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After *Neorealismo*: The Musical Fables of Luciano Berio

The career of Italian composer Luciano Berio is a mainstay in histories of post-war European musical modernism. These surveys however typically gloss over the idiosyncrasies of the composer's work, including a wealth of (re)orchestrations and re-imaginings of folk genres and excerpts from the Western European canon. Such works often deviate or depart from the syntax of musical modernism while elaborating on more conservative tropes, topics, and styles. I argue that Berio's music, rather than being solely symptomatic of a monolithic European aesthetic trend, responds to a more local and specific impulse: the debate over stylized cultural signs raised by Italian writers following the twilight of Italian *neorealismo*.

Though Berio's collaborations with prominent Italian thinkers are well-known, research into the composer's interest in Italian artistic trends more broadly remains underdeveloped. *Neorealism*, despite its brief and limited popularity, engendered debates within Italian literary circles over the ostensible verisimilitude of culturally familiar, albeit stylized, signs and structures strategically deployed in literature and cinema. Berio's music reflects this debate throughout his career by frequently staging antagonisms between disparate styles from distinct cultural milieus, thematizing and exaggerating familiar signs and structures in representative works such as the *Folk Songs* (1964) and *La Vera Storia* (1981). Berio, spurred on by his long-time collaborators Umberto Eco and Italo Calvino, capitalized on the potential of semiotics and metatext to reflect historical musical cultures writ large, indicating that Italian intellectual life and cultural analysis played a much more crucial role in the composer's creative process than is typically presumed.