il più pestifero, perché le parole musicate si ricordano di più e formano come delle matrici in cui il pensiero prende una forma nel suo fluire.

(Verdi's music, or rather the libretti and plots of the plays set to music by Verdi, is responsible for a whole series of 'artificial' attitudes, for ways of thinking, and for a 'style' in the life of the people. [...] The serial novel and popular genres (all saccharine, mellifluous, mournful literature) provide heroes and heroines, but melodrama is the most pestiferous, because words set to music are easier to memorize – they become like matrices in which thought is moulded into shape as it flows through.)<sup>52</sup>

Gramsci's attack encapsulates his concern with language: in Risorgimento opera the versified Italian of nineteenth-century librettos – unintelligible to most inhabitants of mid-nineteenth-century Italy – was invested, via the incisivness of *melos*, with a memorable meaning devoid of semantics. Yet what is at stake in his statement here is not so much a general condemnation of music as a political semiotics of the singing voice. For Gramsci, the urban bourgeoisie used music as a way of effacing – rather than overcoming – the linguistic gap between their literacy and the dialectal oral cultures of those beneath them. The 'words set to music' in opera are despicable to him because they are the vulgarization of landmarks of bourgeois ideology: subject-against-society dynamics, heightening of individual sentiment, pieties regarding the poor. Yet they are not absorbed through readership, or even through language, but through the affect of vocal melody, an affect that commands attention and memory beyond *logos*. It is this masking of the literate and linguistic through the aural and non-linguistic that grieves Gramsci. Gramsci identifies in the operatic voice the ineffable affect of a literate bourgeois ideology working its way into the aural life of working and rural classes.

Coming of age as left-wing artists in the early 1950s, both Berio and Maderna were exposed, directly or indirectly, to Gramsci's linguistic, historical and economic analyses of Italy. Maderna, who had joined the Partito Comunista Italiano in 1952, had set one of Gramsci's prison letters as part of a 12-note cantata in 1953. It is not difficult to hear after-echoes of Gramsci's disdain for bel canto opera in Berio's initial pleas for an Italian electronic music studio, such as his review of a concert of tape music held at MoMA in 1953. Roused by American electronic experiments to the need for a homegrown Italian electronic compositional school, he complained: 'Nessuno dei giovani musicisti italiani ha fino ad ora potuto "consumare" con serietà, in patria, esperienze elettroniche di sorta. Tenori e mandolini sono evidentemente i privilegi che, al momento, si preferiscono ancora riscattare' ('Up until now, none of the young Italian musicians has been able genuinely to take advantage of electronic innovations in their

<sup>52</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni dal carcere* (Turin, 1975), 969; trans. Joseph A. Buttigieg as *Prison Notebooks*, 3 vols. (New York, 1992–2007; repr. 2011), iii, 263. I have here modified Buttigieg's translation in order to highlight both the figure of pestilence (as something highly contagious) in Gramsci's metaphor for opera's effects and the image of thought as something whose flow is shaped but not arrested.

home country. It seems that tenors and mandolins remain, even today, the main assets we like to bank on').<sup>53</sup> Berio identifies the stunted artistic development of Italy with an iconic timbre – the tenor and mandolin combination, the standard instrumentation of nineteenth-century Neapolitan love songs and serenades. A literary and amply exported packaging of local oral musical tradition, Neapolitan song stands here for a version of Italian folklore that complies with – and is therefore marketable to – those who view the peninsula as a quaint southern periphery to the more literate and politically effective central European states. In other words, centuries-old anxieties about the geopolitics of Italy within Europe echo in Berio's remark: Mussolini had famously used the image of tenors and mandolins to express his dismay at Italy's reputation for military – and more broadly political – inefficacy.<sup>54</sup> We can easily reach back to long before Fascism; as I explained above, the political implications of this image of Italian vocality had been established in French and German literary discourse nearly two centuries prior to Mussolini. The extraordinary flexibility and persistence of this discourse was such that it could be evoked to express anxiety and frustrated desire towards a vast and seemingly incompatible range of 'modernities': from military might and totalitarianism to electronic music to – if we were to read the same quotation in a Gramscian strain – the possibility of linguistic education and enduring democratic governance.<sup>55</sup>

With regard to the studio's ideological set-up, however, what is most striking is how, thanks to the impact that Gramsci's magnification of the value of dialectal subaltern cultures had on Italian anthropology and ethnomusicology in the 1950s, Berio's disdain for tenors and mandolins now had a positive counterpart: the field recording. Like many of his contemporaries, Berio nurtured a belief in the ability of recording technology to bypass writing and yield sonic events in their essence. 'The symbols of electronic music', Berio wrote in 1956, 'are sounds themselves, in their objective physical reality.'<sup>56</sup> As mentioned in the previous section, Berio was familiar with the composer whose work most famously incarnated this particular conceit: Schaeffer. Indeed, Berio's interest in the modes of perception of the voice might suggest – beyond Saussurean linguistics, Lomax's sonographs and burgeoning Gramscian concerns with intelligibility across classes – also a debt to a dominant Milanese intellectual practice

<sup>53</sup> Luciano Berio, 'Musica per tape recorder', *Il diapason*, 4 (1953), 10–13 (p. 10).

<sup>54</sup> 'It is high time that the world [...] got to know a different Italian from that of yesterday – the eternal tenor and mandolinist.' Benito Mussolini, quoted in Harvey Sachs, *Music in Fascist Italy* (New York, 1988), 17; also quoted in Richard Taruskin, *Oxford History of Western Music*, 6 vols. (Oxford, 2005; repr. 2010), iv: *The Early Twentieth Century*, 751.

<sup>55</sup> It is testament to the lasting traction of the conflation of Italy with a vocality that hampers both language and politics that Dolar's seminal text *A Voice and Nothing More* opens with an anecdote about Italian soldiers who in order to evade an order to go into battle pretend instead to attend to the beauty of their superior's voice. Although Dolar is quoting the anecdote with critical distance, the complex politics of the conflation of voice with the European South are not the subject of his text, which delves into more broadly philosophical issues. See Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 6–7.

<sup>56</sup> Berio, 'Prospettive nella musica', 109: 'I simboli della musica elettronica sono i suoni stessi nella loro obiettiva realtà fisica.'

of the mid-century, namely a peculiar appropriation of Husserlian phenomenology, particularly the work of Antonio Banfi.

Banfi, professor of philosophy at the University of Milan since 1932 and the main conduit for the translation and diffusion of Husserl's writings in Italy, was one of the most important intellectuals of 1950s Milan. Not only a philosopher, Banfi was also the senate representative of Lombardy in the Italian parliament between 1948 and 1958, and – like many Italian intellectuals at mid-century – a committed Marxist. He took phenomenology to be a mode of discovering, within one's very surroundings, within the space of the city itself, new forms of philosophical knowledge worked out – as Husserl would have had it – from the perceptual encounter with things.<sup>57</sup> Banfi's work was well known at the RAI. The director of the RAI's Third Programme, the musicologist Luigi Rognoni, was a student of Banfi and a close ally of Berio and Maderna's project; another important affiliate of the studio, the philosopher Enzo Paci, was also among Banfi's students; even some journalists at the RAI were known to attend Banfi's classes at the university.<sup>58</sup>

The fact that Banfi's classes spawned two of the studio's most prominent intellectual allies is a key detail, as is the fact that voice and language featured prominently in their work; it was Rognoni who, in 1962, would suggest to Maderna that one of his last pieces for the studio (*Le rire*) should be titled after the ever enigmatic act of laughter.<sup>59</sup> Paci, who had become professor of theoretical philosophy in Milan in 1957, was not a musicologist, but his work on the intersection of linguistics and phenomenology was very influential for literary and musical avant-gardes of the 1960s: in 1951 he had founded the literary journal *Aut, aut*, to which he would contribute, between 1963 and 1974, a regular column entitled 'Il senso delle parole' ('The Sense of Words').<sup>60</sup> Perhaps most poignantly for our purposes, it was also Paci who, in 1957 (the year of his settling in Milan), would thus describe, in one of his personal notebooks, a sleepless night in the city:

Sono le tre e mezzo della notte. Mi affaccio alla finestra. Rumorio lontano di camion. Le case sono incomprensibili. Mi sembra impossibile che restino lì, indifferenti, con tanta vita umana rinchiusa tra le mura. Passa un ubriaco. Grida. Il filosofo: non solo pensa sempre il mondo, ma lo vive, lo percepisce sempre di nuovo con tutti i suoi sensi, come un problema incombente. Parole e grida che vogliono una soluzione impossibile? Poi viene il silenzio. Un silenzio pieno, vibrante. Uno sfondo sul quale le cose si disegnano vergini, nate proprio ora,

<sup>57</sup> Banfi's phenomenological school was, it is important to note, a reaction against the philosophy of Benedetto Croce, whose rather rigid take on idealism was considered, in the years of economic rebirth after the end of the Second World War, obsolete.

<sup>58</sup> Ferrari, for instance, reports that the radio journalist Pino Mezzera also informally attended Banfi's classes in Milan. See Ferrari, *Milano e la RAI*, 96.

<sup>59</sup> The anecdote on *Le rire* is recounted in Luigi Rognoni, 'Memoria di Bruno Maderna negli anni cinquanta', *Bruno Maderna: Documenti*, ed. Rossana Dalmonte and Mario Baroni (Milan, 1985), 146–51 (p. 150).

<sup>60</sup> The columns are now collected in a single publication as Enzo Paci, *Il senso delle parole*, ed. Piero Rovatti (Milan, 1987).

in questo momento. Ed acquistano un significato, diventano traslucide, lasciano intendere il loro senso di verità.

(It is half past three in the morning. I look out of the window. Distant noises of trucks. The houses are incomprehensible. It seems to me impossible that they can stand there, indifferent, while so much human life is contained within their walls. A drunkard passes by. He cries out. The philosopher: he not only thinks about the world, but also lives in it, constantly perceives it anew with all of his senses, as a looming question. Perhaps these words and cries beg for an impossible solution? Then, silence comes. A silence that is full, vibrant. A backdrop upon which things draw themselves untouched, newly born now, in this very moment. And things now take on a meaning, they become translucent, they let us know their idea of truth.)<sup>61</sup>

Paci appears to experience here something akin to a phenomenological reduction – a defamiliarization of known objects and events that in traditional Husserlian phenomenology is an intentional act of perception. Yet for Paci, the moment of defamiliarization originates as much in the urban surroundings as it does in the philosopher's will. That is, phenomenological reduction is intentionality not only applied to the city, that is, but performed spontaneously at the meeting point between urban landscape and the observer's senses. Note that the vocal connotation is here especially strong. More than the houses, the darkness, the screeching trucks, it is the unintelligible cry of the drunkard that prompts the turn from description to philosophical reflection. The anxiety of mapping the inarticulate vocal sound into signification becomes proper to Paci's condition as a thinker: he celebrates the fresh encounter with the material surface of things, but also wonders about 'the solution' that these inchoate vocal sounds demand of the philosopher hearkening to the city.

Many of the elements of Paci's journal entry are the same as those of *Ritratto* – the linguistics of the urban voice, and the advent of silence as an atmosphere of tense potentiality related to the human voice in particular. There is, however, a noticeable difference between the ghostly voice of mankind of *Ritratto* and Paci's drunkard, a difference best understood in terms of the role of *logos*. The dull voice of the Milanese accountant in *Ritratto* is made diaphanous by the ideological demand for the spread of a common spoken tongue, while the drunkard's voice is completely opaque, lifted from semantics. Still, the return of *phonè* is here a productive moment, a state of potentiality pointing towards a new, better language announced as a messianic event. Paci attends to this phenomenon knowing that it – like the mysterious houses and urban streetscape around him – has to, and will, eventually reveal its meaning. Rather than being the concrete property of the Milanese voice (as in *Ritratto*), *logos* here is the dutiful but obscure destination of the philosopher's hearing of urban space. By 1981, Berio would quote Paci as a 'compagno di strada' ('fellow traveller') in relation to the Studio di Fonologia's experiments, and Paci would eventually publish an essay on

<sup>61</sup> Enzo Paci, *Diario fenomenologico* (Milan, 1961), 29; entry dated 18 May 1957.

the phenomenology of contemporary music in the studio's academic journal, *Incontri musicali*, in 1960.<sup>62</sup> Yet already in 1957 – well before Paci took up an active interest in contemporary music – we can find, beyond the common denominator of music, a deeper link between the studio's credo and Paci's intimate reflections on the linguistic phenomenology of the city. The drunkard's cry that haunts Paci could be taken as the key to Berio's half-turn away from the linguistic functionality of phonology – the gap between *phonè* and *logos* reconceived as an existential condition proper to the city.

### *Thema* and the placeless space of speech

The cry of the drunkard described by Paci resonates with Berio's work at the studio: both belong to a common network that joins the northern Italian city with anxieties about the linguistics of the voice. Consider Berio's *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)*, his first extended composition at the Studio di Fonologia to use the voice as its sole material, and one of his most celebrated works. It consists of 6' 13" of elaborate manipulations (fragmentation, filtering, superimposition, varied playback speeds) of a two-minute recording of Berberian declaiming a passage from Joyce's *Ulysses*.<sup>63</sup> *Thema* can be considered the first composition to bear the weight of the studio's phonological research – an exploration of the threshold between intelligible speech and non-signifying vocal utterance.<sup>64</sup> Yet what marks *Thema's* kinship to Paci's intimate Milanese phenomenological diary is, above all, the heightened attention to the space surrounding the speaking voice.

This is a characteristic detectable as early as *Thema's* opening two seconds: we hear four or five voices (it is hard to determine) in the alto to soprano range, all speaking softly, each pronouncing a single word, though the word uttered appears to be slightly

<sup>62</sup> Luciano Berio, *Intervista sulla musica* (Bari, 1981), 55: 'Luigi Rognoni, Roberto Leydi, Enzo Paci e Umberto Eco erano i nostri compagni di strada.' Paci's first published essay on music was 'Per una fenomenologia della musica contemporanea', *Il Verri*, 1 (1959), 3–11. The second essay was 'Fenomenologia e relazione nella musica contemporanea', *Incontri musicali*, 4 (1960), 3–8.

<sup>63</sup> In his thoughtful article on *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)*, Agostino Di Scipio opts to refer to the recording of *Thema* approved by the composer himself, which consists of Berberian's declamation of the Ulysses excerpt and the subsequent manipulations spliced into a single track of 8' 13" duration. Agostino Di Scipio, 'Da un'esperienza in ascolto tra *phonè* e *logos*: Testo, suono e musica in *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* di Berio', *Il saggittatore musicale*, 7 (2000), 325–59. However, my timings will refer to *Thema* as the 6' 13" section of Berio's manipulations of Berberian's recorded declamation only, both for ease of reference (I do not carry out any analytical work on the declamation) and also because this is the form in which the composition is most widely known, despite the composer's rather late-in-the-day correction of this practice.

<sup>64</sup> As work by Scaldaferrri has shown, *Thema* was preceded by a constellation of electronic compositions that explored the voice as an acoustic material – for instance, Schaeffer's *Symphonie pour un homme seul* (1952) and Stockhausen's *Gesang der Jünglinge* (1956), the latter of which was well known and deeply admired by Berio. See Scaldaferrri, *Musica nel laboratorio elettroacustico*, 35–56.

different in each voice. We appear to be hearing a group of people all speaking at once: but the vocal range is too narrow, the dynamics too hushed – the words too phonetically alike for any single word or individual voice to emerge. It is as if we were hearing a single voice distorted by an overly reverberant space, a word enshrouded by the halo of its own sound. This is hardly field-recorded babble: the recording is clean of ambient noise, and the stacked words align into a clear rhythmic attack – a quick short–short–long figuration, almost martial. The effect is that of an interpolation to be registered, but not understood, across space. In other words, it is a spectacular, staged mishearing of an utterance released into a common, reverberant space shared by a remote speaker and us, the listeners.

The opening of *Thema* presents us with a much more material treatment of the voice than we heard in the diaphanous ‘voice of mankind’ offered up in *Ritratto*. We hear, that is, speech in which semantics are masked and the vocal delivery is highlighted. In the case of the opening of *Thema*, this ‘masking’ of semantics and subsequent attention to the voice’s material qualities is effected through the crafting of an imaginary acoustic environment, a resonance chamber whose echo blurs articulation. This procedure is the result of a patented compositional device which Berio terms a ‘word chord’. In ‘Poesia e musica: Un’esperienza’, an exegetic essay on *Thema* published in *Incontri musicali* in 1959, Berio describes this device in detail, thus revealing an intensely spatial conception of the sounds of speech themselves:

Si è perciò ritornati alla registrazione originale del solo testo inglese, classificando e riunendo in accordi quasi tutte le parole presenti nel testo secondo una scala di colori vocali – una serie in un certo senso – che si estende dall’A alla U, compresi i dittonghi. La disposizione originale di questa serie corrisponde [...] alle successive posizione dei punti di risonanza dell’apparato vocale.<sup>65</sup>

(We have thus gone back to the original recording of the English text, and classified and gathered into chords almost all of the words present in the text according to a vocal colour palette – a sort of series – going from A to U, including diphthongs. The original disposition of this series corresponds to the successive points of resonance of the vocal apparatus.)

By ordering and stacking words with similar formants (the technical term for the points of resonance of the vocal apparatus mentioned above), Berio conceived of words themselves as articulations of the body’s inner resonance chambers. This is a carnal conception of the voice in space, then, but one that remains tied to articulate

<sup>65</sup> Luciano Berio, ‘Poesia e musica: Un’esperienza’, *Incontri musicali*, 3 (1959), 98–112, repr. in Berio, *Scritti sulla musica*, ed. Angela Ida De Benedictis (Turin, 2013), 251–66 (p. 261; subsequent references also refer to this reprint). It is important to note that the text of the documentary *Omaggio a Joyce*, originally meant to accompany *Thema*, has a section specifically on formants. The documentary has been released as part of the CD attached to *Nuova musica alla radio*, ed. Rizzardi and De Benedictis; the text of the documentary is also published as Berio and Eco, ‘Omaggio a Joyce: Documenti sulla qualità onomatopica del linguaggio poetico’, *ibid.*, 340–56.

speech.<sup>66</sup> Formants are mostly a property of vowels – sounds, that is, in which the throat and mouth resonate without the stopping of glottis, teeth or tongue – and so for Berio to have retained the consonants that connect the vowels within words was a particular aesthetic decision. He retained the contour of speech instead of working with isolated phonemes, thus delineating, even through such sophisticated electronic manipulation, a potentiality for *logos*.

The simultaneous attention to speech and to a mercurial acoustic space is a key conceptual and compositional aspect of *Thema*. It was, for instance, not only the first composition from the Studio di Fonologia systematically to explore the voice, but also the first to be conceived in four-track spatialization.<sup>67</sup> Besides compositional matters, the primary literature produced by Berio and Eco on *Thema* also treats the concept of space – and the space of spoken utterances – as an important trait of the composition. In the opening of the essay ‘Poesia e musica’, Berio writes:

Una nuova sensibilità dello spazio in generale – ivi compresi anche gli artifici tipografici – hanno certo contribuito a dare una nuova apertura alle dimensioni espressive della parola

<sup>66</sup> In fact, Berio writes specifically about the work of welding together consonants with different phonetic traits for the purpose of word chords, thus rendering articulation more flexible. Berio, ‘Poesia e musica’, 262: ‘Con diverse velocità di distribuzione e con accostamenti più o meno densi, sono state raggruppate quelle consonanti che il nostro apparato vocale difficilmente avvicina. Questi incontri artificiali di consonanti (soprattutto successioni rapide di *unvoiced and voiced stop consonants*: b-p, t-d, ch-g) hanno permesso una evoluzione decisiva verso una più grande ricchezza di articolazione’ (‘With different speeds of distribution and with juxtaposition of varying density, we have grouped those consonants that our vocal apparatus struggles to join. These artificial groups of consonants (especially rapid successions of unvoiced and voiced stop consonants: b-p, t-d, ch-g) have permitted a neat evolution towards a greater richness of articulation’).

<sup>67</sup> Peter Manning has recently argued that the particular attention and focus on spatialization as a compositional and technological asset was one of the key characteristics of electronic composers in 1950s Milan. See Manning, ‘The Significance of Techné in Understanding the Art and Practice of Electroacoustic Composition’, *Organised Sound*, 11 (2006), 81–90 (p. 84). It must be noted that Stockhausen’s *Gesang der Jünglinge* was especially influential both in its radically innovative use of sampled voices in conjunction with synthesized sounds and in its association of voice with complex spatialization techniques. Yet although Berio makes frequent mentions of *Gesang* in his writings on electronic music, he seemed to think that its innovation lay chiefly in the combination of sampled and synthesized sound. See, for instance, Berio, ‘Musica elettronica’ (1958), *Scritti sulla musica*, ed. De Benedictis, 212–16 (p. 214): ‘L’apertura più significativa e più ricca di conseguenze realizzata in questo nuovo dominio è fornita dal *Gesang der Jünglinge*, di Karlheinz Stockhausen, e proprio perché è qui riuscito, per la prima volta, l’incontro organico dei suoni naturali [...] e dei suoni sintetici’ (‘The most significant and influential discovery in this new domain [of electronic music] is *Gesang der Jünglinge*, by Karlheinz Stockhausen, precisely because the organic combination of natural sounds [...] and synthesized sounds is here achieved for the first time’). It is also worth mentioning some key differences between Stockhausen’s and Berio’s approaches to the voice: Berio’s commitment was always to voice as sound material (and to spatialization as a way of exploring the relationship of voice both to acoustic space and to the internal spaces of the body), whereas Stockhausen was far more interested in spatialization techniques than he was in the human voice as specific sound material. This point is made, for instance, in David Osmond-Smith, *Berio* (Oxford and New York, 1991), 62.



poetica, o meglio, alle possibilità poetiche della parola stampata, compresa, detta. Già sappiamo come possiamo ritrovare nella musica [...] questa presenza dello spazio attorno alla parola poetica, di cui il nero su bianco della pagina non è che un aspetto.<sup>68</sup>

(A new sensibility of space in general – including typographical artifice – has certainly contributed towards broadening the expressive dimension of the poetic word or, rather, to the poetic possibilities of the word printed, understood, said aloud. We already know how it's possible to find in music [...] this presence of space around the poetic word, of which the black and white on the page is only one aspect.)

Yet for all this focus on matters of resonant spaces, *Thema* is not a composition about an identifiable place, a locale with semiotic and linguistic connotations. Unlike *Ritratto*, for instance, it makes no reference to Milan, or indeed to anywhere else. It is based on snippets of recorded speech that are from studio recordings rather than from live recordings; moreover, it makes exclusive use of speech in a foreign language (English) and of a literary excerpt by an author (Joyce) whose experimental use of English notoriously verges on the nonsensical. If *Thema* is a piece that explores the spatial aspects of vocal utterances, then it does so in a space that is oddly *placeless* – and, what is more, geopolitically indeterminate.

The contradiction of combining a sensuous rendition of the spatial qualities of listening with a highly abstracted approach to place can be better understood in relationship to the studio and to Milan. Examined from the vantage point of the studio's linguistic and anthropological ambitions of 1956 (ambitions that were very much grounded in Milan), *Thema* constitutes a steep departure, a strong move towards abstraction. One might even say that *Thema* – relying as it does on prestigious literature in a foreign language – was crafted with a high-brow, international audience in mind. And entice them it did: *Thema* went on to have a successful musical life of its own – first as a concert piece, then as part of several LP collections and, by the 1990s, on CD. It is included in anthologies of electronic music to this day and has been accorded a rich analytical bibliography.<sup>69</sup> Yet *Thema* is also part of a thick legitimizing discourse tied to the radiophonic medium and to the Studio di Fonologia. It was originally meant to be part of a lengthy Italian-language radio documentary on the phenomenon of onomatopoeia and its relation to electronic composition for voice. The documentary – a collaboration between Berio and Eco

<sup>68</sup> Berio, 'Poesia e musica', 253.

<sup>69</sup> *Thema* has done extremely well as a stand-alone piece of avant-garde art music. It had two separate releases as a commercial LP in 1958 (LP Turnabout TV 34177) and 1959 (LP Limelight LS 86047); the tape was then restored and released as a CD in 1995 (CD BMG 09026-68302-2). A further CD version – not restored – was released in 1991 as CD BVHaast 9109. Recently, *Thema* was even featured (uniquely among the studio's musical offerings) in a prestigious seven-volume anthology of noise and electronic music released by the Belgian label Sub Rosa between 2001 and 2013 (CD Sub Rosa, SR300). A section of *Omaggio a Joyce* – some of Berio's basic manipulations of Berberian's reading – was remixed (uncredited) by the noise band Crystal Castles in 2007.

– was written and recorded but, like *Ritratto*, never broadcast.<sup>70</sup> *Thema* was also – unlike its equally celebrated sibling compositions from this period, such as Maderna's *Dimensioni II / Invenzione su una voce* (1960) and Berio's *Visage* – the subject of an essay published by Berio himself (in 1958 for *Incontri musicali*). In other words, to become the highly regarded aesthetic object it is today, *Thema* had to shed a husk: it had to lose the traces of its function within the legitimizing discourse of Milan's electroacoustic laboratory.

This hybrid relationship to the site of production is the source of a tension that transgresses the structural aspects of the composition, as well as the piece's historiography within the institution of the studio. We find elements of this tension in the piece's relationship to literature. If the use of Joyce's text signals a departure from the interest in local oral cultures and the linguistics of speech, it is also remarkable that the specific passage chosen for *Thema* concerns the aural experience of a particular site – the author's own home city, and specifically Dublin's Ormond Hotel at dinner time.<sup>71</sup> The pub's bustle is depicted as heard and mused upon by the novel's protagonist, Leopold Bloom. The excerpt, found at the beginning of the eleventh chapter of *Ulysses*, exemplifies the Joycean flow of consciousness – albeit a consciousness that is filtered almost exclusively through the sense of hearing.<sup>72</sup> This literary conceit yields a text so

<sup>70</sup> Early formalist approaches to *Thema* include François Delalande, 'L'omaggio a Joyce de Luciano Berio', *Musique en jeu*, 15 (1974), 45–54, and Norbert Dressen, *Sprache und Musik bei Luciano Berio* (Regensburg, 1982), 38–57; among more broadly theoretical and philosophical interpretations are Nicola Scaldaferrri, "Bronze by Gold", by Berio by Eco: *Viaggio attraverso il canto delle sirene*, *Nuova musica alla radio*, ed. Rizzardi and De Benedictis, 100–57, and especially Di Scipio, 'Da un'esperienza in ascolto tra *phoné* e *logos*'.

<sup>71</sup> It is also important to note that within *Ulysses*, the eleventh chapter is related to sound according to several of the overlapping symbolic narrative structures at play in the book. It is the chapter that corresponds to the encounter between Ulysses and the Sirens; the chapter corresponding to the sense of hearing; and the chapter also devoted to the sonic arts and music. What is more, Joyce famously declared in his correspondence that the overture of the chapter contains 'the eight regular parts of a *fuga per canonem*'. See James Joyce, letter to Harriet Shaw Weaver, 6 August 1919, in *Selected Letters of James Joyce*, ed. Richard Ellmann (London, 1975), 242. Berio and Eco were well aware of the sonic symbolism behind the eleventh chapter; the documentary *Omaggio a Joyce*, for instance, opens with a quotation from Book XII of Homer's *Odyssey* (the encounter with the Sirens).

<sup>72</sup> Analyses of *Thema* rich with philosophical detail regarding the voice have recently been published by Scaldaferrri and Di Scipio, whose work I have already mentioned, and also include Romina Daniele, 'Il dialogo con la materia disintegrata e ricomposta: Un'analisi di *Thema* (*Omaggio a Joyce*) di Luciano Berio' (Milan, 2010). Scaldaferrri has also published two important essays that provide technological and cultural context for *Thema*: 'Aesthetic and Technological Aspects in Berio's *Thema* (*Omaggio a Joyce*)', *Science, Philosophy and Music: Proceedings of the XXth International Congress of History of Science*, ed. Erwin Neuwander and Laurence Bouquiaux (Turnhout, 2002), 207–15, which provides crucial detail on the (still unexamined) process of spatialization; and 'The Voice and the Tape: Aesthetic and Technological Interactions in the European Studios during the 1950s', *Crosscurrents: American and European Music in Interactions 1900–2000*, ed. Felix Meyer, Carol J. Oja, Wolfgang Rathert and Anne C. Shreffler (Woodbridge, 2014), 335–50.

saturated with onomatopoeic language and juxtaposed, grammatically loose fragments that it is almost incomprehensible to the reader:

Bronze by gold heard the hoofrons,  
 Steely ringing imperthnthn thnthnthn.  
 Chips, picking chips off rocky thumbnail, chips.  
 Horrid! And gold flushed more.  
 A husky fifenote blew.  
 Blew. Blue bloom is on the  
 Gold pinnaced hair.  
 A jumping rose on satiny breasts of satin,  
 Rose of Castille.  
 Trilling, trilling: I dolores.  
 Peep! Who's in the ... peepofgold?  
 Tink cried to bronze in pity.  
 And a call, pure, long and throbbing. Longindying call.  
 Decoy. Soft word. But look! The bright stars fade. O rose! Notes  
 Chirruping answer. Castille. The morn is breaking.  
 Jingle jingle jaunted jingling.  
 Coin rang. Clock clacked.  
 Avowal. Sonnez. I could. Rebound of garter. Not leave thee.  
 Smack. La cloche! Thigh smack. Avowal. Warm. Sweetheart,  
 Goodbye!<sup>73</sup>

As Joyce's chapter unfolds, all the words jumbled together in the opening two pages are found again as part of a more coherent narrative structure revolving around Bloom's visit to the Ormond Hotel. Bronze and Gold, for instance, turn out to refer to the two barmaids of the Ormond Hotel, thus nicknamed by Bloom because of their complexions. The 'hoofrons, / Steely ringing' refer to a passing carriage overheard from the window of the pub, while 'imperthnthn thnthnthn' is the mocking retort of a patron who has just been called 'impertinent' by one of the barmaids – and so on. By the end of the chapter, the opening two pages become intelligible not as abstract experimentation with language, but as a rendition of Bloom's hearing of the Ormond Hotel, recorded in detail through a linguistic device that captures not only snippets of intelligible speech, but the unconscious sense-making perceived through the din of inanimate objects: cutlery, glasses, coins.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>73</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1922) (Oxford, 1998), 245–6.

<sup>74</sup> One of the theorists who has most worked on the connection between language and the experience of the city in *Ulysses* is Henri Lefebvre, who mentions Joyce repeatedly in his *Critique of Everyday Life* (1991) (New York, 2014). Apart from the author's own overt engagement with Joyce, key concepts elaborated by Lefebvre such as the 'production of space', understood as the relationship between lived-in space, formalized space and imagined or represented space, are used as analytical and hermeneutic tools in recent Joyce scholarship. See, for instance, *Making Space in the Works of James Joyce*, ed. Valérie Bénéjam and John Bishop (New York and Oxford, 2011).

Joyce's language is, in other words, a transcription device, lending linguistic status to all aspects of audible human experience. Such extended linguistic power is purchased at the cost of its comprehensibility. It is therefore striking that Berio adapted Joyce's transcription technique for the voice, lending the same extensive, all-notating power – and the same tendency towards the nonsensical – not to writing, but to the act of speaking. Berberian strikingly described the piece thus:

In [...] the chapter from *Ulysses*, Joyce introduces the element of noise through the onomatopoeia. The text becomes the verbal sonorization of a scene in a public place, a sort of recording. On this literary 'recording' is based one of the best works in the field of electronic music: *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* by Luciano Berio. Here I must say that the recording and editing techniques have played a fundamental role in the vocal music. The fact that with a tape-recorder you can record one or more sounds, isolate them from their context, listen to them as they are, as sound, modify and combine them with other acoustic elements from different contexts; all this has given the musician (and the singer) the possibility of a different listening of reality and of all those acoustic facts that normally would escape us, since they are absorbed and masked by the action producing or provoking them.<sup>75</sup>

Striking here is the comparison Berberian makes between Joyce's chapter and a sound recording – a field recording. We are reminded of Berio's professed interest in oral cultures and field recordings, and his belief in recording technology as a mode of capturing sonic events; an interest that has by now undergone radical mutation. For if Joyce's chapter is to be taken as a recording, it is a recording whose technological cognate is not the needle and wax cylinder, but the capacity for inscribing aural experience into a linguistic form: a fantastically enhanced ear phono-autograph whose mechanism is not only connected to the bones of the ear, but also extended to the capacity to hear language. Indeed, the evocation of recording technology in relation to Joyce's linguistic representation of the aurality of a public space gets at what the media historian Lisa Gitelman identified as the linguistic and textual undercurrent of Edison's phonograph – and its relationship to the complex practice of shorthand transcription. According to Gitelman, the fundamental tension uncovered by the retrieval of the linguistic and textual aspects of Edison's invention is the tortuous, non-linear path between 'the legible *representation* of aural experience and some more perfect, legible *reproduction* of that same thing'.<sup>76</sup> We could think of the relationship between Joyce's text and Berio's work upon it as a revised version of this path, one in which the storing of the illegible, rather than of the legible, is the goal of transcriptive work. The focus on the negative aspect of transcription – on the sounds that defy linguistic encoding – has the effect of rendering the medium (the transcribing body, but also the recording

<sup>75</sup> Cathy Berberian, quoted in Scaldaferrri, 'The Voice and the Tape', 340.

<sup>76</sup> Lisa Gitelman, *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines: Representing Technology in the Edison Era* (Stanford, CA, 1999), 29.

apparatus) thick, cumbersome, an obstacle to transparent reproduction that lands us squarely back in the realm of representation.

It is also important to note that the category at the heart of Berberian's description is not noise, but something closer to language. Not by coincidence, 'noise' is a term she mentions only once, and then immediately qualifies as being mediated through onomatopoeia – a concept I shall take up shortly. At stake here are rather the illegible and the unintelligible; categories that, while they include phenomena that are linguistically opaque, also imply an inoculated tendency – however frustrated – towards *logos*. In order to elucidate the singularity of this take on noise, we might bring this idea to bear upon one of the most powerful ideologies of mid-century electroacoustic music – Schaeffer's 'reduced listening'. In terms strikingly akin to Schaeffer's own, Berberian muses on recording technology's ability to yield sounds 'isolated from their context', so that one may listen to them 'as they are'. Yet her idea of Joyce as a field recording reveals a fundamental shift in the understanding of this supposedly impartial mode of listening. The truth to be uncovered by 'reduced listening' is not, that is, a generic attention to one's own hearing, but a tendency towards the linguistic – what Hans Georg Gadamer coined 'linguisticity' – that is present in all human listening and thus in all sonic phenomena as heard by humans.<sup>77</sup>

Within the coordinates sketched by Berberian, music becomes the reading, the decoding of the groove left by this linguistic transcription. Not, then, a recording of the space of the Ormond Hotel, but the vocal remediation of something already notated through language, an enactment perhaps of the very moment in which a sound is heard as language. Here we should pay close attention to Berberian's initial emphasis on 'onomatopoeia'. Although mentioned only in passing in Berio's 'Poesia e musica', 'onomatopoeia' was the key concept behind the original documentary accompanying *Thema*. Indeed the documentary's full subtitle is *Documenti sulla qualità onomatopeica del linguaggio poetico* (*Documentation of the Onomatopoeic Quality of Poetic Language*). The significance of this term – and of the unorthodox interpretation Berio and Eco gave to it – is key to the role of listening to space in *Thema*, and is worth retracing quickly. The documentary proper begins – after the announcement of the title – with the following words:

C'è un momento nella vita del linguaggio in cui la parola, prima di ogni convenzione, da puro segno diventa una sola cosa con ciò che viene nominato. È il momento dell'onomatopea, in cui l'oggetto, attraverso i suoni che lo esprimono, assume un'evidenza quasi tattile.<sup>78</sup>

(There is a moment in the life of language in which the word, prior to any conventional usage, behaves as a pure sign that becomes one with the object it denominates. This is the moment of onomatopoeia, in which the object acquires, through the sounds that express it, an almost tactile presence.)

<sup>77</sup> Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960), trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London and New York, 2004).

<sup>78</sup> Berio and Eco, 'Omaggio a Joyce', 341.

Onomatopoeia – the making of signifiers by way of imitation of the signified's sound – is here brought forth as a moment of linguistic origin, a moment that signals a clean break with the Saussurean undertones of the studio's mission statement. The notion of a sonic and material connection between the linguistic sign and that which it signifies was alien to Saussure, who saw vocal utterances as the (mere) performance of an arbitrary linguistic sign and never in terms of the forces behind the creation and acquisition of new words.<sup>79</sup>

The concept of onomatopoeia in *Thema* is far more than a gesture, but the backbone of a lengthy argument that leads us far beyond Saussure and his discontents. For Berio and Eco, onomatopoeia does not primarily have to do with the proper moment of naming things, but is rather a vast, open-ended process of imitation that endows all kinds of sound with a primal linguistic charge. The examples presented by Berio for onomatopoeia start with 'anthropological' case studies such as the kinship between an unspecified African tonal language and a particular style of African drumming, and the similarities of Native American song to birdsong; but eventually we are led to the city in one odd sleight of hand: 'Il canto degli uccelli nella voce degli indiani diviene ora il rumore delle nuove macchine. Istinto irrefrenabile dell'onomatopea' ('The birdsong echoed by the voice of the Indians now becomes the noise of the new machines. The irrepressible instinct of onomatopoeia').<sup>80</sup> We are then promptly provided with a brief clip of a mechanical noise of unspecified origin vaguely resembling the contour of the previously heard birdsong. But there is something decidedly awkward about this transition: whereas all examples thus far implied a rather conscious imitation of animal or human vocal sounds, we are now presented with a case of imitation involving a sound decidedly inanimate – the sounds produced by the rhythmical workings of a mechanical contraption, pointing us towards the technological apparatus of an urban environment. The documentary text also seems to be attributing imitative intent to the noises produced by a mechanism whose primary function is neither sonic nor musical; if the machine's sounds are an example of onomatopoeia, who is performing

<sup>79</sup> The section devoted to onomatopoeia in Saussure's *Cours* is brief but highly interesting: Saussure seems to do an almost disingenuous somersault to avoid considering a causal, sonic relationship between sign and signified. See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916), ed. Tullio De Mauro (Paris, 1995), 101–2: 'On pourrait s'appuyer sur les onomatopées pour dire que le choix du signifiant n'est pas toujours arbitraire. [...] Des mots comme *fouet* et *glas* peuvent frapper certes oreilles par une sonorité suggestive; mais pour voir qu'il n'ont pas ce caractère dès l'origine, il suffit de remonter à leurs formes latines (*fouet* dérivé de *fāgus*, "hêtre", *glas* = *classicum*); la qualité de leurs sons actuels, ou plutôt ceux qu'on leur attribue, est un résultat fortuit de l'évolution phonétique' ('Onomatopoeia might be used to prove that the choice of the signifier is not always arbitrary. [...] Words like French *fouet* "whip" or *glas* "knell" may strike certain ears with suggestive sonority, but to see that they have not always had this property we need only examine their Latin forms (*fouet* is derived from *fagus* "beech-tree", *glas* from *dassimim* "sound of a trumpet"). The quality of their present sounds, or rather the quality that is attributed to them, is a fortuitous result of phonetic evolution'; Saussure, *General Course in Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York, 1959), 69).

<sup>80</sup> Berio and Eco, 'Omaggio a Joyce', 341.

the imitation? Unless we assume an odd lapse into animism – with onomatopoeia becoming a case of things talking – the turn implied here is from speaking to listening. Onomatopoeia, that is, has become not so much a way of producing new words, but a mode of listening in which patterns (even linguistic patterns) are discerned – by ear – in all surrounding sounds regardless of their source.

The double movement – towards a notion of onomatopoeia as listening, and towards the city – can be explained in terms of Berio's and Eco's particular literary interests, which at this time verged not only on Joyce, but also on an Italian thinker who was crucial to Joyce – Giambattista Vico. In his *New Science* (1733) – a text very dear to Joyce, and also to Eco, who would write at length about both Vico and Joyce in *Opera aperta* (1962) – Vico famously staged onomatopoeia as the moment in which primitive humans answered thunderclap by imitating its sound, a moment in which 'hearing' a natural phenomenon as linguistic communication became the condition for the ensuing imitative sound:

Eglino, spaventati ed attoniti dal grand'effetto di che non sapevano la cagione, alzarono gli occhi e avvertirono il cielo. E perché la natura della mente umana porta ch'ella attribuisca all'effetto la sua natura [...] e la natura loro era, in tale stato, di uomini tutti robuste forze di corpo che urlando, brontolando, spiegavano le loro violentissime passioni, si finsero il cielo un gran corpo animato, che per tal aspetto chiamarono Giove [...] che col fischio de' fulmini e col fragore de' tuoni volesse dir loro qualcosa.<sup>81</sup>

(Frightened and astonished by the great event whose cause they did not know, they raised their eyes and noticed the sky. And since the nature of the human mind leads it to attribute its own ways to external events [...] and their nature was, at that time, that of men of great bodily strength who explained their violent emotions by way of screams and groans, they pictured the sky to themselves as a great animated body, whom for that reason they named Jove [...] who meant to tell them something by the hiss of his bolts and the clap of his thunder.)

Within the network of Eco, Berio and their common attention to Joyce, this passage was especially well thumbed. Joyce himself would take up this particular moment of the *New Science* in the beginning of *Finnegan's Wake* – in which the thunder is 'named' as the ludicrously onomatopoeic 'bababadalgharaghtakamminarronkonnbronntonnerronntuonnthunntrovarrhounawnskawntoohooorderenthurnuk', and this same passage was in turn repeatedly evoked by Eco in *Opera aperta*.<sup>82</sup> What is important here, however, is that in Vico's *New Science*, the process of onomatopoeia was a concept closely tied to the very origin of civilization, the passage from nature to culture. Onomatopoeia is bound with the origin of a space in which one is being talked at,

<sup>81</sup> Giambattista Vico, *Principi di scienza nuova d'intorno alla comune natura delle nazioni* [...] corretta, schiarita, e notabilmente accresciuta, ed. Paolo Rossi (Milan, 1959), 157.

<sup>82</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* (1964), trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, 1989), esp. Chapter 8 ('Two Hypotheses about the Death of Art'), 166–79.



addressed – a shared, public space created at the moment in which all sounds are heard as tending towards novel words: *phonè* spirited towards *logos*.

Onomatopoeia, then, is the means to a journey that leads all the way back to one of the most famous 'places' of Western philosophy: the mythical site and time of the origin of language. Indeed, if *Thema* incarnates a place, a particular kind of site, it is precisely this primal scene of the origin of language, a place that shares traits not only with Vico's onomatopoeia, but also with other accounts of the origin of language, such as Rousseau's. We can, for instance, hear echoes of Rousseau's *Essai sur l'origine des langues* behind Berio's wish for a future listening praxis whose true purpose

non sarebbe comunque di opporre o anche di mescolare due diversi sistemi espressivi, ma di creare invece un rapporto di continuità fra di loro, di rendere possibile il passaggio dall'uno all'altro senza darlo ad intendere, senza rendere palesi le differenze fra una condotta percettiva di tipo logico-semantic (quella che si adotta di fronte a un linguaggio parlato) e una condotta percettiva di tipo musicale.<sup>83</sup>

(would not be to oppose or even to mix two different expressive systems, but to create a relation of continuity between them, to make the passage from one to the other unnoticeable, without exposing the difference between perceptual behaviour of a logical-semantic type (which is adopted with spoken language) and perceptual behaviour of a musical type.)

Here, then, is a mythical time and place where linguistic failure does not exist, but only an infinite potentiality for signification; a place where – to paraphrase Rousseau – 'there is no music but melody and no melody but the varied sounds of speech'.<sup>84</sup> This is the place not of music, but, as Jacqueline Waeber puts it, of *music*, the excess and lack of semantics that separates modern-day music from language, while fusing them both into the same projected shadow.<sup>85</sup>

And yet the imagination of such a time and place – of such a primal language – is itself a historical product, one with strong geopolitical connotations. For Rousseau, writing in late eighteenth-century monarchical France, it was famously Italy, and Italian opera, which provided the modern cure for the longing for this primal 'elsewhere'.<sup>86</sup> For Berio, an Italian composer all too aware of his country's high operatic cachet, but also of this cachet's implicit relationship to Italy's position as a southern (and chronic) latecomer to a constellation of Western governments which had a longer tradition of

<sup>83</sup> Berio, 'Poesia e musica', 254–5.

<sup>84</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Languages* (1781), trans. John H. Moran and Alexandra Gode (Chicago, IL, and London, 1986), 51.

<sup>85</sup> Jacqueline Waeber, 'Introduction', 'Rousseau in 2013: Afterthoughts on a Centenary', colloquy in the *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 66 (2013), 251–95 (p. 254).

<sup>86</sup> Postcolonial critiques of Rousseau, such as Dainotto's, notably do not afford great significance to Rousseau's embracing of the European South as a positive, and mourned, site of origin – a characteristic that separated him from other French Enlightenment philosophers who held Italy in suspicion as a place adverse to literature and democracy. See, for instance, Dainotto, *Europe (in Theory)*, 101.

democracy, the retrieval of this 'music', a lost moment of potentiality, was a means of bringing a hierarchy of Western (and central) European powers back to a level ground in which no language had more claim to reason than others. For him, this 'elsewhere' became experimental literature written in the English language. The symbolic role of English-language modernism is, paradoxically, one of the last traces of Milanese linguistic anxieties we can find in *Thema*. English – the language of the allied powers of the Second World War – enjoyed special political prestige in the first decade after the war as an international lingua franca that shadowed the formation of a state-wide common language in Italy. Italy's state radio – which had been under the aegis of the pro-American Christian Democrat party since the early 1950s – was itself responsible for the inexorable spread of the English language, which was prolifically sent across the airwaves in the shape of anglophone pop music.<sup>87</sup> Yet even within elite literary circles, English literature enjoyed much prestige; for example, the literary magazine *Il Verri*, founded in Milan in 1956, privileged English-language poetry and literature above all other foreign literature.<sup>88</sup> Eco, Berberian and Leydi passed many an evening together at Berio and Berberian's home both listening to new music and examining modernist literary works.<sup>89</sup> We might gain much insight into the atmosphere that yielded *Thema* if we stop to imagine precisely this fireside scene and the kind of listening experience it might have involved. Joyce's *Ulysses* – whose official Italian translation would be published by Mondadori only in 1960 – would have been an arcane object, held out and probably read aloud by Berberian, the group's only native English speaker. We might imagine her gentle American diction rebounding off the sitting-room walls as Eco and Berio wrestled with Joyce's forbidding constructions, enjoying the perceptual lilt between the semantics and non-semantics of a language that was not, after all, their own but that, in its very unintelligibility, was a welcome, even familiar, aural experience. A Milanese evening, yet an evening revolving around the aural and linguistic encounter with an elsewhere, an aural experience with no place. Phonation and audition, then, but phonation and audition still unmoored from concrete language politics: a convivial return to the origins of language.

<sup>87</sup> The most famous analysis of the influence of American language, lifestyle and media in Italy is Stephen Gundle, 'L'americanizzazione del quotidiano: Televisione e consumismo nell'Italia degli anni cinquanta', *Quaderni storici*, 21 (1986), 562–94.

<sup>88</sup> To bring us back to more musicological pastures, one of Leydi's earliest monographs after the war was a study of American protest songs: see Roberto Leydi, *Ascolta, Mister Bilbo!: Canzoni di protesta del popolo americano* (Milan, 1954). Leydi was also deeply interested in jazz music in the early 1950s, an interest that also reflected a widespread positive bias towards American cultural production.

<sup>89</sup> See Berio, Eco and Leydi, 'Luciano Berio, Umberto Eco, Roberto Leydi rievocano lo Studio di Fonologia', 221. It is likely that foreign languages, and particularly English, would have been spoken and read during these evenings; in those same years, Berberian began working as a translator, translating into Italian the writings of the literary critic Patricia Hutchins (*Il mondo di James Joyce*, trans. Roberto Sanesi and Cathy Berberian (Milan, 1960)), the comedian Woody Allen (*Saperla lunga*, trans. Alberto Episcopi and Cathy Berberian (Milan, 1966)) and the political cartoonist Jules Feiffer (*Passionella e altre storie*, trans. Umberto Eco and Cathy Berberian (Milan, 1963)).

## Conclusion

The resonance of Enlightenment theories of language in *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* is hardly an isolated occurrence in mid-century Milanese modernism. In a retrospective essay on the efforts of 1950s and 1960s literary avant-gardes in Italy, Eco located the Studio di Fonologia of Maderna and Berio within this intellectual climate: the Milan of the years 1955–60, which he termed an ‘illuminismo padano’ – an Enlightenment of the Po valley.<sup>90</sup> Eco’s reference to the Enlightenment was made in relation to a series of events and enterprises undertaken in Milan, all of which concerned literary research on language. Among them were the first translations of literary works by foreign avant-gardes (notably Brecht and Joyce), the foundation of the literary magazine *Il Verri* (named after Alessandro and Pietro Verri, both very active writers and thinkers in the Milanese Enlightenment of the 1760s), and the inauguration of the literary review *Il politecnico* (also named after an earlier Milanese literary enterprise by Carlo Cattaneo).

The Studio di Fonologia is, strikingly, the only institution mentioned by Eco that is not a literary enterprise; indeed, it is the only activity concerned not with printed materials but with listening – a listening directed at the recorded and manipulated human voice. It is likely that Eco’s point of reference for the studio’s output was indeed *Thema* – the piece over which he had the most direct intellectual influence, and a piece that puts linguistic decoding and transcription at the heart of its poetics. The association – beyond Vico’s onomatopoeia – with a specifically Milanese Enlightenment is here particularly pointed. An erudite historian, Eco would have known that the Milanese Enlightenment had revolved around a magazine – *Il caffè* – that boasted a peculiar narrative frame: it was presented by its editor as the transcribed conversations among the learned customers of a bustling fictional coffee shop in Milan. Transcription of oral exchanges, the aurality of a public venue: the linguistic scene of the Lombard Enlightenment shared similar coordinates to those of *Thema*. Of course, *Il caffè* presented perfectly intelligible intellectual exchanges rather than the non-semantic complexities of Berberian’s manipulated voice, the clamour of the Ormond bar; yet the stress on a linguistic depiction of a public space roots them both in a shared concern with the nature of a common tongue, and it is this concern, perhaps, that lies behind Eco’s historiographical ordering.

Indeed, Eco’s enigmatic reference to the Milanese Enlightenment brings us all the way back – beyond the primal linguistic scene of *Thema* – to the politics of language within the state-owned media. If the studio belongs to a Milanese Enlightenment, it

<sup>90</sup> The parallel between the Milanese Enlightenment and the Milanese 1950s is first discussed in Umberto Eco, ‘Il gruppo ’63 e l’illuminismo padano’, *Sugli specchi e altri saggi: Il segno, la rappresentazione, l’illusione, l’immagine* (Milan, 1985), 93–104. In this version of the essay, the Studio di Fonologia does not feature. It does feature in a later essay entitled ‘Gruppo ’63 quarant’anni dopo’, first delivered as the keynote lecture in Bologna on 8 May 2003 for a conference in celebration of the fortieth anniversary of the foundation of Gruppo ’63, and now published in the collection *Costruire il nemico e altri scritti occasionali* (Milan, 2011), 135–67.

does so most of all in virtue of its relation to the project of linguistic reform carried out by state broadcasting. Both enterprises share the construction of a fictional, ideal speaking subject. The act of transcription offered as the condition to *Il caffè*'s life as a text is a politically charged narrative expedient: the construction of writing as the transcription of a perfectly transparent common spoken language. It is not difficult to note the parallels between such conceits and the complex negotiation of Italian as a spoken language by the national radio – the grafting of the ‘grain’ of the mother tongue onto the ideal speaker’s voice, and the wry offering up (in *Ritratto*) of uninflected Italian as a Milanese ‘voice of mankind’.

It is not a coincidence, perhaps, that the chronology of the studio’s work on the voice coincides with the most intense moments of encounter and confrontation with the economic and political parameters of the RAI. If *Ritratto* was crafted the year before the studio’s opening as a pitch to RAI executives, it is also remarkable that the year after *Thema*’s completion, 1959, was also the year of Berio’s resignation as director; the studio’s head engineer, Alfredo Lietti, resigned the following year. With the emergence of the new medium of television, radio quickly became obsolete as a means of entertainment and linguistic education, and the budget for the radiophonic avant-garde – and its quickly ageing state-of-the-art technological apparatus – dwindled. Most of Berio and Maderna’s now famous elaborations on recorded speech were created over the following two years, as if to mark the overlap with, and incumbent expulsion from, the political and linguistic project of state-owned media.<sup>91</sup>

And so we are back to the discourse on the threshold – the state of simultaneous belonging and not belonging, of speech and insignificant vocality that haunted Prieberg’s loaded depiction of the studio’s geopolitical location. Near the edge of the hypermodern city hover the silent ghosts of a rural past, or so the story goes. And yet, what is perhaps most disturbing about Prieberg’s peasant, with his white clothes, dark skin, caged bird and shawm, is that he, too, is already an aestheticized version of a concrete political reality, the immigrant communities that lay huddled around the expanding city bounds. The lyrical peasant is a ghost because he has been beautified out of political relevance. He plays the old shawm because he is not, in fact, a speaking political subject. Years later, the writer and activist Goffredo Fofi would report the Turinese workers’ perception of southern immigrants through an image that looks like a grim – and perhaps more accurate – version of Prieberg’s musical peasant: ‘Essi guardavano con una punta di disprezzo i loro cugini di campagna che, a sentir loro, andavano in giro “con le radio appese al collo, le scarpe piene di buchi e parlavano solo in dialetto”’ (“They looked with contempt upon their cousins from the countryside, who, by their account, walked around “with radios hanging around their neck and

<sup>91</sup> The dismemberment of the studio in 1959–60 is documented in Angela Ida De Benedictis, “A Meeting of Music and the New Possibilities of Technology”: The Beginnings of the Studio di Fonologia Musicale di Milano della RAI, *The Studio di Fonologia: A Musical Journey 1954–1983* (Milan, 2009), 3–19.

holes in their shoes, and spoke only in dialect”).<sup>92</sup> Apart from the overt markers of poverty, it is the sonic imagery – the imagery around the voice, specifically – that has been most intensely modified: Prieberg’s peasant did not speak, but instead blew into a shawm; Fofi’s immigrant is overloaded by broadcast speech he – who ‘speaks only dialect’ – does not own, or, probably, understand. What is melody in Prieberg becomes unintelligible speech in Fofi, and the technology of the wind instrument – channelling breath away from the voice and into melody – becomes the technology of radio broadcasting, doubling the immigrant’s dialectal utterance as a second, inscrutable voice issuing from the device hung around his or her neck. We might understand the studio’s work of the early 1950s as bouncing conceptually between precisely these two images, harnessing music now as consolation from, now as awed rediscovery of, the sinister gift of language.

#### ABSTRACT

The Studio di Fonologia Musicale of Milan, Italy’s first electronic music studio, opened in 1955. Housed in the national broadcasting (RAI) studios in Milan, the studio was founded by two celebrated Italian composers: Luciano Berio and Bruno Maderna. The institution is often remembered nowadays for being the first electronic music studio to focus its activity on the human voice. As I argue, this focus was not only of an aesthetic nature, but rather reflected long-standing political and intellectual conceptions of voice, speech and public space that were rooted in Italy’s early days as a republic, and in mid-twentieth-century Milan as the flagship city for this newly achieved political modernity.

<sup>92</sup> Goffredo Fofi, *L’immigrazione meridionale a Torino* (Milan, 1964), 142.