

With his series of *Sequenzas*, Luciano Berio embraced virtuosity. This conception of performance had become laden with pejorative connotations, associated with hollow displays of technical prowess in which style triumphed over substance, but Berio exploded this myth. For him, virtuosity encompassed a 'virtuosity of knowledge'. In addition to technical mastery, therefore, a highly intelligent and historically aware approach is demanded of the performer, who is called upon to display scintillating technique in music that nevertheless consists of clearly delineated and precisely articulated relationships, of which he or she is expected to show a thorough understanding.

The eponymous 'sequences' are harmonic fields, established at the outset of most of the *Sequenzas* and from which the consequent material is generated. Each *Sequenza* also demonstrates Berio's thorough understanding of the instrument's particular technical demands and acoustic qualities. Berio railed against the notion of making an instrument work against itself, insisting that it should be explored within its existing physical parameters rather than squeezed into a different shape; he eschewed, for instance, the prepared piano. However, while refusing to tamper with an instrument's nature, in the *Sequenzas* Berio relished expanding and confounding our expectations of what that nature is. In particular, with those *Sequenzas* written for monodic instruments, Berio desired to cultivate a polyphonic mode of listening. To achieve this he explored the idea of a single instrument producing more than one voice, toying with our aural perception of foreground and background (in the audible, non-Schenkerian sense.) In this way a monodic instrument becomes capable of implying not merely a dialogue, but also the sounding together of more than one voice. The inspiration for this stemmed from J.S. Bach's 'polyphonic' melodies, but whereas in Bach's case the implicit polyphony was bound up with the musical language of his time, and thus more readily discernible to the listener, with the *Sequenzas*: 'history provided no protection, and everything had to be planned out explicitly'.

In *Sequenza I*, oscillations between two pitches (heard as a kind of 'background' texture) are interrupted by staccato interjections (heard in the 'foreground'). Berio said that: 'It's the principle of *more* or *less* that governs the flute *Sequenza* ... It's used not to produce ambiguous, "open" and interchangeable structures, but to control the density of the melody as it proceeds'. Berio graded this density in terms of the maximum, medium and minimum levels of tension of what he described as the flute's 'temporal, dynamic, pitch and morphological dimensions' – the latter referring to the instrument's 'form' or characteristic nature. At any given moment at least two of these dimensions are at the maximum level of tension. In the case of the morphological dimension, this is achieved when the conventional perception of the flute is dramatically altered through the use of techniques such as flutter-tonguing, 'double stops' or multiphonics (the simultaneous production of two pitches related in the instrument's harmonic series); and key-clicks – a percussive device that produces the pitch of the fingered note without the flautist breathing into the instrument. In the case of the 'double stops', Berio said that: '... their function is more symbolic than actual: to some extent they stand for my desperate search for polyphony with the most monodic instrument in history'.

The opening bars of *Sequenza IV* for piano also establish a sense of 'foreground' and 'background', albeit in an entirely different way: sustained chords (equivalent to the flute's oscillations) form a backdrop to the more prominent staccato chords

(functioning similarly to the flute's staccato gestures). This exchange then mutates into a dialogue between interrelated chordal and linear material. The role of the sustaining pedal is crucial in *Sequenza IV*: it is assigned one of the two harmonic fields developed in the work, with the other developed by the keyboard. These harmonic fields are unfolded simultaneously and at times interwoven, the relationship between materials for keyboard and pedal lending the piano a new sense of internal dialogue, over and above its already manifest polyphonic capabilities.

Berio used this relationship to accentuate one of the piano's particular acoustic qualities: its 'spatial' dimension. As distinct from its range of available pitches, the 'space' of the piano concerns the specific attack and resonance of certain pitches juxtaposed or in combination. This quality is particularly prominent during a passage towards the end of *Sequenza IV*, when the initial material is at its most fragmented. (Rather than employing the precise rhythms that pervade much of the work, Berio notates these bars using connected grace notes, giving the pianist a certain degree of rhythmic freedom). Berio's use of the sustain pedal during these bars – the 'dialogue' between pedal and keyboard – creates a beautiful sonority.

Of all the *Sequenzas*, it is *Sequenza VIII* for violin that most explicitly demands historical awareness on the part of the performer. Berio saw the work as a very particular homage not only to specific works for the violin, but also to the instrument itself, which he considered one of the most versatile and significant in history. Furthermore, in *Sequenza VIII* Berio's desire for a single instrument to create the effect of polyphony shifts from the metaphorical to the literal; the violin is called upon to play passages of real, not merely implied, polyphony. The treatment of the recurrent A-B cell and the layering of longer note values against passages of fiendishly rapid material draw upon Bach's structural devices, in particular those of the *Chaconne* from the D minor Partita, while the phenomenal agility required of the performer establishes a musical lineage with 19<sup>th</sup>-century virtuoso works. The A-B cell returns to end the *Sequenza*, establishing a satisfying over-arching unity that frames the intricate and wide-ranging material within.

Several of Berio's *Sequenzas* spawned other works. *Sequenza VIII* engendered *Corale*, while Berio's *Chemins* are commentaries on different *Sequenzas*, realisations of their implicit harmonies, with *Chemins III* being a further elaboration of *Chemins II*. Berio was fascinated by the processes of elaboration and transcription, hence the dual identity of *Sequenza IX*: *Sequenza IX b* is a transcription for alto saxophone of *Sequenza IX a* for clarinet.

*Sequenza IX* is, essentially, an intricate melody exploring the relationship between two pitch fields. One of these is stable, consisting of seven notes usually fixed in register, while the other is volatile: five notes that traverse the instrument's range. This contrast permeates the score, the first metronome marking of which is crotchet = 60 '*ma sempre un poco instabile*'. Later, this unpredictability is heightened with the marking: *Tempo molto instabile*. Precisely notated rhythms (dominated by dotted and double-dotted units and triplets) are interspersed with moments of relative rhythmic freedom (such as the repetition, over ten seconds, of an arch-shaped figure notated without stems.) Pitch also veers between the concrete and the indefinite. As well as using multiphonics, Berio specified different fingerings to denote unconventional

articulations of particular pitches, resulting in audible shifts in intonation, an instability that reaches its apex with the clarinet's flamboyant slides.

All of the *Sequenzas* were written for specific performers: *Sequenza I* for Severino Gazzelloni; *Sequenza IV* for Jocy de Corvalho; *Sequenza VIII* for Carlo Chiarappa; and *Sequenza IX a* for Michel Arrignon. However, like *Sequenza III* for voice, which was composed for Cathy Berberian, *Sequenza XIV* for cello was written with the very particular capabilities and musical heritage of its dedicatee, Rohan de Saram, in mind. Of Sri Lankan parentage, de Saram played Kandyan drums as a boy (Kandy being the ancient capital of Ceylon); Berio's interest in assimilating different musical traditions led him to ask de Saram about the musical practices of Sri Lanka, and in particular the four distinct 'sounds' of this drum. The ensuing collaboration resulted in Berio's final *Sequenza*. In the opening bars – and throughout the piece – Berio exploits the percussive potential of the cello to evoke the Kandyan drum, with the cellist's left hand striking the strings while the right hand hits the body of the instrument. Berio also drew upon a 12-note rhythm recorded and notated for him by de Saram. This rhythm is not used strictly, but is variously modified into 11 or 13-beat units. In contrast with these robust rhythmic sections, the *arco* passages, featuring *portamento* and harmonics, explore the cello's timbres from astringency to a more plaintive, haunting eloquence. The final version of *Sequenza XIV* was premiered in Los Angeles in February 2003, and was first performed in the UK in April 2004.

In *Due pezzi* for violin and piano (1951) Berio employed serial procedures, as befits a work written in response to the music of Dallapiccola (whose own *Due studi* for the same combination was elaborated to produce *Due pezzi* for orchestra in 1947). Berio's 'two pieces' can, in effect, be heard as three, owing to a relatively still central interlude. In the 1940s Dallapiccola, himself influenced by Webern, made unorthodox use of serial methods (including octave doubling until he refined his style in the 1950s). Berio said that his four pieces, *Due pezzi*, *Cinque variazioni* for piano, *Chamber Music* and *Variazioni* were not simply influenced by Dallapiccola's music, but were to some extent a 'reaction' to it: 'With these pieces I entered into Dallapiccola's "melodic" world, but they also allowed me to escape from it'.

*Musica leggera* was written for the 70<sup>th</sup> birthday of Goffredo Petrassi, who, alongside Dallapiccola, was one of the most significant Italian composers of his era. Petrassi embraced without any sense of contradiction the musical worlds of Renaissance polyphony and mid 20<sup>th</sup>-century innovation, a contrast that feeds into Berio's homage, which fuses similarly apparently contradictory elements by combining a dance-like levity with densely layered canonic structures.

Vocal writing was of seminal importance in Berio's output, to the extent that it infiltrated his approach to instrumental music. He was '... interested in music that mimes and, in a certain sense, describes that prodigious phenomenon that lies at the heart of language: sound becoming sense'. Two works that may be said to 'mime' this phenomenon are *Les mots sont allés* (a 'recitativo'), and *Lied*, the titles of which make explicit Berio's desire to communicate the 'vocal' characteristics of the cello and clarinet respectively, transferring musical characteristics with vocal connotations into the purely instrumental realm (a process he also used to write the instrumental *Requies, in memoriam* Cathy Berberian). As with the *Sequenzas*, this is achieved with an acute historical awareness. Berio articulated his interest in the relationship between

vocal and instrumental music by examining historical precedents: ‘... simplifying a great deal, you could say that before Monteverdi instrumental music was an extension of vocal music. After Monteverdi vocal music became an extension, an *alter ego* of instrumental music.’ He went on to cite Mozart and Stravinsky as two rare exceptions of musicians for whom ‘the two tendencies . . . coexist in a miraculous equilibrium’, a balance to which Berio aspires in these two works, and, arguably, in all his music.

Luciano Berio died in May 2003, but the freshness and significance of his music is lasting. On the subject of posterity, he stated that: ‘. . . undoubtedly the conviction that thought is permanent, that ideas have a longer life than things, and that men transmit ideas between them as durably as they transmit languages, is ingrained and implicit in human existence.’ Indeed, when Berio spoke of the archetypal composer as eternally young, he provided, inadvertently, a fitting description of how we may remember him:

‘. . . our composer, a creative artist who is eternally a “young man”, intent upon giving form to “the uncreated conscience of his race”, is like a navigator passing through the boundaries of his own history to explore unknown archipelagos, and to land on mysterious islands which he thinks he is the first to discover, and which he describes to others in sound.’

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