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# Questions and a Few Answers in Performing Luciano Berio's Sequenza 1

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## Questions and a Few Answers in Performing Luciano Berio's *Sequenza I*

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Berio's *Sequenza I* has been a part of the modern flutist's cannon ever since its publication in 1958 by Zerboni in Milan. The work was written in spatial rhythmic notation, allowing the performer some temporal freedom. By the late nineteen fifties and after a long bout with more rigid serial techniques, performers seemed to welcome the loosening of a compositional rigidity that had recently usurped many expressive choices from their purview. Despite the composition's enormous challenges, some of the most prestigious performers of the twentieth century began to program the work, including Severino Gazzelloni, Aurèle Nicolet, and Jean-Pierre Rampal. However in a caustic 1981 *Intervista sulla musica* interview<sup>1</sup>, Berio described these performances as "excessive" and "unethical", questioning the performing artists' musical integrity. Perhaps for this reason, the subsequent 1992 *Universal Edition* revision of *Sequenza I* was not well received. Back to traditional rhythmic notation but without bars, it included new but rigid rhythmic details, some moments having little relationship to the original 1958 publication.

The effort required to perform *Sequenza I* has always been considerable. Some passages are just challenging; others are unplayable. At

a culminating moment about halfway into the piece, an indication of four articulations per pitch class requires five pitches at a quarter note equals 70 MM. This requires playing twenty notes in less than a second. It is notable that the passage was not changed in the new version. (See Fig. 7)<sup>2</sup> With such exhilarating demands, composers often attempt to make the impossible the new normal. Hearing Berio's contemptuous words, however does nothing to inspire, and many of today's performers prefer the first edition.<sup>3</sup> But, after suspending judgment based on ego and expediency, is there still something to be gained from this new edition?

In order to thoroughly understand Berio's performance expectations, a rhythmic analysis and comparison of the two versions is required. To do this, it is necessary to create an overlay of the first and second editions. Though a very few pitch classes have been altered in the new edition, the primary changes are in the rhythm and dynamics. The rhythms are specified in traditional notation in the new edition and the meter is indicated as a quarter note equals 70 MM. This alone is clear evidence that all "measures" are exactly the same length, and explains the meaning of his

groupings of triplets, quintuplets and sextuplets in the new edition. The indication corresponds to the first edition's symbol of "measure" utilizing small ticks on the staff. By adding those indications to the second edition as measures, we can begin to see Berio's desire for a greatly variable rhythmic subdivision of each measure. The following analysis will refer to these superimposed measures. The systems on each page must be numbered, and the measures numbered for each system. All systems and numbers refer to the second, 1992 edition. Some of the measuring is ambiguous, but this process of adding bar lines will help avoid confusion as to the exact measuring of each system.

In system one, the first three measures are divided into five sixteenths. The fourth measure is divided into six sixteenths, making a simple transition to the fifth through seventh measures, each being divided into three eighth note triplets. Though not obvious by any means, system two initiates four sixteenths to the bar for two measures, followed by two bars of five sixteenths, an eighth triplet bar, four sixteenths, a measure of eighth triplets again, and then an anticipated fermata. Though there are different numbers of sixteenths, each bar is a quarter note equals MM. 70. Otherwise, Berio need not have indicated the grouping brackets of five or three notes as seen below:



Figure 1. (1992)

The last note E4 of system two is the first fermata that is encountered. In the new edition, All the fermatas are given specific timings in seconds, so rather than a suspension of the beat, one has the impression that the meter continues through the fermata.

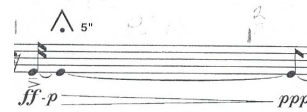


Figure 2. (1992)

This, along with the lack of notated measures and miniscule subdivisions adds to the tension reported by performers when working with the new edition.<sup>45</sup>



Figure 3. (1958)



Figures 4 A and B (1992)

The last bar of system four (Figures 3, 4. A and B) is an example of where only the second edition could reveal Berio's rhythmic intentions<sup>6</sup>. Here, the first edition has no clear indication of the measure's meter, so there would be no way that a performer could have anticipated a 5/16 metric subdivision. The first edition all but insists that the subsequent Ab grace note occur on the beginning of the next measure, yet the new edition requires the player to delay its execution (See Figs. 3 and 4). Performers who have legitimately interpreted the spatial notation based on the first version may find such moments vexing.

Still, the new version gives us a definitive interpretation directly from the composer. System five presents the first real discrepancy where no clear reconciliation of the two versions is apparent. The Eb at the end of the second measure is tied to another eighth. In the first version, there is only one measure of time indicated between that Eb

and the B natural four notes hence. Up to this point, note values make sense, however the only logical conclusion is that the extension of the Eb is an error, based on the first version of the piece (Figure 6). Speculating on Berio's intention based on the spacing of the first version, perhaps the Eb should be tied to a sixteenth rather than an eighth.



Figure 5. (1992)



Figure 6. (1958)

The next discrepancy is the first note of page 2. In the original edition, this G is clearly before the following measure, however the new version clearly places it on the downbeat. Placing the G6 on the next beat lines up pitch class and meter; probably not what Berio wanted. Therefore, the G4 in the first measure should be ahead of the beat.

Ambiguities seem to arise before or after fermatas. The new edition has a number of additional fermatas, making it unclear where meter resumes. The first edition seems clearer, because the meter continues through these long notes, most of which are not written as fermatas. Page two system six measure four provides a break in the rapid triplet passage, allowing for a phrase break and breath before the two thirty-second notes. System seven's third measure is of course unplayable at the tempo indicated, asking for twenty-four articulations in less than a second. Much has been said about Berio's irritation that performers were stretching or compressing the meter,

however it is difficult to see how this passage could be played otherwise. Though most performers simply double-tongue each pitch, requiring only twelve articulations rather than twenty-four, there is still no performance that manages this passage without altering it. The phrase in the new edition notably ends with a new style term, *il massimo*, replacing the original *molto* indication, and the flutter-tongue allows the tempo to press ahead.



Figure 7. (1992)

As we proceed to system eight measure four, Berio begins to add grace notes that are clearly "over the bar line" when we look at them in the first edition. The performer will have to choose whether to perform these graces with some reference to the bars in the first edition or not. In this and indeed other respects, the bar lines of the first edition are indeed audible in performance. In the last system, the very short D in measure four lacks such an indication in the first edition. It is however clearly motivic, being similar to many phrases that end with an abrupt and loud attack.

The final measure of the first system of page three has a number of changes from the original and may be the biggest alteration in the new edition, grouping the fluttered notes in eight and six rather than five, six and then three. The *Density 21.5* Varese quotation at the end of the figure has much less prominence if it is buried within the measure, as it seems to be in the new edition, occurring in the second half of the beat as a triplet, rather than the beginning of the measure in

the first edition (measure one, system two. (See Figure 8, beginning of system 2.)



Figure 8. (1992)

As with some of the slower sections earlier in the piece, the rhythmically notated sections seem rough and less lyrical than they appear in the first edition. This is apparent in the second half of system two through system four, page three. Measure six of system seven is notated with only four grace notes, rather than the twelve in the first version. In systems nine and ten, the rhythmically notated version appears more uneven, including a number of tied notes that seem to avoid downbeats once the measure markings are in place. The effect seems to impede the forward motion of this phrase that is so often heard in performance. This erratic rhythm adds to a greater rhythmic variety than the original edition would imply. (See Figure 9.)



Figure 9. (1992)

The fourth page of the new version is markedly less altered than the earlier pages, however the fermatas seem much longer when they are tied to long notes, as in system three with the held Bb.



Figure 10. (1992)

Mensural ambiguities begin in system five, where the third pitch, F#, seems to be extended.



Figure 11. (1992)

By this point in the piece, the “upbeat” of three sixteenths to the beginning of a measure has become a recognizable gesture, (see system five page two and the end of system four, page three), so that rhythmic solution seems appropriate for the beginning of the *ppp sempre* phrase of system five page four.

The metric placement of the graces in system seven differs from the first version, as well as the phrase ending before the rest in system eight. In the new version, the final suffix of the phrase (F and G) makes sense as his abrupt but well-established cadential gesture, and allows the next grace-note collection more space to initiate the penultimate phrase.

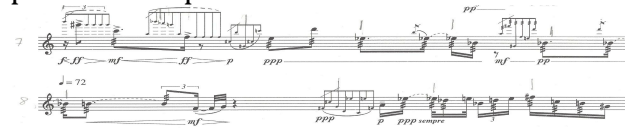


Figure 12. (1992)

Dynamic discrepancies between the versions are subtle. The original version begins more aggressively, marked *sfz* rather than the *ff sempre* as marked in the new version. Again in the second system, third measure, the high G is marked *ff* rather than the original *sfz*, and the last E natural in the

system begins louder (*p*) instead of the original *pp*.

The second page, system two measure three, the E natural is kept at *pp* in the new version, rather than the diminuendo from *p* in the original version. In system nine, we again have a *ff* instead of the *sfz* in the first edition. One could interpret this change as having been intentional, having occurred a third time in the new score. Page three system nine opens with a *sfzff*, differing from the first version in that it places more emphasis on the D natural. The pagination in the new version seems to emphasize the delicacy and predominant *ppp* sweetness of the end of the piece, in that we see it throughout the fourth page.

By incorporating the new rhythmic and dynamic information into the metric structure of the first edition, we have a much more clearly defined idea of Berio's issues with previous performances. Instead of blindly creating rhythmic analogy and gesture in performance as had been necessary in the first edition, Berio has contributed more specific information and interpretation to his score. What is revealed in the Brinkman-Folio interviews is that today's performers are protective of their interpretations of the first version. Though the implication of their essay is that we might document a comparison of the performances of the two versions, the new version doesn't stand a chance, having been used by Sophie Cherrier alone.<sup>7</sup> Most have been praised for their creativity and dexterity in these interpretations, and are unwilling to detach themselves from these performances, even in the face of new information from the composer himself. Isn't this yet further evidence that we live in a surprisingly conservative musical world? The new edition may not be popular with today's performers, but Berio thought it was improvement. That should be reason enough to establish its

value for flutists who have not yet rigidified their interpretations.

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<sup>1</sup> Rossana Dalmonte, Luciano Berio; a cura di Rossana Dal.ote, *Intervista sulla musica* Roma: Bari Laterza, 1981.

<sup>2</sup> Luciano Berio, *Sequenza I* (2<sup>nd</sup> version) Wein, Universal Ed. 1957, 1992, p.2 system 6, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Nina Perlove, Transmission, Interpretation, Collaboration-A Performer's Perspective on the Language of Contemporary Music: An Interview with Sophie Cherrier, *Perspectives in New Music*, Vol. 36, No. 1(Winter, 1998), pp 43-58.

<sup>5</sup> Cynthia Folio, Alexander Brinkman. Rhythm and Timing in the Two Versions of Berio's *Sequenza I* for Flute Solo: Psychological and Musical Differences in Performance, from Berio's Sequenzas: Essays on Performance, Composition, and Analysis, Ed. By Janet K. Halfyard. Pp xvi +306. (Ashgate, Aldershot : Burlington, VT) 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Cynthia Folio, (Rhythm and Timing), 2007.

\* All musical examples by permission of Edizioni Suvini Zerboni, Milano.

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