

# **Visualizing Berio's *Sinfonia*: Choreographing Animation for Indeterminate Narratives**

IJFMA Animated Space 2021

## **Introductory Note**

*In the latter part of 2019 I secured a commission from the Oregon Symphony to create a multi-screen animated projection for Berio's Sinfonia. It was scheduled to premiere on March 14, 2020. Needless to say, two days before we were to open, with everything cued and good to go, the Governor shut down live events due to COVID. We created a flattened composite of the visuals as a temporary documentation of the canceled performance.*

## Abstract

In 1968, a year of massive political and cultural upheaval, Luciano Berio composed a score that would shape his legacy. Entitled *Sinfonia*, which literally means sounding together, the symphony was sparked by the assassination of Martin Luther King. Heralded as “the ultimate pre-postmodernist musical palimpsest” (Service, p. 1 ) *Sinfonia* reverberates with the political assassinations and massive protests punctuated by police repression that marked 1968.

In late 2019, I was offered an animated projection commission with a primary voice in choosing a piece for live symphonic performance/projection. After some researching, I found Berio’s *Sinfonia*. It had what I was looking for - a “contemporary” piece, it resisted illustration, linear narrative and 19<sup>th</sup> century romanticism while eschewing the rigid formality of serialism. Instead, it embraced two core Modernist principles – fragmentation and use of the archive. Berio quoted/sampled disparate chunks of literature, music, and events of 1968 in the service of the political and the poetic to discover unity in the heterogeneous. His score seemed ripe for visual interpretation - and exposition - with animation as the prime driver. Following Berio’s lead, I chose visual sampling as my entre and turned to Google. By animating in and out of iconic (and lesser known) images in the orb of 1968, I created a commensurate puzzle piece that mirrored the suggested avant-garde intent I found in *Sinfonia* – “Where now? Who now? When now?” (Beckett, 1965, p. 291)

With that challenge in mind, this paper examines non-linear narrative strategies, documentary elements/influences and an overriding poetics at work in my multi-screen animated projection for Berio’s *Sinfonia*. In shedding some light and analysis on specific instances and sequences in my 4-channel work, I hope to provide insight into the aesthetic choices and cinematic mechanics that sustain a level of indeterminant narrative.

**Keywords:** animation, experiential design, projection mapping, animated installation, classical avant-garde, Luciano Berio, *Sinfonia*, Roomful of Teeth, Rose Bond, Oregon Symphony, expanded animation, non-linear narrative

## Visualizing Berio's *Sinfonia*: Choreographing Animation for Indeterminate Narratives

In 1968 Luciano Berio composed a symphonic score that would both shape his legacy and capture a year charged by societal, cultural and political unrest. Berio titled the piece, *Sinfonia*, which literally means sounding together. Tom Service, a music journalist for the Guardian, described *Sinfonia* as “the ultimate pre-postmodernist musical palimpsest” (2012, p 1). Berio ‘quotes’- or, in current lingo, ‘samples’ - tracts from Mahler, Debussy, Ravel, Stravinsky and others; and lifts lines from the likes of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, the Situationists and others. *Sinfonia* is a puzzle piece of musical and vocal fragments that asks big questions – “Where now? Who now? When now?” (Beckett, p. 291) On its face, it seems to reflect 1968 as a year of upheaval – and appears to offer no answers other than the admonition “Keep Going” (Beckett, p. 291).

In the latter part of 2019 I secured a commission from the Oregon Symphony to create a multi-screen animated projection for Berio's *Sinfonia*. Over the course of the last twenty years, non-traditional screens and multi-media performances have emerged globally providing large scale, dimensional experiences. My work over the past twenty years is part of that movement but it can be classified within a subset by its commitment to content, non-Hollywood narrativity and both representational and abstract imagery in contrast to a fairly widely held expectation for expanded animation to tend towards formalism, pure abstraction and lack of narrative.

In shedding light and some analysis on specific instances and sequences in my 4-channel work, I hope to provide insight into aesthetic choices and cinematic structures that sustain a level of indeterminant narrative. In the end, *Sinfonia* remains a spectacle rich with content – a maze of illusion conjuring networks of memory, allusion and cross-reference that calls us to come to grips with initial confusion and learn “to be receptive to the peculiarly vivid aesthetic impact of the half understood” (Osmond-Smith, p. 91).

## Background on Sinfonia

I want to begin with a little background on the composer Luciano Berio (1925-2003). Italian born, Berio had physically and culturally migrated to New York City by the 1960s and was there in 1968 - a momentous year. In April Martin Luther King is assassinated igniting riots in American cities; in May, Paris explodes with protests that unite students and labor; in June, Robert F. Kennedy is shot dead in a Los Angeles hotel kitchen; in July, Haight Ashbury blossoms in a Summer of Love; and throughout the fall, leading up to the US elections, anti-war protests rock college campuses across the US. In the immediate wake of MLK's assassination Berio composed a tribute - "O King" - which uses only the vowels from the name Martin Luther King – elongating them into ethereal streams or shortening them to staccato objects. That song became the instigator, and Movement 2, of *Sinfonia*. He completed three more movements in the Fall of 1968. A recording of Movement 2 'O King', made in 1969 by Pierre Boulez & the Orchestre National de France with Ward Swingle & the New Swingle Singers, can be found at this link. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4xnonVCjKwc>



Figure 1 Still from Movement 2 "O King"

As an artist and composer Berio was not immune to politics nor was he beholding to any particular classical or avant-garde movement. He had a passing interest in the Serialists,

dabbled in NY's 60's electronic music scene, and knew modernist music and literature. At *Sinfonia*'s NY premiere, Berio wrote his own program notes "*Sinfonia* must be understood in its etymological sense of the 'sounding together' of eight voices and the instruments or, in a larger sense, the 'sounding together' of different things, situations, and meanings." (Berio, 2016, CD Notes) One result of this concept of 'sounding together' is that you're not able to hear everything. The piece feels like a layered puzzle with fragments of story and those somehow familiar but hard to place melodious phrases. Musical quotations and fragments of spoken word combine to a dizzy degree in Movement 3. A recording by the Seattle Symphony with Roomful of Teeth can be found here. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kpDzcJ50orI>

As a visualist and media artist, Berio's *Sinfonia* had what I was looking for: range and grist. It was a "contemporary" piece that resisted illustration, linear narrative and 19<sup>th</sup> century romanticism while eschewing the rigid formality of serialism. Instead, it embraced two core Modernist principles – fragmentation and use of the archive. His samplings of disparate chunks of literature, music and world events of the late 60's were woven into a kind of poetic and political unity. His score, imbued with the tensions of that time, seemed absolutely fitting for ours.

### **Expanded Cinema – Micro-Narratives and Indeterminacy**

By 1965 Stan VanDerBeek had coined the term Expanded Cinema and in 1970 Gene Youngblood published his seminal book *Expanded Cinema*. There's little disagreement that Youngblood's argument for a synesthetic experience of film had ties to the heavy experimentation with drugs in 1960s California. In her essay "Paracinema and the Dematerialization of Animation" Birgitta Hosea (2019) aptly summarizes Youngblood's beliefs as: "Instead of the passive experience of popular entertainment, expanded cinema would utilize multiple sensory stimuli to leave space for the individual's own free association and thus expand consciousness" (p. 41).

Hosea continues describing the turn expanded cinema took in Europe. Rather than the immersive, psychedelic or meditative experience, Euro expanded cinema "tended towards a

political attempt to deconstruct the illusionism and worldview of the mainstream cinematic experience.” (p. 41) Often process and material centric, these films challenged and disrupted the reality of the representational real. Hosea writes how they sought to “question narrative as a form with its stupefying effect on the viewer. The intention was to encourage a more politically aware and critical attitude toward the world and all its complexities” (p. 41).

In her 2003 essay entitled “Some Reasons for a Review of the Avant-Garde Debates Around Narrativity” Jackie Hatfield raised some questions. While giving due credit to brilliant London film critics and scholars who sought to solidify film status within the fine art world, she acknowledges that, in doing so, they set a bar that canonized work with a modernist thrust – work that was purist, non-imagistic and decidedly anti-narrative. Hatfield concluded that categorization and curatorial definition can be forms of censorial power. Material formalism precluded that work with representation – and work with a message - was marginalized as being narrative.

The thinking around narrativity in experimental or avant-garde animation continues to evolve. In her essay “A Hermeneutic of Polyvalence”, Lilly Husbands cites Tom Gunning’s article “Towards a Minor Cinema” which centers on avant-garde filmmakers who were re-engaging with narrative in “the sort of polyvalent montage that characterized earlier works of the American ‘poetic’ avant-garde” (2019, p.171). Her essay provides an in-depth analysis of narrative devices at work in Lewis Klahr’s *The Pettifogger* (2011) after calling out “the lack of examination of the formal and narrative complexities that have manifested in experimental animations...” (p. 169). Kindled by that call out, this paper examines non-linear narrative strategies, documentary elements and takes a glimpse at the poetics in play in my multi-screen animated projection for *Sinfonia*. Not unlike Berio’s composition this visual work is a puzzle piece - a spectacle in scale enriched by nuggets of content – a physical experience that calls us to come to grips with initial confusion and find meaning in the allusions.

### **Choreographing Fragments Across the Gutter**

To understand cinema, especially in a classic Hollywood sense, is to understand the function and language of editing. While mise-en-scene defines the ‘look’ of a film, the Soviet

film theorists elevated the import of montage. Sergei Eisenstein (1949) in his essay "A Dialectic Approach to Film Form" singled out montage as "the nerve of cinema" (p. 48). Indeed, in the following statement one can feel his awe as an electrifying moment of birth.

The logic of organic form vs. the logic of rational form yields, in collision, the dialectic of the art-form. The interaction of the two produces and determines Dynamism... I also regard the inception of new concepts and viewpoints in the conflict between customary conception and particular representation as dynamic - as a dynamization of the inertia of perception - as a dynamization of the "traditional view" into a new one. (Eisenstein, p. 46-47)

While scholarly study of montage theory is generally confined to the rectangle - a traditional single screen, it can be applied to multi-screen work especially if there is 'gutter' between them. One example of amping up imagery by choreographing directionality between screens (then topping it with animation's potent power of morphing) can be found in the opening segment of *Animate Sinfonia's* Movement 3 which I'll refer to as the carousel sequence. The movement begins in darkness with an orchestral jolt and the lower center screen pops on. We see a single figure in purple seated with their back to us. As the figure swivels towards us, we notice the red curtains, the floor boards and a bright directional light – a spotlight. It is a stage. At this point, the audience gaze has been drawn and fixed to the low central screen from the preceding shot of MLK lifting his head that conclude movement 2's 'O King'. The pop opening of movement 3 with its illusion of 'stage reality' fits an audience expectation of what 'should' happen under the theatre's proscenium. Amid a cluster of voices, we hear the phrase "We're back" as the heavy red curtains are drawn back, the virtual camera slowly pulls out from the purple suited 'Joker' to reveal foot lights. As the high notes of the winds and strings swirl, the string of foot lights begins to rise and slowly twist – and the camera tracks their fluid dance.

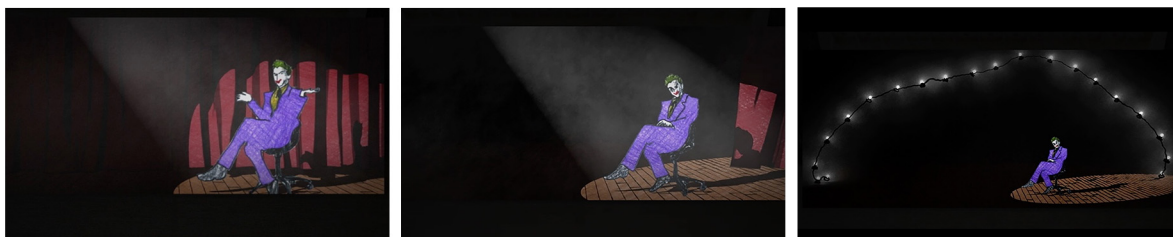


Figure 2 Still sequence from opening of Movement 3

All this complex directional visual movement circles within the low central screen until, above the waltzing strings, soprano voices emerge singing an indiscernible children's round while above the proscenium, in top center screen, a circling crown of lights begins a tilting descent. Moments below the crown of lights, which we now recognize as a carousel, is set to drop into the lower screen, beams of carnival lights lift upward in the side or wing screens. As the turning carousel slows its descent and its outline fills in with painted scenes from a 1910 midway ride, horses fade up in the wings lifting and descending on their poles. Voices become more alarmed and a male voice pleads "We need to do something!" and "What just happened?" against a rising cacophony. "Where now?" as the churning crown loses its form and pieces of line scatter in a circling wake.

While I don't profess to be a full-fledged Eisensteinian, sequences like the one just described are informed by montage theories in that this sequence is designed to unseat traditional expectations and dynamize "the inertia of perception" for a new meaning. The blocking for this sequence can be seen in the storyboard excerpt shown in Figure 3.



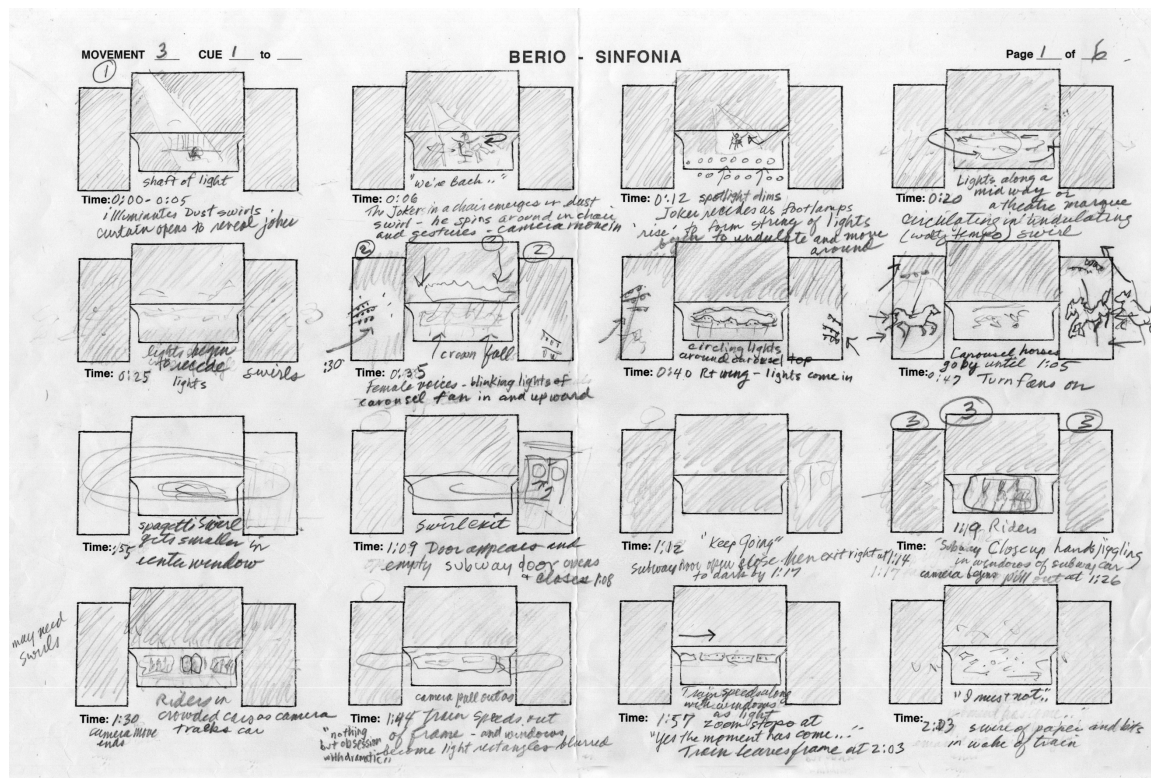


Figure 3 Storyboard Page 1 of 6 from Movement 3

At the same time as principles of montage can be applied to several screens, it is also employed in single screen scenes for particular impact. Because much of *Animate Sinfonia* is replete with representational drawing, it lends itself to cinematic methods of aesthetic gratification – what Stefan Sharff calls its ‘cinesthetic elements’. Sharff explains, “the unique quality of the cinesthetic elements is that they are repeatable configurations with stylistic and narrative functions which every movie goer learns how to ‘read’ ... the cognizances of these cinesthetic elements of structure is essential to the recognition of cinema as an art form.” (p 5) The question for the filmmaker becomes how to structure form and content in order to orchestrate the subliminal interaction of illusion and the perceived real.

While not referenced by Hollywood-centered Sharff, additional cinesthetic elements can be identified in Soviet montage, a subject of intense interest in my graduate studies. Dialectic editing, the collision of shots, the Kuleshov effect are well known. Sergei Eisenstein employed another technique in *Battleship Potemkin* that caught my attention as an animator – on a cut he would overlap the frames of two action shots. Frames of the same action would repeat. It

operates in a similar way as step framing in that it manipulates the experience of time affecting viewer reception through subtle discontinuous movement. One way to describe it would be to compare it to a gulp of air or a gasp when alarmed. If the audience is sutured in, reaching to decode meaning, these lapses have a haptic effect – a disturbance that raises the hairs on one's neck.

In *Animate Sinfonia*, the retro-action overlap is used in combination with another of Sharff's cinesthetic elements – the three-shot salvo - made famous by Hitchcock in *The Birds*. In storyboard form Sharff illustrates all 21 shots from what I call the 'Dead Dan' scene from Hitchcock's film. Sharff explains, "Throughout, Hitchcock uses opposite juxtapositions: left-right, high-low, horizontal-vertical. The stroke of genius comes in the center of the climatic shots (14, 15, 16), disclosing the mutilated body of Dan in a three-shot-salvo, from medium close-up to extreme close-up and from 1 ½ to less than ¾ seconds long, a staccato on one axis of view." (p 9) The three-shot-salvo is put to work in a climactic moment from Movement 2. The iconic photo taken on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel - three people pointing upward as Martin Luther King lies mortally wounded at their feet - is gesturally activated and infused with potency through the combination of drawn animation and these cinesthetic choices.



Figure 4 Three shot salvo preliminary drawings from *Sinfonia* Movement 2

Again, this work, *Animate Sinfonia*, differs from a traditional movie. You are applying and choreographing cinematic elements not just within a single rectangle – but to multiple

screen surfaces in a huge hall – a space itself that calls on people to swivel in attempts to follow the action, knowing they will never see it all.

## Non-fiction Animation & The Archive

I want to turn this short analysis to an area of study that appears to be heating up in our field – non-fiction or documentary animation. As I mentioned, Berio was aware and influenced by events from 1968. While in no way a documentary or even a musical equivalent of Literary Journalism, his *Sinfonia* does seem anchored to fragmented realities of world events. It was the crazy vocalizations of Movement 3 that puzzled and hooked me. Once I was deep in the research, well beyond just listening and feeling, the visual approach became evident. I too would sample just from images. Googling names and terms brought up photographs of the times – some iconic and some random. They became the still frames I could elongate – the missing pieces and gaps partially filled.

There's more and more being written on animated documentary – but I'm thinking of Bella Honess Roe's term "the excess of animation". Materials matter. My choice for this piece, my drawing tool, was the Palomino Blackwing pencil. The instability of its soft graphite serves as a metaphor for memory and perhaps for the historic – itself so vulnerable to erasure.



Figure 5 Still sequence of animated erasure from M2

Clearly, for this project I approached the internet as a visual archive – one organized by search engines and unlocked by key words. In his introduction to *The Archive: Documents of Contemporary Art*, Charles Meriweather (2006) introduces various relationships between art and the archive. One section of writings that he calls ‘Traces’ deals with the perception and understandings that events leave in their wake, “the index, or residual mark, of the occurrence” (p .10). He goes on to distinguish the archive from remembrance or history. “Manifesting itself in the form of traces, it contains the potential to fragment and destabilize either remembrance as recorded, or history as written, as sufficient means of providing the last word in the account of what has come to pass” (p 10).

The white Mustang sequence in Movement 4 may provide an example of Meriweather’s *traces*. Martin Luther King was fatally shot on a balcony of the Lorraine Motel on April 4, 1968. The day before James Earl Ray pulled into Memphis in his 1966 white Ford Mustang and rented a room in a rooming house across from the Lorraine Motel. What I animated, the Mustang’s slow cruise, the brake lights, is footage that doesn’t exist. It is reenactment meant to approach the authentic.



Figure 6 White Mustang still from Movement 4

In many ways the archive can be seen as the provider of the building blocks for documentary work. And yet, there are challenges as to how such images are used in an art space. Animating still photos and choreographing vignettes makes some sense to me as the filmmaker but my referents become unstable and vulnerable to counter-readings. Protests are

a motif that runs through *Animate Sinfonia* yet the genesis and goals of its progenitors in my piece vary politically from Paris 1968, to Civil Rights marches in the USA, to the theatrics of Hong Kong's shopping mall sited protests. Although I have no expectation that every viewer will discern those differences, I trust my research to layer in meaning for multi-leveled readings.

The New Delhi based Raqs Media Collective deals squarely with this issue. The Collective works with documents and archives to generate public dialogue around postcolonialism. In their "First Information Report - 2003" (Meriweather p. 171) they speak to the difficulties of working with raw documents and the vigilance it takes to negotiate the externalizing or unearthing of this material with the subjectivity implicit in its selection. They conclude, "...just as the recovery of memory and history (of defeats and dispersal, powerlessness and servitude, as much as of survival and creation), and the painstaking reconstruction of an archive of lost and scattered meanings is one of the first cultural tasks on the agenda of the insurgent, a critical engagement with a documentary mode of practice too becomes (for the same reason) one of the key undertakings of the current art practitioner who seeks to express contemporaneity as much as s/he engages with art" (Meriweather p 171).

## Poetic Points of Contact

An aspect that made *Sinfonia* so appealing to me was its deliberate indeterminateness while working in collusion with multiple layered allusions to the real conditions of human experience. In creating my animations it became important to understand more of Berio's allusions and referents, be they literary, musical or historical without letting that research dictate or illustrate a set meaning. For me there had to be a gap between my animation and the music – times where the orchestra led and the screens were dark and times when my images, strong and beautiful, had a slippery link to the sounding of voice and instruments and, less often, moments of true collusion.

In a recent conversation<sup>1</sup> with Lilly Husbands who graciously accepted my invitation to watch the flattened, pseudo documentation of *Animate Sinfonia*, her interest was perked by

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<sup>1</sup> Zoom conversation with Lilly Husbands July 21, 2021

what she called “the poetic points of contact” – those moments where the interplay of sight, sound and space come together. Of course, to come together one must first be apart. Eisenstein acknowledges the import of points of contact when he writes, “The quantity of interval determines the pressure of the tension” (p. 47). In other words, if the gap or separation is too wide, we risk losing the artistic intention - certain intervals become inaudible. We have no points of poetic contact.

In popular music there is a beat but in an a-rhythmic piece like *Sinfonia* there are myriad points that could be hit or overlooked in favor of an unfolding visual rhythm. *Animate Sinfonia* is performed live and rather than using a generative approach, we engage with the score and call live cues for each video sequence. As such there are points in the score where we know the images will sync with the music. Yet, while certain cues seem obvious, many more are discretionary. Humans love making meaning. Being ‘lost’ and then found, brings a particular joy. I find Movement 4, which Berio originally meant as the final movement, to be especially intriguing in looking at these moments of resonance just because its slow pan of a kitchenscape is so humbly anti-climactic. After the great men and their movements have been remembered and ensconced in history, in solemnity the camera, the light, makes a lingering pass over cups, a piece of toast, some cans of peas raising them – like unremembered monuments – then rests, in that small kitchen of the everyday, on a woman doing dishes.

To summarize, this analysis of *Animate Sinfonia* acknowledges its historic references, the archive, cinematic structures and expanded animation but it also must touch on the poetic and the question of poetic points of contact. Gaston Bachelard makes the case that poetry summons more of reality than a listing of the facts. In *The Poetics of Space* (1994) he alludes to the phenomenologist Eugene Minkowski and his theories on *retentir* or reverberation – which is described as a kind of sonority of being as the real measure of a poetic image.

I wrote about this idea of sonority in my paper “Poetics and public space: an investigation into animated installation” (p. 75) and quote Minkowski to explain how a form, or a building, or an animated installation comes to life – or fills with life – in a space. Minkowski draws an analogy to describe this property of reverberation “as if a well-spring existed in a

sealed vase and its waves, repeatedly echoing against the sides of this vase, filled it with their sonority” (Bachelard, p. xvi).

In the end, it is the sounding together – the orchestration and the visual choreography – much sampled from still photos, the very definition of the index, that animation enters - stepping well beyond a clay imprint to conjure a fictive construction of the real and become that aloof dance partner for *Sinfonia*’s musical morphing with its maze of illusion and allusion that calls us to come to grips with our initial confusion and learn “to be receptive to the peculiarly vivid aesthetic impact of the half understood” (Osmond-Smith p. 91).

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