

## **Berberian Sings the Beatles (with Help from Andriessen and Berio)**

by Kate Meehan

In the mid-1960s, Cathy Berberian (1925–1983) found herself caught up in the Beatlemania then sweeping the United States and Europe. Though Berberian first gained recognition as a singer of avant-garde music by such composers as Luciano Berio (1925–2003), her husband for fourteen years (1950–64), she had long maintained an interest in folk and popular musics from around the world. Yet she did not add popular music to her repertoire until 1966, when she first displayed an interest in the Beatles. She credited her teenage daughter Cristina with introducing her to the group. In a letter to Louis Andriessen (b. 1939) from January 1966, she declared that they were “both crazy about the Beatles,” continuing, “I cannot live without my record of their songs from HELP!”<sup>1</sup> Later in 1966, she asked Andriessen if he had heard the Beatles’ latest record [*Revolver*], which she deemed “fabulous – especially Eleanor Rigby.”<sup>2</sup> That year she decided to sing some of their songs herself and worked with a number of composers, including both Andriessen and Berio, to arrange them in historical styles.

Berberian’s collaboration with Andriessen on her Beatles adaptations developed over the course of 1966. In a letter to him from that summer, Berberian mentioned that she had sung four Beatles songs on BBC television, but she did not specify which songs or who had arranged them.<sup>3</sup> In another letter from late December of that year, she claimed to have “no piano arrangement” for the songs and stated a desire to “work them out” with Andriessen.<sup>4</sup> She also hoped to sing some unspecified songs in their original keys, with the exception of “Michelle,” which had to be transposed down a step. She offered to send him the music, which he could “transpose as necessary and find the right style for each.” Many years later Andriessen confirmed the collaboration. In a 1999 interview, he described the genesis of the project: Berberian wanted him to accompany her while she sang Beatles songs, and he suggested that they make their own arrangements, which they then did “together.”<sup>5</sup>

Andriessen produced, but never published, a collection of four Beatles songs for Berberian, which he titled *4 Beatle-liedjes*, the transparencies of which are presently in the Andriessen Collection at the Paul Sacher

Foundation (*Example 1*). All the songs are for voice and keyboard, but each has a distinctive style. “Yesterday” was written in the style of Gabriel Fauré and evokes the French *mélodie*. (Like several of the songs, the style was apparently suggested by a rhyme, e.g., Yesterday/Fauré.) Andriessen indicated that “You’ve Got to Hide My Love Away” [*sic*; the original is “You’ve Got to Hide Your Love Away”] should be played on a harpsichord in the manner of Henry Purcell, and “Michelle” simulates the style of Maurice Ravel. Only “Ticket to Ride” evokes no specific composer’s style, although the recitative-like opening in the piano marks it as baroque.

Andriessen’s arrangements retain many characteristics of the original songs as written by John Lennon and Paul McCartney. He kept the original melodies, lyrics, and forms, and largely kept the harmonies as well, though he seems to have ignored Berberian’s direction to transpose only “Michelle.” Instead, three songs have been transposed a whole step down from their original keys, and “Ticket to Ride” has been moved down a tritone. The songs remain readily recognizable, with larger historical connections suggested primarily through the style of the accompaniment.

While collaborating with Andriessen on the arrangements, Berberian also worked with other composers to create different versions of the same songs. On 25 October 1966 Berberian gave a concert at Carnegie Hall in New York showcasing several compositions written expressly for her. Berio’s *Circles* (1960) was to serve as the finale of a program that included John Cage’s *Aria with Fontana Mix* (1958), Henri Pousseur’s *Phonèmes pour Cathy* (1966), and Berio’s *Sequenza III* (1966). Yet according to newspaper reviews, Berberian could not perform *Circles* due to “technical troubles.”<sup>6</sup> Instead she substituted “some ‘contemporary’ music in the definition used by disk jockeys today.”<sup>7</sup> This contemporary music turned out to be “Michelle,” “Ticket to Ride,” and “Yesterday,” arranged by Berio, Thomas Simon, and Peter Serkin, respectively.<sup>8</sup> Presumably written for voice with piano accompaniment, none of these arrangements has been published, nor did Berberian ever record them. Furthermore, Berberian’s letter to Andriessen from December 1966, stating that she had no piano arrangements of the songs, suggests that these arrangements may have been largely improvised. In any case, no written record of them survives, and Berberian does not seem to have performed them again. Soon, however, Berio would contribute more polished arrangements of Beatles songs to Berberian’s growing collection.

In 1967, Andriessen assisted Berberian with preparations for her recital at the September Venice Biennale; he intended to compose a new piece for her and to act as her accompanist. As the year progressed, he abandoned his planned piece, *Colours*, because the festival refused to commission it from him. As a result, Berberian recast her program, substituting Berio’s *Folk Songs* (1964). Meanwhile, Berio negotiated with Mario Labroca, the director of the festival, to present his *Epifanie* that year. As Berberian explained to

I: Yesterday.

*in Faure.* *p senza vibrato.*

*pp legatissimo*

*legato molto*

*legg.*

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Example 1: Louis Andriessen, 4 Beatle-liedjes (1966), full score, p. 1 (Louis Andriessen Collection).

Andriessen, Berio decided that if these two major works by him were to be performed, he needed to be present to “defend” himself.<sup>9</sup> To justify paying for Berio’s trip, Labroca put Berio “in charge” of Berberian’s recital – a responsibility Berberian dismissed through her ironic reportage of the situation.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, Berio contributed to the program by arranging three Beatles songs and three songs by Kurt Weill.

Berio’s arrangements duplicated three of Andriessen’s settings: “Michelle,” “Ticket to Ride,” and “Yesterday.”<sup>11</sup> Berio cast his Beatles songs for voice and chamber ensemble (the forces available for Berberian’s recital), with each song calling for a different combination of instruments. “Michelle,” which Berio set twice, appears in a version for two flutes and harpsichord as well as a version for mixed winds and strings. The two settings have drastically different musical styles, with the harpsichord and the chromatic, ornamented flute lines in the first suggesting the baroque. The second version follows in Andriessen’s footsteps: when he heard Berberian’s performance, Italian music critic Fedele D’Amico immediately recognized it as “Ravelian.”<sup>12</sup> The generically baroque “Ticket to Ride” and “Yesterday” round out the collection.

Like Andriessen, Berio left the melody and musical structure of the original songs relatively untouched. He did change the keys of “Michelle” and “Ticket to Ride,” transposing them down a whole step and a tritone, respectively. Also like Andriessen, he evoked disparate styles primarily through changes in texture and accompaniment. Yet he also gave each song a substantial instrumental introduction and interludes to set the appropriate tone. “Yesterday,” for example, includes a six-measure introduction featuring the obbligato flute, and similar music interrupts the song about halfway through.

Both Berio and Andriessen completed their arrangements without actually setting the text of any of the songs. In the manuscript scores of Berio’s arrangements found in Basel, only “Yesterday” includes any text, providing only the incipits of key lines. Andriessen’s unpublished score similarly omits the text. The missing words did not bother Berberian, as is evident from an exchange she had with Christine Swenoha, an employee at Universal Edition.<sup>13</sup> In February 1970, Swenoha requested that Berberian provide scores of Berio’s arrangements so that another singer could perform them. When the scores arrived Swenoha expressed concern over the absent text. Berberian responded: “Sorry. Someone will just have to buy the three Beatles songs + write the text under the vocal line – I never needed it.” (The manuscript versions of Berio’s *Folk Songs* also appear with either partial texts or none at all.<sup>14</sup>)

Berberian often sang the Beatles songs as arranged by Andriessen and Berio, though she favored Andriessen’s simpler settings, which proved easier to add to her recitals. She recorded Andriessen’s arrangements several times, including her 1970 album *Magnificathy*. She also released an

album named *Beatles Arias* in 1967 with arrangements by Guy Boyer, her entry into the emergent field of records featuring Beatles songs in baroque style. The Beatles songs most often appeared on her programs in a recital she titled "From Monteverdi to the Beatles," which ostensibly gave an overview of vocal styles throughout the centuries, but in reality focused on baroque and contemporary music by such composers as Purcell, Berio, and Stravinsky. This program became her "standard" recital, and she performed it for the rest of her career.

By juxtaposing the popular music of the Beatles with respected works from the canon of Western art music, Berberian made clear her opinion that the two styles should be treated as equal. Berio shared Berberian's attitude, writing in an untitled essay:

The Beatles' selections of gestures from the museum of past and present experiences gives their songs an essentially epic character ... This is why these songs always represent something other than themselves; this is why they give an impulse toward thought, instead of being merely an anesthetic to the senses and an invitation to oblivion; this is why, finally, they deserve our attention.<sup>15</sup>

Berberian, with help from Berio and Andriessen, showed that good music could come from a popular source, and that the music of the Beatles deserved a place in the concert hall.

<sup>1</sup> 12 January 1966. Private collection of Cristina Berio (hereafter CB).

<sup>2</sup> CB.

<sup>3</sup> CB.

<sup>4</sup> 27 December 1966, CB.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Maja Trochimczyk, Amsterdam, 21 October 1999. Printed in *The Music of Louis Andriessen*, ed. Maja Trochimczyk (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> Alan Rich, "Blithe and Far-Out," *World Journal Tribune*, 26 October 1966.

<sup>7</sup> Howard Klein, "Cathy Berberian Sings Cage Music," *New York Times*, 26 October 1966, p. 41.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Berberian to Andriessen, CB.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Luciano Berio, *Beatles Songs* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1967), catalogue no. 33098.

<sup>12</sup> Fedele D'Amico, "L'inesauribile Cathy: Un festival nel festival in concerto Berio-Berberian a Venezia," *La Fiera Letteraria* no. 39 (28 September 1967); printed in Luciano Berio and Fedele D'Amico, *Nemici come prima: Carteggio 1957-1989*, ed. Isabella d'Amico (Milan: Rosellina Archinto, 2002), p. 111.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Sacher Foundation, Universal Edition Deposit.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Sacher Foundation, Luciano Berio Collection.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Sacher Foundation, Luciano Berio Collection.