

# *Experiment and discourse: Luciano Berio's "Sequenze"*

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Central to the "Sequenze" is a new understanding of virtuosity, which together with experimental techniques also leads to unusual sound effects. These can also be seen in Berio's later ensemble and orchestral works.

This season's concerts by the Berlin Philharmonic include a "sprinkling" of individual Sequenze by Luciano Berio. In these works Berio established a new understanding of virtuosity and positioned himself as a profoundly inventive magician of sound who integrates elements of theatrical action.

Since the beginnings of instrumental music, unaccompanied performance by a soloist has repeatedly been misconceived as a monologic situation in which the musician uses his skills to establish a relationship with the listener in an instrumental or vocal discourse. Unlike any other 20th-century composer, the Italian Luciano Berio has continually explored the possibilities of this situation over a period of more than four decades, and has created a series of fourteen compositions with the same name throughout: *Sequenza*. Contrary to its original meaning – namely in the sense of a melodic elaboration at the end of the medieval “Hallelujah” or as a repetition of melodic or harmonic elements at different pitches – Berio decided to choose this name as a reference to the constructive idea that every piece is based on a series of harmonic fields from which all remaining musical functions are derived. According to the composer, almost all of the *Sequenze* therefore aim “to elucidate and develop a harmonically perceived progression using melodic means”, whereby an “impression of polyphonic hearing” should be created “that is partially based on the rapid alternation between different characters and their simultaneous interaction”.

“Polyphony” is – in particular with the tone generators that normally remain primarily monophonic – understood in a figurative sense and refers to the presentation and superimposition of diverging modes of action and different musical characters.

This idea of a quasi-“virtual polyphony” is implemented by Berio, for example, in *Sequenza I* for flute (1958), by contrasting primary and secondary notes, tones and noise sounds, registers, timbres and expressive gestures with one another and at the same time superimposing conflicting actions such as the crescendo of the valve sound and the decrescendo of pitches. A comparable contrast is found in *Sequenza XI* for guitar (1987/88) as the collision of two levels that are different both technically and musically: differentiated specifications for strumming, plucking or fingering techniques, percussive elements and details such as the integration of optional re-tuning are important elements of a precisely considered choreography of hand and finger movements used by Berio to achieve a confrontation between two different instrumental, gestural styles – playing in the flamenco tradition and the “classical” method of performance. In contrast, in *Sequenza XIV* for violoncello (2002) the composer integrates rhythmic passages that draw on Kandyan drumming from Sri Lanka and are characterised by a polyphonic confrontation between tone production on the strings and percussive sound generation on the body of the instrument, in addition to extremely heterogeneous melodic sections.

However, the leaning towards “virtual polyphony” is most clearly discernible

in the Sequenze where Berio incorporates theatrical action. For instance, in Sequenza III for voice (1965/66) he uses elementary forms of expression such as humming, whispering, speaking, breathing and mouth sounds in addition to singing that is driven to exaltation, and adds a wealth of associative performance instructions. The densely packed alternation between relevant shading lends the performance scenic qualities because mimic modes of expression and hand or body movements must be utilised for sound production, thus creating superimposed action that is perceived as imaginary theatre.

Berio works in a similar manner in Sequenza V for trombone (1966), where he not only explicitly dictates theatrical elements, but also integrates breathing into or across the instrument as a specific musical action and makes the musician sing; the playing is altered by the sound of certain vowels and a two-part dialogue is created for long periods, including vocalisation of the instrument and instrumentalisation of the voice in equal measure.

*“Berio places himself in the significant tradition of solo composition.”*

Stefan Drees

Only two compositions also divide the polyphonic approach across several tone generators: in Sequenza VII for oboe (1969) Berio writes a quiet, unchanging bourdon sound on the note B natural, which should be played by a different sound source (such as a tape recording) and should function as a sound centre from which the instrumental part develops and to which it returns at the end.

Ultimately, Sequenza X for trumpet in C and piano resonance (1984) even specifies the use of an electronically amplified piano which serves as a resonator for the melody instrument. A second instrumentalist must therefore press down the corresponding chords silently and operate the sustaining pedal, thus creating different spatial areas of harmony which are fuelled by the trumpeter and subsequently resonate. This is a particularly clear example of

the extent to which Berio was thinking in “harmonic processes” when he wrote for a monophonic melody instrument because the melody part is always accompanied by harmonic shading.

A key element of the *Sequenze* is a new understanding of virtuosity that leads to the integration of experimental techniques of sound production. As a result, many of the works were composed for musicians who contributed towards redefining the boundaries of their individual instrument with newly developed techniques, and thus also decisively influenced the modification of compositional access to the instrument. The *Sequenze* investigate such technical aspects and can even be occasionally understood as musical comments during which the latest instrumental techniques are initially isolated and subsequently subjected to a process of transformation that lends them musical expression and thus enables their useful integration into the repertoire of technical interpretation.

This kind of approach is found, for example, in the oboe *Sequenza* which was composed for Heinz Holliger and whose technical demands – such as harmonics and double harmonics, multiphonics, double trills, trill-glissandi, harmonic or double harmonic trills – reflect the specific skills of the oboist and incorporates the player into an arching musical discourse.

In a very similar manner, in *Sequenza XII* for bassoon (1995), written for Patrick Gallois, Berio uses a multitude of unusual techniques such as long glissandi to connect registers that are far apart, or widely varying staccato techniques. Lasting almost twenty minutes, this work is not only the longest composition in the *Sequenza* series; in view of the fact that the composer aims to achieve a continuous sound and the piece must therefore be performed without pausing for breath, with “double circular breathing”, the artist is also confronted with unusual physical strain.

The compositional examination of playing techniques with regard to their aesthetic relevance is also to be attributed to Berio’s turning against the conventions of the tone generators used, which have become musical clichés. For instance, in *Sequenza II* for harp (1963) he focuses in particular on the unfamiliar, harsher sound of the instrument by incorporating clusters to be played with the palms of the hands, Bartók pizzicati, glissandi using strings or pedals, or percussive sounds. Comparably, in *Sequenza VI* for viola (1967) he contradicts its image as a doleful string instrument by writing predominantly chordal tremolos to be played triple forte, for which the performer requires a great deal of strength and stamina. Lyrical moments only appear in the course of the piece, as a counterpoint and to a certain extent parallel to the gradual physical exhaustion of the instrumentalist, which join together towards the

end to form a calm melody.

The fact that Berio knew how to use the idiomatic peculiarities of the tone generators, despite such enormous technical demands, is shown not only by the passages from the guitar *Sequenza*, whose harmony is taken from the string tuning, or the accompanying structures in *Sequenza XIII (Chanson)* for accordion (1995), in which the arrangement of the accordion bass notes reflects the circle of fifths. This is also clear in the conventionally composed *Sequenze*: in *Sequenza IV* for piano (1965/66), the composer dispenses with any kind of experimental components such as the preparation of piano strings or playing inside the piano and instead explores polyphonic conception that is primarily linked to the keys. And the structure of *Sequenza IXa* for clarinet in B flat (1980), also published in a rearrangement as *Sequenza IXb* for alto saxophone (1981), was described by Berio himself as a “long melody” which, “like most melodies, displays redundancy, symmetries, transformations and repetitions” and is subordinated to a context of developmental logic that leads to a process of disintegration and ultimately leaves behind mere fragments of its origins.

*“I am absolutely fascinated by the slow and dignified development of instruments and instrumental (and vocal) techniques throughout the centuries. This might also be the reason why I never attempted in any of my Sequenze to change the genetic make-up of an instrument nor to use it contrary to its individual nature.”*

Luciano Berio

Regardless of the manner in which Berio displays the technical possibilities of the tone generators, he always creates a certain relationship between the performer and his instrument, and therefore its history. In the earlier compositions such as *Sequenza III* and *Sequenza V*, this is achieved by requiring the musician to perform at a theatrical level and therefore causing

the forms of conventional interpretation to be completely modified, whereas performers of the later works are frequently confronted with the tensions between traditional stimulus and contemporary composition within an extended historical perspective. *Sequenza VIII* for violin (1976/77) is characteristic of this, where Berio – based on the principle of ostinato variation, as realised in the *Chaconne* from Bach's *D minor Partita BWV 1004*, for example – takes quasi-variative repeating elements, namely the tones A and B natural, as a starting point which runs through the entire composition like a common thread. Comparably, in the accordion *Sequenza XIII*, he conveys musically disparate worlds by combining – as suggested in the subtitle *Chanson* – “echoes of folk, workers' and cabaret songs, Argentinian tangos and jazz” with classical elements, thus reflecting the history and technique of the instrument, i.e. integrating the rich tradition of various usages and the resulting sound typing as a “legacy of specific musical milieus” (Teodoro Anzellotti).

In accordance with the postponement of the immanent theatrical moment for the examination of historical details, despite their general similarities the individual *Sequenze* can also be interpreted as representatives of a gradual transformation of Berio's aesthetic perceptions. This is directly illustrated by the change in notation and ranges from “space notation” in the early works with its quantitative, yet still approximative duration specifications which extricate the performers from the thicket of conventional rhythmic notation, to the integration of notation into the matrix of the bar structure in the later *Sequenze*; this assumption is also recognised in the fact that during the nineties Berio began to transfer individual early works – such as *Sequenza I* – to conventional notation. Nevertheless, the examination of the solo tone generator remains a significant constant in Berio's creative oeuvre.

With a basic experimental outlook, he repeatedly scrutinised the discourse of the soloist and – by all means in line with the traditional perspective – designed it as a monologue. From this viewpoint, it is understandable that Berio firmly emphasises his affinity with the historical continuity of instrumental (or vocal) techniques and thus positions himself in a distinguished tradition of solo composition.