

Berio's *Sequenzas*

Essays on Performance, Composition and Analysis

Edited by Janet K. Halfyard

An **Ashgate** Book

BERIO'S *SEQUENZAS*

Dedicated to
David Osmond-Smith (1946–2007)

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Essays on Performance, Composition and Analysis

Edited by

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Paul Roberts is a freelance composer, music editor and engraver. He was Luciano Berio's musical assistant for Universal Edition Vienna for over 13 years, and has been responsible for the engraving of many of Berio's works, including *Sequenza I*, *Sequenza IV*, *Sequenza VII*, *Sequenza XIV*, *Chemins IV*, *Chemins V* and *Récit (Chemins VII)*. In this respect he is often required to collaborate with BMG Ricordi Milan, the Teatro Comunale di Firenze and the Orchestra Regionale di Toscana. He has published articles on *Sequenza VII* and *Cronaca del Luogo*, and his compositions include *Consequents* for soprano and ensemble (1994), commissioned by the Southbank Centre, London for a concert that presented performances of all 11 *Sequenzas* written up to 1994. The piece is scored for the combined forces of those *Sequenzas* and is based on their music.

Edward Venn is Lecturer in Music at Lancaster University (UK). His research focuses on contemporary music and performance, and especially contemporary

British music. He has published articles on Adès, Wood, Tippett and Finzi, and his book, *The Music of Hugh Wood*, is to be published by Ashgate in the Twentieth Century Music series.

Kirsty Whatley wrote her MA dissertation on the development of the harp idiom in twentieth-century art music and has delivered several seminars, papers and workshops on this subject. She is currently extending her performance research into the technical and historical diversity of the harp family at the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis in Switzerland. As a contemporary musician she frequently collaborates with composers and has premiered several works, including Andrew Keeling's *Sacred Time* for solo harp.



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Foreword

Janet K. Halfyard

Berio's *Sequenza* series is one of the most remarkable achievements of the late twentieth century, a collection of virtuoso pieces that explores the capabilities of a solo instrument and its player, making extreme technical demands of the performer whilst developing the musical vocabulary of the instrument in compositions so assured and so distinctive that each piece both initiates and potentially exhausts the repertoire of a new genre.

My original motivation for proposing this volume had three separate but interlinked sources. The first is my own relationship with *Sequenza III*, a piece I first encountered as an undergraduate student and subsequently started learning in the early 1990s. The process is ongoing: I doubt I shall ever stop learning *Sequenza III*. The second source is my students at Birmingham Conservatoire, all of whom are required by their course to engage with ideas of performance practice and contemporary composition. The *Sequenzas* are always popular choices for their seminars, but the continual complaint has always been 'I can't find any books on this'. Finding myself in a position to provide one, it seemed only fair that I should, and given the general dearth of literature on Berio in the English language, such a book seemed both timely and much needed.

The final source of motivation, however, was the *Sequenzas* themselves. *Sequenza III* is the one I am closest too as a musician and musicologist, but through my students and the work that the best of them have done – indeed, it tends to be the best of them that tackle these noticeably demanding pieces – I have come to know and admire the rest of the series more thoroughly. Berio offers us a series of what on the surface might appear to be miniatures as arguably his most outstanding legacy to instrumental repertoire. They are brief in terms of their duration, ranging from six to eighteen minutes (interestingly, these are the durations of the first and penultimate pieces – they evidently got longer as time went by) but in terms of their musical depth, they are giants of our time.

This book therefore brings together a collection of essays on a uniquely important group of pieces by one of the major figures of twentieth-century music. The *Sequenzas* have been significantly influential in the development of composition for solo instruments and voice, and there is no obviously comparable series of works in the output of any other modern composer. Series of pieces tend to be linked by the instruments for which the composer writes, but this is a series in which the pieces are linked instead by particular compositional aims and preoccupations – virtuosity, polyphony, the exploration of a specific instrumental idiom – applied to a series of different instruments.

The contributors to this volume bring a range of expertise to the discussion of the *Sequenzas*. Most are based in the UK and the USA, but there are also contributions by authors from Switzerland, France, Italy and Brazil. All can be considered experts in their field, and I am indebted to all of them for their commitment to this volume. I am particularly grateful for the contributions from Thomas Gartmann, who has already published extensively on Berio's work, and from Paul Roberts, Berio's assistant from 1990 onwards, both for his own essay and the various insights he has been able to give on issues related to the composition of the *Sequenzas* that have not previously been in the public domain. I am especially and lastingly grateful to David Osmond-Smith, who passed away late in May 2007, just as this volume was going to print, and whose encouragement and support right from the start of the project I very much appreciated.

The essays have been grouped into the three main categories of performance, composition and analysis, although these categories are, in practice, far from exclusive. The essays in the performance section address issues that arise in the physical performance of the pieces concerned, frequently basing conclusions on interviews with practitioners and analysis of recordings, as well as often drawing on the personal knowledge and experience of the authors themselves as both musicologists and musicians who perform these pieces. Cynthia Folio is a flutist writing, with Alexander Brinkman, about *Sequenza I*, its many recordings, and the issues arising for performers from the implied differences between the 1958 and 1992 editions of the score. Zoe Browder Doll is a pianist, looking specifically at Berio's use of the *sostenuto* pedal in *Sequenza IV*, *Leaf* and *Sonata*, and the sometimes unpredictable results this can cause in performance. Patricia Alessandrini's essay addresses the notation of *Sequenza VII*, its renotation by Jacqueline Leclair and how the proportions of the work's structure are articulated by these two versions and by the timings that occur in performances of the piece. A theme that emerges here and elsewhere in the volume is the extent to which the *Sequenzas* often challenge conventional ideas of the nature of the instruments for which they are composed. Kirsty Whatley is a harpist, addressing the practical necessities and aesthetic results of performing *Sequenza II*, in particular the way the work distances itself from the traditional Romantic–Impressionist image of the instrument. In the final essay in this section, the British trumpeter and musicologist, Jonathan Impett, examines the rhetoric of the trumpet itself as an instrument situated between musical cultures in *Sequenza X*, addressing ideas of gesture, structure and performance in the composition and realization of the piece.

The essays in the composition section discuss some of Berio's specific compositional concerns and his aesthetic standpoint in relation to a range of issues. Paul Robert's essay here is devoted to the *Chemins* series, elucidating Berio's compositional processes and intentions, drawing on the author's firsthand knowledge as Berio's assistant throughout the 1990s. Andrea Cremaschi focuses on the relationships in a particular constellation of works surrounding *Sequenza IX*, the withdrawn 'Chemins V' for clarinet and electronics, Part II, scene seven of *La vera storia* and *Récit (Chemins VII)*. My own essay looks at the theatricality of

the *Sequenzas*, from the ideas of character, narrative and action that are present in many of them, to the theatrical nature of the virtuosity that unites them all. Two essays in this section bring Berio's relationship with Umberto Eco to the fore: Edward Venn's essay interrogates Eco and Berio's notions of the Open Work across a broad range of Berio's compositions, including *Sequenza I* and the *Chemins*, while Eugene Montague examines aesthetic concurrences between Eco's novel *Foucault's Pendulum* and Berio's *Sequenza VIII* for violin.

Finally, the essays on analysis take a variety of different approaches to specific works. Irna Priore's essay addresses issues of vestigial serial practice in the construction of pitch material in *Sequenza I*, while Didier Guigue and Marcílio Onofre examine the sonic character of chords in *Sequenza IV*, employing the system of analysis that Guigue is responsible for developing as part of an ongoing project developing methodologies for twentieth-century music analysis. Amanda Bayley explores the way in which *Sequenza VI* challenges our concept of expressivity in performance through analysis of how structural qualities such as dynamics, tempo, texture and gesture are perceived by the listener. Again, focusing on how the piece might be heard, Mark Porcaro examines the 'structural polyphony' of *Sequenza XI* and the manner in which different layers of this structure come in and out of focus in the course of the piece. Finally, Thomas Gartmann's analysis of *Sequenza XIII (Chanson)* examines the gestures and layers of the work, its number games and its stylistic ambivalence, as Berio's composition articulates the confrontation between the traditions of classical music and vernacular performance.

There are some apparent absences in the fifteen essays presented here: although *Sequenzas III* and *V* are discussed in some detail in David Osmond-Smith's introduction and Chapter 6, *Sequenza XII* for bassoon and *Sequenza XIV* for cello are mentioned only briefly, and this reflects the simple fact that no proposals were made regarding these pieces. *Sequenza XIV*'s absence is undoubtedly because it was the last composed and is still the least well known, with no commercial recording available when this volume was commissioned, but there is no equally obvious reason for the absence of *Sequenza XII*. Although in an ideal world each of the fourteen *Sequenzas* might have had their own essay, the absences should not perturb us unduly: this book is not intended to be the last word on the series or the definitive version of how they should be understood. In fact, as much as anything, these essays reveal rather effectively the extent to which different – and potentially conflicting – understandings and readings of the pieces are both possible and unavoidable. Any writer comes to any composition with their own intellectual and musical intentions and preoccupations, and these agendas play a necessary and productive role in allowing our understanding of the material being addressed to develop, pointing to new directions that might be pursued and new approaches that might be taken. This volume, therefore, aims to be inclusive but makes no claims to being an exhaustive account of the *Sequenzas*. It brings together a range of approaches and a range of readings of both the pieces and the series that demonstrate the richness of this repertoire and the many levels on which Berio's compositions can be considered.

A project like this can evidently not be accomplished by one person on their own, and I have cause to be grateful to many people: George Caird and Peter Johnson at Birmingham Conservatoire for their practical support of my work; Helen Beecroft for her moral support and practical help with the musical examples; Duncan Fielden and David Saint; the library staff at the Conservatoire, particularly Robert Allan, Sanshia Bedford and Sandy Price; Paul Robertson, for introducing me to Thomas Gartmann; and all the contributors for their hard work and perseverance in bringing this project to completion. I would also like to thank Ben Newing, Rod Taylor and Adrian Connell at Universal Edition (London), and Heidi May and the editorial staff at Ashgate for their advice and support.

Acknowledgements

Examples 1.1–1.2, 1.4–1.6, 2.1–2.8, 3.1–3.7, 5.1, 5.3, 5.6, 7.1–7.9, 8.1–8.9, 9.1–9.8, 10.2–10.6, 11.1, 11.3, 13.1–13.11, 14.1–14.7, 14.10–14.16, 15.1, 15.3 and 15.5–15.15 are reproduced from Luciano Berio's scores. Copyright by Universal Edition A.G. Vienna. Reproduced by permission. All rights reserved.

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Notes on the Text

Octave designation

Where authors refer to specific pitches, the text uses the octave designation system employed by the Acoustical Society of America, which numbers octaves from lowest to highest as follows:

The image displays two musical staves illustrating the octave designation system. The top staff is in bass clef with a 4/2 time signature and contains notes for A₀, B₀, C₁, B₁, C₂, B₂, C₃, and B₃. The bottom staff is in treble clef and contains notes for C₄, B₄, C₅, B₅, C₆, B₆, C₇, and B₇. A dashed line labeled '8va' spans the final two measures of the bottom staff. Octave numbers are indicated by subscripts: 0 for A, 1 for C, 2 for B, 3 for C, 4 for B, 5 for C, 6 for B, 7 for C, and 7 for B.

A₀ – B₀ C₁ – B₁ C₂ – B₂ C₃ – B₃

C₄ – B₄ C₅ – B₅ C₆ – B₆ C₇ – B₇

Dates of composition

There are some differences between dates of composition as shown on the scores of some of the *Sequenzas* and the dates of composition attributed to the pieces in other sources such as David Osmond-Smith's catalogue for his 1991 monograph on Berio. These apparent discrepancies can largely be attributed to the fact that they tend to refer to different aspects of a work's progress. For example, in the case of *Sequenza XII*, Berio started work on the composition around 1992, a fact easily obtained from Pascal Gallois' own account of his work with Berio (see www.pascalgallois.com); most sources give the date of composition as 1995 (the year of completion and the piece's premiere), while Universal Edition gives the date of the final score as 1997. All of these dates are accurate within their own terms of reference, although this variety of dates may at first appear contradictory.



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Introduction

David Osmond-Smith

Luciano Berio knew enough about words not to laugh at musicologists (or at least, not as often as they perhaps deserved). In a world dizzy with verbiage, he knew well enough that the space through which music may follow its own compass must be defended from *logos* by *logos*: fighting words, cautious scholarly words or, in his own case, playful raids upon the inarticulate which never underestimate the vastness of the territories into which they have ventured. When one of the regiment of commentators found the *mot juste*, he applauded; when they floundered in labyrinthine elucubrations, he sighed wryly – but did not mock.

He also knew enough about words to choose cannily when it came to titles for his compositions. To call one piece for flute in 1958 a *Sequenza* helps focus listeners' attention upon how musical time passes. To call seven of them thus – as he had done by 1969 – sets up expectations of a series which at the time prompted the question: having started, where would he stop? (As the sixties concluded, it looked as though this series – then seven, with numbers *III* to *VII* produced in a continuous flow from 1965–69 – had indeed also drawn to a close. Yet in 1976 he returned to the concept with a large work for violin, and thereafter composed roughly two *Sequenzas* per decade until seven had become fourteen.) It also, of course, prompts the interviewer or journalist, forever in search of 'a few words' for a publisher to print, to ask why these fourteen large works for single performer are all called 'Sequenza'?

Berio was ready for his questioners: it was because these works set in play a sequence of fixed harmonic fields. For those seeking a first handhold when coming to grips with the scores, that is unquestionably a useful starting-point – at least from *Sequenzas V* and *VI* onward. But as Berio observed of himself, like a good Ligurian, he never threw anything away, so you must also expect of the *Sequenzas* that they become ever more fascinated by revisiting past procedures from the fresh perspectives opened up by a new instrumental domain. They become more and more like *Finnegans Wake*: full of echoes, full of interweaving levels. Since it is the subtlety of the weave that lends fascination, one risks the prosaic if one solemnly teases out the threads. But if the musicologist is the fall guy of the art that they serve, a little mockery is worth the risk.

The 'sequence' alluded to in the title of the 1958 virtuoso work for flute is primarily a melodic sequence. More accurately, it incorporates a series of rereadings of a pitch sequence.¹ Generating the new by rereading an established musical 'text' – modifying octave placement and rhythmic proportion to the point where melodic identity dissolves into transformation – is a predilection that derives from the experience of serialism (as indeed does Berio's concern, at this point in the later 1950s, to make active use of the full chromatic pitch resources at his disposal). We are as yet at some distance from the concept of 'harmonic field' as it was to be subsequently understood. The sequence of pitch-classes is established for at least those portions of *Sequenza I* dedicated to 'rereading'; but octave placement and durational proportions are maximally variable. Yet such pitch-class identities, quickly evident to the score reader, are calculatedly occult for the listener deprived of perfect pitch and a photographic memory. The same could not be said when the 'rereading' principle re-asserts itself as a major structural force in the first part of *Sequenza VI* (1967). For now the basic 'text' – a long, chromatically ascending sequence of chords – is instantly recognizable in each of its various manifestations. The 'rereading' of a basic repertoire of chords may be done either by adding or subtracting pitches. In the case of *Sequenza VI* the principle is subtractive: a hypothetical sequence of four-note chords (fully manifest in the electronic organ part of *Chemin II*, elaborated in the same year around *Sequenza VI*) is subject to deletions or sketched allusions according to what conveniently lies beneath the hand of the viola player, whereas in *Sequenza IV*, written over the previous two years, a collection of chords² built from superposed triads (and thus again elaborating a vocabulary from the traditional placement of hands on instrument) is playfully corrupted by the displacement and addition of individual pitches. The exploratory verve derived from juxtaposing chords selected from an established collection – from interrogating the syntactic potential of that collection – has much in common with the similarly open-ended, self-regenerating choice of melodic relations from a fixed pitch-field.

Drawing consequences from the juxtaposition of dissimilar objects or gestures is in fact one of the most consistent features of the *Sequenzas* – muted in the case of a purely melodic conception, such as *Sequenza IX* for clarinet (1980), but blatant in the case of *Sequenza II* for harp (1963), *Sequenza III* for voice (1965–66), or *Sequenza XI* for guitar (1987–88). On a structural level, such consequences are the fruit of a tension – one might adopt one of Berio's favourite metaphors, and call it a counterpoint – between musical time and dramaturgical time. Berio's deep knowledge of the nineteenth-century repertoire was such that he felt no compunction in engineering the most traditionally 'organic' of climaxes, followed

¹ For a few examples, see David Osmond-Smith, *Berio* (Oxford/New York, 1991), p. 31, or the essay by Irna Priore, chapter 11 in this volume.

² In a public interview at the Trondheim Chamber Music Festival, 2002, Berio introduced this *Sequenza* by recalling the jazzmen's enquiry of each other: 'How many chords you got?'

by meditative relaxation. *Sequenza VI* is an evident case in point, and Jonathan Impett's essay in this volume points to the same sensibility at work in *Sequenza X* for trumpet (1984). Yet Berio's sense of dramaturgy – even if it be simply the drama of a virtuoso wrestling with their instrument – has a much more specific origin. If asked what was the most profound influence operating upon his sense of theatre, Berio would invariably reply: 'Brecht'. This might at first surprise those who know him principally from his musical theatre – which at least in later years is devoid of the didactic motivations that underlay Brechtian dramaturgy. But it will not greatly surprise those who know the *Sequenzas* well.

Berio's reflections upon Brechtian dramaturgy stem from a specific and formative experience. In the winter of 1955–56, a few months before his death, Brecht attended the final rehearsals of Giorgio Strehler's production for the Piccolo Teatro in Milan of *Die Dreigroschenoper*. Bruno Maderna conducted the band and was thus able to negotiate Berio's presence among the small body of artists and intellectuals permitted to follow rehearsals. Watching Brecht and Strehler at work became a profoundly formative experience for many of those accorded this privilege, and since Berio and Maderna were constantly at work together consolidating the newly opened Studio di Fonologia, it is fair to assume that their understanding of the dramaturgical principles that Brecht strove to realize was reinforced by their own discussions.

Because they have their echo in various of the *Sequenzas*, it is worth pausing for a moment to consider the theoretical nexus formed by the two cardinal dramaturgical concepts underlying Brecht's epic theatre: *Verfremdung*, usually translated as 'alienation', and *Gestus*.³ Alienation is essentially the critical suspension of empathy – of the pleasing illusion that we 'know how some other person feels'. In its simplest and crudest form, it is achieved when an actor giving a 'realistic', post-Stanislawskian performance suddenly steps out of role. The spectator is confronted by the fact that the actor is giving a performance, and is implicitly invited to consider whether one is equally 'performing' one's everyday 'self'.⁴ Importantly for Berio, Brecht generalized the principle. Theatre consisted of a bundle of mutually alienating praxes: naturalistic acting, mannered acting, song, projected texts, and so on. Their juxtaposition within theatre obliged the spectator to adopt a critical appraisal of their status and intention as artifice, to ask why they were thus juxtaposed rather than 'going with the flow' of any one of them. The most immediately evident example within Berio's work is *Sequenza III* for voice, where lyric singing, speech and 'everyday vocal acts' such as laughter or coughing

³ For a concise history of Brecht's introduction of the term *Verfremdung*, see John Willett's note in Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. and trans. John Willett (London, 1964), p. 99. For an exemplification by Brecht of *Gestus* as employed in his New York production of *Die Mutter*, see the same volume, pp. 82–3.

⁴ C.f. Chuang Tzu's well-known parable on the lability of identity. He had dreamt that he was a butterfly. On awaking, he had no means of knowing whether he was a man who had dreamt that he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming that he was a man.

are juxtaposed in a vertiginously compressed manner, mutually alienating one another. And as Janet Halfyard points out in her essay on *Sequenza III* in this volume, the fact that the performer is instructed to walk on to the stage already producing muttering vocalizations inevitably throws into confusion an audience engaged in the usual concert-hall ritual of applauding a soloist's entrance – a classic Brechtian alienation device in that it compels the audience into self-consciousness of what they are doing, row upon row, staring at this woman. Yet this implosion of what Brechtians refer to as the 'A-effect' is only the most extreme of its applications within the *Sequenzas*. For the same 'encyclopaedic' sensibility, the same quintessentially twentieth-century preoccupation with finding ways whereby traditionally incompatible idioms may be persuaded to inhabit the same musical space, comes straight to the fore when Berio writes *Sequenzas* for instruments that did not develop their identities within the Western orchestra, such as the guitar (*Sequenza XI*) or the accordion (*Sequenza XIII*). In both instances performative and harmonic gestures that would traditionally articulate popular forms of dance and song instead have to find ways of survival in mutually alienating dialogue with those features of Berio's musical language – the gradual exploration of the potential of a fixed harmonic field, for instance – that serve to dynamize his fluid, wandering forms. Similarly *Sequenza XII* for bassoon persuades into cohabitation the extraordinary 'extended' techniques developed by its dedicatee, Pascal Gallois – such as the immensely slow downward glissando, supported by circular breathing, that opens the work – and gestures from its traditional orchestral personae: the agile staccato bass, the lyrical tenor register, and so on. Technical innovation and encyclopaedic historical awareness mutually alienate one another.

The Brechtian A-effect does not of itself necessarily have wider formal implications. It falls to his related concept of *Gestus* to give a sense of the wider dimensions operating in theatrical time. *Gestus* is a theatrical praxis that Brecht – and his commentators – tended to exemplify rather than to define, but one may risk a simple metaphor. If there are concurrent and mutually alienating threads running through a performance, the *Gestus* is achieved where they are knotted together to form a striking and semantically dense theatrical moment. One might take an example from Strehler's 1956 production of *Die Dreigroschenoper* – one sufficiently striking that Strehler transposed it to his two subsequent productions of the work.⁵ In Act 1, scene ii, Tiger Brown, High Sheriff of London, has taken an hour off from his professional duties to attend the wedding of his old pal, the arch-hoodlum Mac the Knife. They grow sentimental about the good old days when both served together in the British Indian army, keeping subject nations in order. Lights change, the organ is lit up, and the two launch into their favourite routine from the old days: the 'Kannonensong'. Mac's gang, all in their best suits, listen to the first two verses in silence. In Strehler's version, by the third verse they have

⁵ I am indebted to the description given in David L. Hirst, *Giorgio Strehler* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 98–9.

taken to marching on the spot and, while reaching into their pockets for the tools of their trade – knives, guns, knuckle-dusters – bawl out the chorus's sardonic celebration of putting to cannibalistic use the shredded flesh of lesser peoples, while a back-projection glows red with fire. The chorus ends; guns are fired; blackout. Then the sardonic celebration of a mobster marriage resumes as if nothing had happened.

This momentary intertwining of political and criminal violence emerging from a façade of low-life elegance, this underlining of 'as above, so below' – which after all was the fundamental topos of John Gay's *Beggar's Opera*, which Brecht took as his model – is a typical, if fairly rudimentary example of Brechtian Gestus. One may see a similarly overt and raw example in Berio's *Sequenza V* for trombone. The very name of the instrument unleashes a whole cloud of associations for an Italian speaker. Trombone – a big 'tromba' or trumpet – is also a big tube or pump. It is also (among many other things) a blunderbuss. 'Trombare' is, in Tuscan slang, 'to copulate', but also 'to fail'. 'Trombonare', by aural metaphor, is to act the windbag, yet for lovers of obscene visual metaphor the trombone slide may evoke the male phallus in action (and of course phalluses and guns are all too familiar a popular comparison, and are both rich sources of masculine performance anxiety). No surprise, then, that the performer enters (in full evening dress), 'strikes the poses of a variety showman about to sing an old favourite' – in other words, intimates to the audience his intention to perform – raises his trombone-phallus-rifle aloft and 'shoots' a single note before lowering his instrument. The gesture is repeated several times to allow the associations to sink in; then other notes of a fixed field are gradually introduced, as are frantic clatterings of a vibrating hand-held plunger mute at the bell of the trombone. As hysteria reaches its height, the performer suddenly lowers his instrument and asks the most devastating (and eminently Brechtian) of questions that one might address to a male erection or to an aimed rifle: 'why?'. The performer sits down, and continues his private meditations with both mute and voice through the trombone echoing that all too probing '[u]–[a]–[i]'.

Such associations will of course strike different spectators with different force. And for the pure in heart, and curious of mind, Berio had ready a further layer of meaning – one agreeably tailored for the manufacturer of programme notes. His anecdote concerning Grock is discussed in Janet Halfyard's essay in this volume: and it is precisely the sort of mimed parable on performance anxiety that might most readily accrete to itself a cohort of more Rabelaisian shadows.⁶ *Sequenza V*'s use of Brechtian Gestus to generate dark comedy was plainly not lost on Edoardo

⁶ As will be obvious upon reflection, Grock's routine was a mimed parable upon failure in musical performance (a theme taken up by the unfortunate tenor in Berio's *Opera*). But Berio's *Sequenza* does not act out failure – it speaks of it in the inevitable programme note. So a good Brechtian would ask: 'just what has failed?'

Sanguineti, who concluded his introductory poem for the work: ‘why do you want to know, I say to you, why I say to you why?’⁷

Such ‘open’ use (in the sense espoused by Umberto Eco) of Brechtian Gestus is by no means confined to those *Sequenzas* traditionally acknowledged as ‘theatrical’. To give but one example, when feeding to commentators an interpretive strategy for *Sequenza VIII* for violin, Berio never failed to mention Bach’s solo violin partitas – and particularly the Chaconne from the second Partita in D minor. Although Berio was certainly not going to activate such associations by an overt musical quotation, he nevertheless placed at the structural core of the violin *Sequenza* a musical object that is capable of arousing such associations for those listeners disposed to weave an extra semantic layer into their reception of the work: an accented, dissonant dyad of A plus B. The Bach Chaconne is propelled into its magnificent gyre by leaping, in its second bar, onto an analogous accented dissonant dyad: D plus E. In Berio’s *Sequenza*, the dyad is, if anything, a gravitational fulcrum differing from the analogous sustained B that anchors the oboe *Sequenza* only by the fact that it never loses its bowed accent – in other words, the performance gesture that links it to the Bach Chaconne. So although the gesture of bowing a heavily accented dissonant dyad functions as a structural marker – as does a Brechtian Gestus, which in effect marks a *punctum* in the flow of dramaturgical time – it also reminds us that Berio, although perfectly understanding the practical devising of the Brechtian Gestus, nevertheless engages in a ‘creative misreading’ of the device when theorizing around it. While Brecht took repeated pains to emphasize that dramaturgical Gestus does not necessarily involve physical gesture, Berio, in his 1961 essay ‘Du geste et de Piazza Carità’, projects a proto-semiological interpretation onto the term, evoking the rich semantic cloud of associations behind any gesture (including, of course, a performative gesture):

One cannot invent a gesture entirely anew, because it always implies a relation with the diverse histories and customs, both social and expressive, that cohabit within it. The gestures of Brecht’s epic theatre are in part inhabited by the gestural repertoires of silent cinema and Japanese Nō theatre.⁸

Brecht might have assented to the observation but would almost certainly have pointed out that whether or not the use of such gesture functions as Gestus depends upon its role in dramaturgical structure. The recurrent accented dissonant dyad of

⁷ ti dico: perché, perché? e sono la secca smorfia di un clown:
perché vuoi sapere, ti dico, perché ti dico perché?

⁸ Luciano Berio, ‘Du geste et de Piazza Carità’, *La Musique et ses problèmes contemporains*, *Cahiers Renaud-Barrault* 41 (1963), reprinted in a revised Italian version in *Sequenze per Luciano Berio* (Milan 2000), pp. 275–77. English translation by David Osmond-Smith.

Sequenza VIII makes sense as Gestus; the individual quixotic ‘incidents’ of multiphonics – singular sound-objects – in *Sequenza VII* for oboe do not.

Such a proliferation of semantic currents within purely instrumental works, such an overt acknowledgement of responsibility towards the history of the instrument in question, places formidable burdens upon the musicological commentator. *Sequenzas* that are patently ‘studies’ in traditionally intra-musical matters – *Sequenza IV* for piano as a study in harmonic density and syntax, *Sequenza IX* for clarinet as a study in melodic thought – lend themselves to the ‘parametric’ preoccupations of traditional analysis. Not, of course, that the others do not, but they in addition solicit a semiological exegesis that is far harder to do more than sketch.

As I suggested at the start of this introduction, Berio would have empathized with the commentator’s dilemma – but might well have seized the opportunity to underline that there are certain dimensions of human experience upon which music exerts a surer hold than does language. His readiness to bridge that gap, to offer something to those eager for a verbal hand-hold by which to lower themselves into the swirls and eddies of music, could at times create problems for the general commentator. Like many creative personalities, he was most ready to reach for the metaphors that illuminated his most recent music. A simple case in point is the series of *Chemins* that he elaborated around certain of his *Sequenzas*. Beyond the early seventies, it became an accepted critical commonplace to employ Berio’s own favoured metaphor: the *Sequenza* was a rich and multilayered text to which as composer he would return to supply musical ‘commentary’. But unlike verbal commentary, where one absorbs first text and subsequently commentary – even if it be by alternating between the two – Berio’s musical commentaries elaborate upon a text simultaneously with that text’s own unfolding. They add extra layers to it or pare it down, so that an alternative way of describing the phenomenon – one to which Berio himself resorted as a corrective to critics’ descriptions of the third movement of *Sinfonia* as a ‘collage’ – is that it focuses upon differing degrees of harmonic density. In other words, rather than ‘rereading’ a pre-established musical harmonic or melodic sequence as a mode of development and extension within a given work – as noted above in relation to *Sequenzas VI* and *I* – Berio is taking a completed work and accreting around it further layers of material that reflect and develop what was laid down in the musical text. That text thereby generates its own harmonic backdrop (as in *Chemins IV*), or its own partial self-annihilation (as in *Chemins II*).

The crux here for some commentators is ‘what is pre-established?’ The metaphor of text and commentary implies that one antecedes the other; and the narrative dear to musicologists that they are hovering at the composer’s shoulder watching the work being created obliges them to posit a chronological succession. Nor is that succession in question as regards the later *Chemins*. Six years separate the composition of *Sequenza VII* for oboe and the *Chemins IV* that is formed around it. Similarly, four years separate *Sequenza VIII* for violin and its own ‘chemins’, *Corale*; twelve years separate *Sequenza X* for trumpet and *Kol Od*