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Halfyard, Janet, ed., *Berio's Sequenzas: Essays on Performance, Composition and Analysis* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

(Reviewed by Emma Gallon)

1 Berio's *Sequenzas* (1958-2002)

Although Berio has verified that the title *Sequenza* refers to the sequence of harmonic fields established by each of the series' fourteen works for a different solo instrument, the pieces are also united "by particular compositional aims and preoccupations – virtuosity, polyphony, the exploration of a specific instrumental idiom – applied to a series of different instruments". (Janet Halfyard, "Forward" in Halfyard 2007: p.xx) These compositional aims in their various manifestations are explored in all of the essays in this book without exception, and both Berio's understanding of the terms, their relation to the pieces' signification and their implications for the receiver, be it performer, listener or analyst will be discussed below. Further details on *Berio's Sequenzas* can be found on the Ashgate website at <http://www.ashgate.com>.

The introduction to the book by the late David Osmond-Smith, leading authority on Berio and key in establishing Berio's reputation in Britain, focuses on the simultaneous musical commentary that the parallel *Chemins* series provides as the text of the *Sequenza* unfolds, and contrasts it with the difficult and almost prosaic retrospective commentaries that the musicologists in this book must undertake verbally in order to unweave the complex polyphonic strands of past echoes and present formations that Berio knots together. (David Osmond-Smith, "Introduction" in Halfyard 2007: 1.) These verbal commentaries are divided into three sections: performance issues, Berio's compositional process and aesthetics, and analytical approaches. Additionally, each part has a slightly stronger stress on one of three different aspects of signification that emerge through interpretation of the *Sequenzas*. These are, respectively, the discourse with musical history, openness and reworking, and polyphony of listening, significant aspects of Berio's compositional aesthetic that qualify the aforementioned compositional aims and address his belief that "nothing done is, of itself, ever finished" through the multiple and indefinitely wide-ranging possibilities that the pieces allow, a concern that almost paradoxically unites the *Sequenzas*. (Paul Roberts, "The Chemins Series" in Halfyard 2007: 136.) The essays will be considered in relation to their respective section's predominant aspect of meaning with one exception: the editor Janet Halfyard's own essay on theatricality will be discussed as part of the first section rather than the second in which it is placed, as I feel her emphasis on performance implications and instrumentation link strongly with the similar concerns found in the earlier chapters written by Kirsty Whatley, Zoe Browder Doll and Jonathan Impett.

2 Performance Issues: Discourse with Musical History

It is to these four chapters we now turn. In the second chapter, Kirsty Whatley makes explicit Berio's level of historical awareness in particular relation to *Sequenza II* for harp as he reworks two related explorations of idiomatic writing into the subject matter of the piece, namely virtuosity and the harp's iconography, or as Whatley puts it, study and statement. Whatley's primary focus is on the semiotic aspects of the harp and argues that Berio subverts the narrow conventional notions of the harp's feminization and romanticism with, for example, frequent changes in articulation and numerous repetitions of notes, thereby bringing the image of the harp into the realm of the musical signified.

Though Whatley is much more lucid in verbalizing Berio's musical commentary on the instrumental symbolism, I feel that Zoe Browder Doll and Jonathan Impett get to the nub of Berio's aims more closely through the slightly more nuanced argument that instrumental technique is explored and often expanded rather than subverted. Berio's concern with idiomatic writing suggests he did not want to work against the instrument's natural properties in the manner of certain of his avant-garde contemporaries. Browder Doll's essay on Berio's extensive use of the *sostenuto* pedal in *Sequenza IV*, though it occasionally reads like a technical score annotation, is a case in point. Berio does not call for the instrument to be used un pianistically but allows the middle pedal to expand the piano's vocabulary by creating new counterpoints between attacks and reverberations, *sostenuto* tones and *non-sostenuto* tones. Like Whatley, Impett evokes the symbolism associated with the trumpet in relation to *Sequenza X*, but suggests that the military, religious and jazz connotations, amongst others, in combination with extended techniques such as valve tremolo and pedal tones do not merely expand the sonic palette but increase the understanding of trumpet technique in its "naked" natural form. (Jonathan Impett, "Shadow Boxing: *Sequenza X* for Trumpet and Piano Resonance" in Halfyard 2007: 85.) Impett thus makes a similar claim to Browder Doll for Berio's idiomatic writing but his discussion of the physical gestures of the soloist also anticipates Halfyard's essay on theatre and virtuosity in the *Sequenzas*.

The crux of Halfyard's argument, which neatly draws together the previous three essays discussed too, occurs in her final section on "the theatre of virtuosity", as her previous analyses of narrative, character and action in *Sequenzas III* and *V* lead towards this summary of the relationship between performing subject and musical structure. For Berio, virtuosity always involves a conflict between the instrumentalist and the instrument, and therefore the physical performance is of primary focus to the audience. However, Berio has expressed his disdain for the virtuoso performer with "agile fingers and an empty head". (Janet Halfyard, "Provoking Acts: The Theatre of Berio's *Sequenzas*" in Halfyard 2007: 115.) Instead, Halfyard argues that Berio's virtuoso must "serve the needs of the composition rather than merely to thrill the audience with brilliant but, by implication, superficial displays of technique". (Ibid.) The rhythmic and melodic detail of Berio's writing and the soloist's "choreography" determines that virtuosity is displayed as part of the piece and not as an added extra, or even a substitution for the music in performance. Thus, the meaning of the *Sequenzas* begins to emerge when viewed in the light of past instrumental repertory.

The final area in which Berio establishes a discourse with musical practice is that of notation, addressed by the remaining two chapters in this section. Both Cynthia Folio and Alexander Brinkman's analysis of *Sequenza I* for flute and Patricia Alessandrini's

overview of *Sequenza VII* for oboe propose to examine the implications for the performer when faced with the proportional or grid notation, respectively, of the original scores in comparison with the piece's subsequent renotation using more traditional methods (by Berio in the first case and Jacqueline Leclair in the second). Rather disappointingly, neither essay fully explores this issue. The first concentrates on interpretative differences in timing of eleven performances whether the performances were from the 1958 edition or the 1992, rather than “de-mystify[ing] the real musical differences between ‘free’ and ‘controlled notational systems’ as it initially claims. (Cynthia Folio and Alexander R. Brinkman, “Rhythm and Timing in the Two Versions of Berio’s *Sequenza I* for Flute Solo: Psychological and Musical Differences in Performance” in Halfyard 2007: 11.) Similarly, the two performances of *Sequenza VII* that Alessandrini analyses are both from Berio’s original score in order to demonstrate the various structural inaccuracies that can ensue. Nevertheless, both essays’ references to and analytical justifications of the original score as a “dress” and the new edition a “straitjacket” have interesting consequences for the piece’s signification in both original and renotated forms. (Luciano Berio, quoted in Muller 1997) Although each essay understands the renotation of both *Sequenzas* as just one interpretation of the piece, Folio and Brinkman are content to leave it at that, suggesting that this interpretation satisfactorily maintains Berio’s aims in the instructions to the performer, albeit in an altered form. Indeed Berio decided to renotate *Sequenza I* to prevent performers from taking too many liberties with the score. Alessandrini, on the other hand, states that Leclair’s score “necessitates new analyses” as if the greater accuracy of her notation almost creates a new piece with increased structural security and even stylistic changes. (Patricia Alessandrini, “A Dress or a Straitjacket? Facing the Problems of Structure and Periodicity Posed by the Notation of Berio’s *Sequenza VII* for Oboe” in Halfyard 2007: 81.) Once again we return to the idea that the true essence of the original *Sequenzas* lies in their openness or the ability to allow multiple interpretations.

3 Berio’s Compositional Process and Aesthetics: Openness and Reworking

If the notion of openness can be defined, as Edward Venn puts it after Umberto Eco’s theorisation of the open work, as “the latent potential of a contingent and contextual event or events to suggest multiple and textually consistent interpretative possibilities”, then it is not only notation and renotation that can allow a piece to be understood as open. (Edward Venn, “Proliferations and Limitations: Berio’s Reworking of the *Sequenzas*” in Halfyard 2007: 175). This larger-scale openness is observed in practice in Venn’s essay on the reworking of *Sequenza VIII* into *Corale* and *Sequenza VI* into *Chemins II, IIb* and *III*. First though, Venn’s discussion is pre-empted by Berio’s former assistant Paul Roberts’s overview of the entire *Chemins* series. Roberts describes each *Chemins* in turn and its development from the *Sequenza*, under the premise that the *Chemins* is Berio’s analysis of the preceding *Sequenza* and not merely an orchestration. This is an interesting point when considering the open and mutually reflective interrelations between the two, the original material of which is described by Berio as “a question that provokes not only an answer but also a comment to another question and another answer”. (Roberts, “The *Chemins* Series” in Halfyard 2007: 136.)

This “interpretative malleability” of the two series is elaborated in Venn’s essay in light of the comprehensive summation of Eco’s open work that grounds it. (Venn, “Proliferations and Limitations” in Halfyard 2007: 172.) Venn argues that the listener is forced to be receptive to multiple possible interpretations of the musical structures themselves, such as the absence of causation in the *Sequenzas*, a listening practice that is manifested in the reinforcement or suppression of certain “nodal points” in their reworking into *Chemins*. Moreover, the listener as active in creating the pieces’ meaning can always bring new contextual aspects to the piece and so the work remains open throughout the performance. (Ibid.: 175) This idea of commentary as proliferation of potential meaning stands in direct contrast to Andrea Cremaschi’s views immediately preceding this chapter. Cremaschi argues, rather, that it is the redundancies and symmetries within musical structures that create meaning, and, in relation to *Sequenza IX*, the consistency between *Chemins V* and *La vera storia*, as extra-textual references to the original material, serves to strengthen this meaning in a subtractive manner. Thus, the rather unexpected conclusion follows that the music can communicate and maintain meaning throughout these various contexts.

Although I would perhaps more readily side with the argument that the introduction of new contexts opens up a multiplicity of new potential meanings, working backwards through the book again, Eugene Montague makes the noteworthy point that a sign can be “closed” (interpreted) by a receiver on its communication within a particular codified context. Montague likens the A⁴-B⁴ dyad of *Sequenza VIII* for violin, a “compass” that points away from itself to the rest of the musical material and the violin repertory to which it does not belong, to the fictitious Plan in Eco’s *Foucault’s Pendulum* in which the protagonists construct a web of lies that although has no content, can nonetheless be interpreted as it forms a coherent code. This sign is then closed at the end of the performance as the violinist “accepts the compass as part of an extended realm of communication”: it has become part of the repertoire and is no longer meaningless. (Eugene Montague, “The Compass of Communications in *Sequenza VIII* for Violin” in Halfyard 2007: 152.) Despite the interpretative leaps of faith that Montague makes (why is there regret at the end of the piece?) his argument mediates between that of Venn and Cremaschi in that signs can vary between “open” and “closed”: their existence on the expressive plane (Eco’s term) as Berio places them can be fixed, and potentially reworked and refixed, on the content plane by the listener. The foregoing analyses probe the ways in which Berio’s *Sequenzas*, through their comparative openness, make musically explicit this facet of all composition, that listeners can derive different layers of meaning from what they themselves bring to the piece.

4 Analytical Approaches: Polyphony of Listening

Though this is surely the case for all pieces of music, Berio’s *Sequenza* series is a special case through the significant reliance on the listener as an active participant in the creation of the piece’s meaning to engage in a polyphonic type of listening. By this, Berio wished the listener to perceive “the exposition and superposition of differing modes of action and instrumental characteristics”. (Mark D. Porcaro, “A Polyphonic Type of Listening In and Out of Focus: Berio’s *Sequenza XI* for Guitar” in Halfyard 2007: 255) Berio’s exploitation of this polyphony is most explicitly

discussed in the final four chapters, all of which focus on the simultaneous development of the different parameters within selected *Sequenzas*.

In their analysis of the sonic complexity of bi-triadic and non-triadic chords in *Sequenza IV*, Didier Guigue and Marcílio Fagner Onofre discover that the chords fall into structured sequences according to harmonic complexity, which they slightly tenuously compare to classical forms. Meanwhile, they also determine that the amplitude, relative range and harmonic complexity of the chords develop at different rates, requiring the listener to perceive this polyphonic process of layering, a point echoed by Mark Porcaro in his examination of the development of four simultaneous sections distinguished by their textural and gestural material, throughout *Sequenza XI* for guitar. Amanda Bayley goes one step further and analyses the independent parameters in *Sequenza VI* for viola in the context of the relationships between structural expressivity and expressivity in performance that Berio fixes as far as possible as score notes. In the last essay of the book on *Sequenza XIII* for accordion, Thomas Gartmann approaches the parametric independence from yet another angle: the stylistic ambivalence that Berio attains by layering virtuoso accordion playing on top of lighter accordion cliché in terms of thematic gesture. Collectively, these four essays address how a polyphonic type of listening is demanded for the comprehension of the musical structures themselves with some reference to historical discourse.

Finally, Irna Priore's discussion of serially inspired motivic techniques of *Sequenza I* changes the emphasis, the polyphony occurring from the listener's ability to recognise the dialogue between serialism and open form. However, the twelve-tone row is so disguised by repeated pitches that Priore is forced to ask what purpose a row serves if "most of its melodic properties are diluted in the way Berio manipulates the melodic material", a question that Priore does not fully answer acknowledging Berio's resistance to pre-compositional systems, and her conclusion that this is just one reading of many does little to satisfy. (Irna Priore, "Vestiges of Twelve-Tone Practice as Compositional Process in Berio's *Sequenza I* for Solo Flute" in Halfyard 2007: 202.) Nevertheless, the first half of this essay situates Berio in relation to two major contemporaries (Boulez and Cage) addressing important influences and musical currents that no other essay in this volume does, which goes some way towards showing how Berio developed a stylistic polyphony to be interpreted by his "ideal" listener. (Ibid.: 191.)

Though each of the essays in this section shows how Berio employs polyphony in the *Sequenzas*, there is little focus on what impact such techniques have for the pieces' meaning. However, we can speculate that meaning once again can be derived from the comparison of the polyphony within these pieces, in general written for monodic instruments, with their historical precedents, in particular the "inaccessible ideal" that Bach's music provides. (Berio 1985: 97) This would be an interesting area for further research, even more so as Berio sheds little light on the significance of polyphony in his works.

5 Conclusion

In the forward to this book, Halfyard states three motivations for its proposal: her own relationship with *Sequenza III*, to address the demand for literature on the *Sequenzas*

by her students at the Birmingham Conservatoire, and to acknowledge the series as a musical landmark in both twentieth-century and instrumental repertory. While the book satisfactorily achieves the last, perhaps most important, aim, clearly illustrated by musical examples, figures and tables with minimal typographical errors, there is a problem with the concept of the book as a whole. As all the pieces are united by very specific compositional aesthetics, and indeed each new *Sequenza* revisits those previous from fresh perspectives, there is an unavoidably large amount of repetition of these aims from essay to essay, although they focus on different pieces. Consequently, in the context of this book, the most successful essays tend to be those that refer further outwards from Berio's own intentions, for example, those written by Halfyard, Montague and Venn, as they rework the emphasis on the pieces' aesthetics from wider, more "open" interpretative contexts. Nevertheless, as much of the recent criticism on the *Sequenzas* concentrates on the performance practice issues that the pieces provoke, for example, the essays written by Redgate, Thomas and Webb in *Contemporary Music Review*, the book provides an important shift in focus on the analysis of the series in light of their compositional principles and signification. (Thomas 2007, Webb 2007 and Redgate 2007.)

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