

A TESTIMONY TO THE IMMORTALITY OF THE STRING QUARTET GENRE: *GLOSSE* BY LUCIANO BERIO

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SUMMARY. Luciano Berio's string quartet compositions are a significant post-war contribution to the medium. *Glosse*, the last of these pieces, is conceived as a series of short musical commentaries on an imaginary quartet. Yet, this work emerges as a very coherent one, leaving a strong impression of continuity, as well as distinctiveness of the individual ideas. Motivic and textural fragments fusion together, through the employment of the so-called "harmonic fields" technique, which is thoroughly described in the article. The music is primarily gestured and somewhat pointillist, typical of Berio's late output. This study attempts to elucidate the pitch, harmonic, and formal structure of the piece, in relation to the primary meaning of its title, *Glosse*.

Keywords: quartet, Berio, *Glosse*, strings, analysis, form, pitch, harmonic field, chromatic saturation.

While not all designated "string quartets" as such, Luciano Berio's string quartet compositions,² threading through his output at roughly one per decade, are a significant contribution to the medium. *Glosse* was composed in 1997, following a commission from I Teatri di Reggio Emilia, for the 4th *Premio Paolo Borciani* International String Quartet Competition. The piece was dedicated to Leonardo Pinzauti. Here is a short confession that Berio made on one occasion *Glosse* was performed:

*"I had already been working sporadically for some time on a new string quartet (the fourth), when I was asked to contribute a mandatory finalists' piece to the Borciani Competition. Glad to render homage to the memory of Borciani and the Italian Quartet, I took the sketches, which I had been collecting and modifying here and there, and gathered them together in such a way as to avoid the impression of a homogeneous development or of continuous variation. I thus gave up the idea of a "fourth quartet" and in its place Glosse was born, made up of short commentaries on a virtual quartet or, more precisely, on a quartet which does not exist. A rather complex and mysterious matter..."*³

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² *Study* (1952), *Quartetto* (1956), *Sincronie* (1964), *Notturmo* (1993), and *Glosse* (1997).

³ *Profiles and repertoires*, available online at: <<http://www.cematitalia.it/index.php?id=5.1&lg=en&pag=opera&wh=6>>, Accessed 19 August 2010.

In conclusion, *Glosse* could be regarded as a collection of motivic and textural fragments which fusion together, in an anticipation of a quartet that Berio planned but, eventually, decided not to write. Yet, this work emerges as a very coherent one, leaving a strong impression of continuity, as well as distinctiveness of the individual ideas. Before analyzing the piece itself, a little biographical insight is necessary.

Luciano Berio was born in 1925, in Oneglia, Italy. He studied the piano with his father and grandfather, who were both organists. During World War II, he was conscripted into the army, but on his first day, he injured his right hand while learning how to load a gun. This prevented him from pursuing a career as a pianist.

After the war, Berio studied at the Milan Conservatory, mainly under composer Giorgio Ghedini. The Conservatory ran a ten-year course of study, but Berio was able to register directly into the fifth year, and concentrated on composition. At that time, he made a living by accompanying singing classes, and even by conducting provincial opera shows. While doing this, he met Armenian-American soprano Cathy Berberian, who would become his wife shortly after graduation (they divorced in 1964). Berio would write many pieces exploiting her versatile and unique voice.

In 1952, Berio won a Koussevitzky bursary and went to the United States to study with Luigi Dallapiccola at Tanglewood, Massachusetts. There he gained a great interest in serialization but, notably, he only accepted the exigencies of serial canons in as much as they suited his creative needs. One consequence of this is that analysts will find in Berio's scores only remnants of the serial system. Later, he attended summer courses at Darmstadt, meeting Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen, György Ligeti, and Mauricio Kagel there. He became interested in electronic music, and upon his return to Italy, in 1955, co-founded the "Studio di Fonologia," an electronic music studio in Milan (with Bruno Maderna as the other co-founder). He also produced an electronic music periodical, called "Incontri Musicali" ("Musical Gatherings").

In 1960, Berio returned to Tanglewood as Composer in Residence, and in 1962 took a teaching post at Mills College in Oakland, California. In 1965, he began to teach at the Juilliard School, and there he founded the Juilliard Ensemble, a group dedicated to the performance of contemporary music. In 1972, Berio returned to Europe. From 1974 to 1980, he acted as director of the electro-acoustic division of IRCAM in Paris, and in 1987 opened "Tempo Reale" in Florence, a centre similar in intent to IRCAM. In 1994, Berio became Distinguished Composer in Residence at Harvard University, remaining there until 2000. He continued to compose to the end of his life, and died in Rome, in 2003.

Although Luciano Berio had a life of constant travel, the places to which he relocated did not influence his work dramatically. He always said that America, for example, served only as a work place, not an inspirational

world. Inside, he always remained Italian. He encouraged the knowledge of European musical tradition, but strongly militated against nostalgia.

Over the course of his career, Berio showed great interest in ethnomusicology, phonetics, structural anthropology, and especially electro-acoustic research. Although he included tape parts in several compositions he wrote from 1970 on, electronic resources no longer played the central role in his work that they had in the late '50s and '60s. *Glosse* is just one of the pieces that belong to this return to acoustic instruments.

As is the case of this work, Berio's scores reveal a great diversity of details. Nevertheless, his achievements are mainly based on traditional compositional techniques, such as the transformation of pre-established materials, or the permutation of limited resources. Continuity was always important to Berio's development as a musician, and it obviously influenced the way he wrote his music. He would once admit, "Like a good Ligurian, I never throw anything away".⁴ Obviously, Berio referred here to both his earlier compositions, and particular musical ideas or materials he might have thought of at one point or another.

Most of his sound materials are shaped as musical gestures, and *Glosse* is one of those compositions that owe their cohesion to the sustained inventiveness of the individual gestures. The real potential of "gestural writing" lies in the fact that Berio uses gestures for what they may eventually become by means of evolution, and therefore does not transform the piece into just a "catalogue" of gestures.

In terms of music structure, Berio has a tendency to focus the listener's ear by working only with a limited choice of pitch materials at one time. In order to better organize the sound material used in a piece, he came up with the concept of "harmonic fields" (or "pitch fields"). These fields are temporarily fixed pitch groupings (both vertical and horizontal), dominated by one or two intervals (and sometimes the notes diatonically or chromatically adjacent to them). They consolidate and break up in fairly rapid succession, but represent a means of maintaining harmonic control within complex structures. The label "pitch field" could be seen somehow restrictive, because it suggests a collection of independent elements, while "harmonic field" implies that there are more complex relations and processes taking place.

The idea of "harmonic fields" is just one of many possible approaches to organizing pitches, neither as strict as total serialisation, nor as free as purely intuitive writing. Berio calls the pitch reduction of a field "harmonic summary". He constantly tries to alternate and define distinct fields (with distinct sonorities), but at the same time seeks to cover all the possibilities of grouping the twelve pitch classes. He named the process of exhausting the aggregate "chromatic saturation".

⁴ Osmond-Smith, David, *Berio*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1991, p. 46.

Sometimes, using a principle analogous to that of defining pitch fields, Berio approaches rhythm as a fixed sequence, too. This procedure is, however, less common in his work.

Berio has numerous ways of going about working with pitch fields. He manipulates and transforms them by harmonic enrichment, by dissolving harmony into melody, dissolving melody into series of harmonics, repetition of harmony, interpolation of pitches, etc. A very common harmonic procedure is swapping notes between instruments, in order to create barely perceptible differences in the global timbre of the “harmonic field”. This procedure proves most efficient in the case of orchestral works. The “harmonic fields” can also be defined by simultaneity, or spelled out selectively (*arpeggiando*, through embellishments, etc.). See Example 1, at the end of the study, for illustration of harmonic field consolidation.

In Berio’s works, there is a constant connection between the logic of pitch organization and the evolution of motivic or gestural materials. Very often, motives or gestures (which are static entities) contribute to the process of creating interaction between harmonic fields (which become dynamic entities). In other words, it is motives and gestures that help harmonic fields renew themselves. One result of this coexistence is the introduction of gestural and harmonic “refrains”. In *Glosse*, the idea of refrain plays a very important role.

The title of the piece (*Glosse*) is the Italian plural for *gloss* (noun). The origin of the word is the Latin *glossa*, which means paraphrase, annotation, or commentary. The German dictionary also contains a very illustrative verb that belongs to the same family, *glossieren*, which means to gloss, annotate, comment, elucidate.

In Berio’s opinion, a musical *gloss* is a collection of brief musical annotations, a short dictionary of idiomatic “sonic gestures”. Throughout the string quartet, these gestures are defined by means of a few distinguishing marks, which will be described thoroughly here.

In terms of overall formal structure, there is a sectional approach to the piece. There are twelve distinct sections, which share a few common traits (gestural refrains that reoccur across the sections, such as *pizzicato* chords, or melodic motives initiated by different instruments). What really makes the sections different from one another is the particularity of each “sonic gesture”. By providing a distinct sound to every section, these “sonic gestures” at the same time play the role of “formal gestures”. They also confer a distinct character to every section (lively, lyrical, mechanical, frantic, contemplative, narrative, etc.). Most importantly, there is no elaboration to the piece. The distinct idioms are just exposed (defined), alternated, blended together, or juxtaposed, in what Berio calls a “counterpoint of gestures”.⁵

⁵ Osmond-Smith, David, *Berio*, p. 72.

The following table shows in which way *Glosse* is structured, and classifies the essential materials and instrumental techniques that Berio utilizes throughout the piece.

Table 1

Luciano Berio, *Glosse* – FORMAL STRUCTURE

Section	Measures ⁶	Characteristics
1	1 → 23	- Plays the role of a Theme in the overall economy of the glossary; - Exposition of several idiomatic gestures (<i>pizzicato</i> chords, melodic motives in the cello part, tremolos, polyrhythm, dynamic changes); - Summary of the 'sonic gestures' to be presented throughout the rest of the piece.
2	24 → 36	- Melodic dialogues (all instruments take up the initial cello motivic material); - Detailed, distinctive 'formal gestures'.
3	37 → [64]	- Continuous 'Brownian' motion that defines 'harmonic fields'; - Cello is again the most active motivically (melodic gestures).
4	65 → 74	- Sketchy gestures (two-note or three-note groupings); - Dynamic subtleties play an important role; - Harmonics represent the element of novelty; - Cello establishes a prominent bass line (recurrence of the same pitches). The lowest recurrent pitch, up to measure 80, is F ² (cello) - a possible fundamental shared by all harmonic fields.
5	75 → 84	- Isorhythmic gestures (different patterns for each instrument, but totally synchronized metrically, and matched dynamically); - Mechanical attacks and releases.

⁶ Although each section is clearly delineated by double barlines, there are a few cases of transitional measures, such as nos. 23, 64, 104 and 134. Measure 64 is isolated in-between double barlines, but cannot make up for a separate section in itself.

Section	Measures ⁶	Characteristics
6	85 → 96	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Violently articulated passages (e.g. eight-notes); - All instruments play within a close range, but parts are again independent from one another; - Layered texture.
7	97 → 103	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Trill and tremolo archetype (single and double-stopped trills); - Viola emerges with melodic gesture.
8	104 → 134	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Polyphony of attacks (entries); - Dialogues of scattered trills, accented notes, and soft sustained notes; - Double strings (preferred harmonic intervals: minor 3rd and semitone).
9	135 → 153	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Arpeggiated harmonics or multiple grace notes – new gestures; - These are played against a succession of long notes that seem to result from the augmentation of the melodic motive.
10	154 → 168	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Pizzicato</i> on double strings (as fast as possible); - Performers must lay bow aside and imitate guitar playing (<i>rasgueado</i>); - Dialogues of dynamic changes; - Harmonic intervals are again consistent with the melodic patterns that formerly created the ‘harmonic fields’ (e.g. section 3).
11	169 → 171	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Short conclusive segment before ‘restatement’ of Theme section; - Combination of <i>pizzicato</i> and <i>arco</i> (anticipation of final synthesis); - Reappearance of eight-note chords (functionally, a re-transitional section).
12	172 → 190	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Freely organized ‘restatement’ of first section; - Idiomatic elements present again (<i>pizzicato</i> chords, melodic motives with intervals that create the preferred ‘pitch fields’); - Cello goes all the way down to low C (singular moment); it is the instrument that has the last word of the piece – disintegrating melodic motive.

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Among the gestural idioms that could be labelled as “refrains”, relevant to the entire quartet are:

- chordal, rotative *pizzicato*;
- short melodic motives using certain collections of pitches;
- *tremolo* on double-stopped strings (usually bowing on the bridge);
- plucked *ff pizzicato* + the same note held on the bow (on a different string);
- harmonics in various combinations;
- *pizzicato tremolo* (*rasgueado* – imported from guitar technique);
- preference for the interval of minor 3rd (either harmonic interval, or if melodic interval then especially descending minor 3rd).

The pitch structure of *Glosse* is better illustrated by the following music examples.

Example 1 focuses on the consolidation of harmonic fields through busy textural writing. In this particular case, the four instruments play independent lines, which, layered together, create a sort of harmonic “environment” with a certain number of pitch constituents. The global effect plays a more important role here than individual melodic intervals do.

Ex. 1

Luciano Berio, *Glosse* – example of harmonic field

mm. 37 - initial 'harmonic field':

sample of independent line, and pitches involved

dominant interval type: 5

mm. 38 - harmonic enrichment and consolidation of new 'harmonic field':

dominant interval type: 5

Example 2 shows how harmonic fields are structured over the course of the initial four measures of the quartet. More and more pitch-classes are added to an initial chord, by means of successive instrumental entries. The pitch-class sets that are formed rapidly cover the chromatic total. These sets have no melodic relevance; they are only meant to push vertical collections to “chromatic saturation”.

Ex. 2

Luciano Berio, *Glosse* – example of chromatic saturation

Section 1 - 'pizzicato chords':

The score for Section 1 consists of two systems. The first system, labeled 'Section 1 - "pizzicato chords"', shows three measures. The first measure (mm. 1) features a 7-note chord in the bass clef, with parts for Violin 1 (Vi. 1,2) and Viola (+Vla.). The second measure (3 st.) features a 9-note chord, with parts for Violin 1 (Vi. 1,2) and Cello (+Cello). The third measure (5 st.) features a 10-note chord, with parts for Violin 1 (Vi. 1,2) and Cello (+Cello). The second system, labeled 'mm. 4, 1st chord' and 'mm. 4, 2nd chord', shows two measures. The first measure (mm. 4, 1st chord) features a 10-note chord in the bass clef. The second measure (mm. 4, 2nd chord) features 'the chromatic aggregate' in the bass clef.

Example 3 is centered on a contrasting melodic gesture, which first appears in the cello part, and is subsequently taken up by other instruments. The pitch reduction in this example shows how chromatic saturation is achieved through superimposition of melodic motives played by different instruments. As in Examples 1 and 2, the dominant interval between adjacent elements of the pitch field remains the perfect fourth (interval-class 5).

Ex. 3

Luciano Berio, *Glosse* – example of melodic motives

The score for Example 3 consists of three systems. The first system, labeled 'Cello melodic line: mm. 23', shows a melodic line in the bass clef. The second system, labeled 'Violin 1 melodic line: mm. 37', shows a melodic line in the treble clef. The third system, labeled 'Violin 2:', shows a melodic line in the treble clef. The score includes annotations: '8-note pitch field' and 'dominant interval type: 5' for the Cello line; '9-note field' for the Violin 1 line; and 'notes that were missing from the aggregate' for the Violin 2 line.

Example 4 details the relationship between the final, recapitulating section and the beginning of *Glosse*. The same strategy of building up chorded structures and saturating harmonic fields takes place over the final measures of the piece. Pitch-classes are not exactly identical, but the order of instrumental entries is quite consistent with the initial model. The pitch reduction here displays sets horizontally, for illustration purposes only. In the actual score, all eight, nine, and eleven-note pitch fields are spelled out by means of combined simultaneous *pizzicato* chords.

Ex. 4

Luciano Berio, *Glosse* – pitch reduction of final section

Last section (Restatement), Violin 1, 2:

mm. 172

8-note harmonic field (chord)

Violin 1,2 + Viola

mm. 173

9-note harmonic field (chord)

Violin 1,2, Viola + Cello

mm. 174

11-note harmonic field (chord)

Note! This field is one pitch-class short of an aggregate - the missing note is F, the obsessive recurrent fundamental pitch of most harmonic fields.

Compared to the earlier quartet masterpiece “Sincronie”, which bases its form on timbre rather than on pitch, Berio’s similar works dating from the ‘90s, *Notturmo* and *Glosse*, display a shifted interest toward folk idioms, and toward a synthesis of modern and post-modern elements. With *Glosse*, in particular, Berio constantly forays poly-stylist territory. He remains true to the spirit of modernism, but becomes more flexible in his compositional approach. In this last of his string quartets, Luciano Berio embraces an authentic fusion of minimalism, textural and *Klangfarbenmelodie*⁷, which might not be completely new, but which reveals a wonderful sound universe worth exploring.

⁷ German for “tone-colour melody”.

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