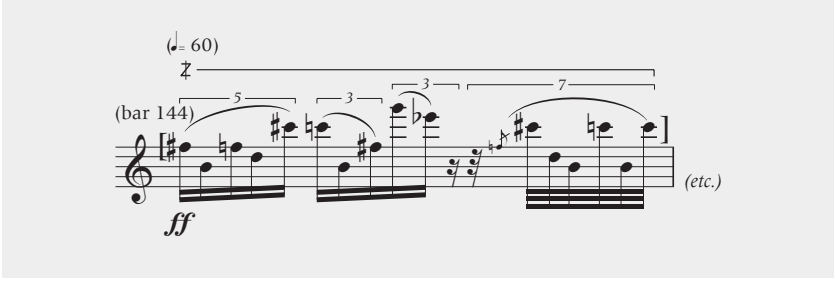
On Luciano Berio's *Sequenza VII* for Oboe

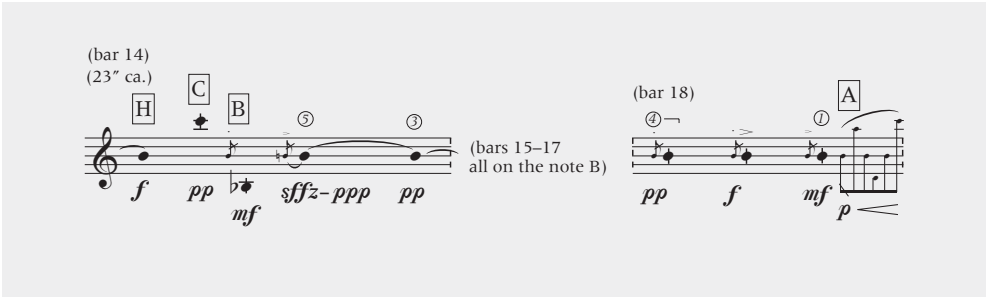
by Paul Roberts

Not only has the series of *Sequenzas* (fourteen pieces, the latest being premiered in 2002[1]) by Berio provided an enormous contribution to the solo instrumental repertoire since the Second World War, but as a whole they represent a substantial and challenging corpus for performers, listeners, and composers alike. Berio has described his approach especially to the purely monodic instruments in this series of compositions as "search for a virtual polyphony,"[2] in which the musical point of departure is often "a sequence of harmonic fields, from which spring […] the other musical functions," to the extent of "suggesting a polyphonic type of listening, based in part on the rapid transition between different characteristics, and their simultaneous iteration." This quotation, although referring to several pieces, is a perfect generalized description of the *Sequenza VII* (1969) for oboe. Rich in its harmonic implications, *Sequenza VII*, like several other of the *Sequenzas*, gave rise to another work which forms part of the series of *Chemins*, where the original solo *Sequenzas* reveal new paths and identities within the context of instrumental groups. In *Chemins IV* the oboe soloist is surrounded by an ensemble of eleven solo strings.

A traditional analysis of *Sequenza VII* cannot fully interpret nor give due justice to this piece. It is quite impossible to provide detailed and systematic musical examples of the pitches and rhythms for convenient reference that show how the piece mechanically "adds up." From time to time brief traces remain within the fabric of the piece that give evidence of apparently serially derived origins despite the general use of proportional notation as



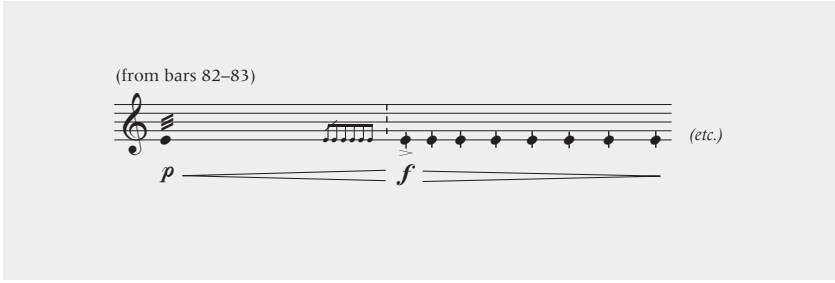
Example 1



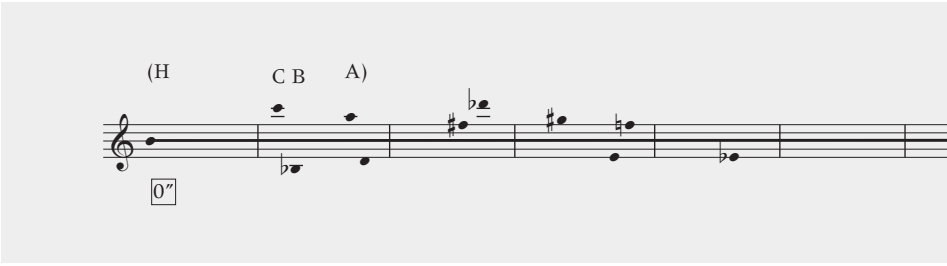
Example 2

opposed to traditional rhythmic notation *(Example 1)*.[3] The difficulty in understanding the musical text has lead some commentators to look elsewhere for a starting point.[4] In fact several coincidences have been observed as being possible sources. The choice of the note *B* (*H* in German) has been seen as representing the initials of the dedicatee, Heinz Holliger. However, this completely ignores any possible relevance that this pitch (regardless of its spelling) may have in this register. The sustaining of this note – by a different sound source, the choice of which is free – has also been seen as an ironic reference to the oboe when tuning the orchestra. Even the first four different notes to be exposed happen to be a permutation of *B–A–C–H (Examples 2* and *4)*.

Actually the answer is much more practical, and lies in the understanding and appreciation of the instrument itself. The invisible, permanent sustaining of the note *B* (which constantly varies in intensity independently from the soloist) is derived from the fact that it is precisely a pitch that the oboe can produce with many different fingerings – all of which differ slightly in timbre from one another. These differences can best be perceived when they are played against the neutral sustained background *B*, which never changes timbre. Therefore it is the note *B* itself, in its central register in terms of the oboe tessitura, from which springs the basic harmonic material. A material that is also contained within the duration of this "pedal," itself activated and extinguished by the soloist since it is at the same time the very first and very last note of the piece. The dominance of this *B* is such



Example 3

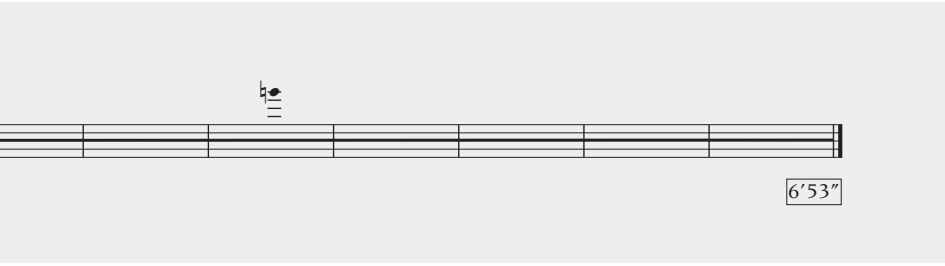


Example 4

that it acts as a point of perspective for every other pitch that appears, with which it is heard both simultaneously (as sustained) and in immediate adjacency.

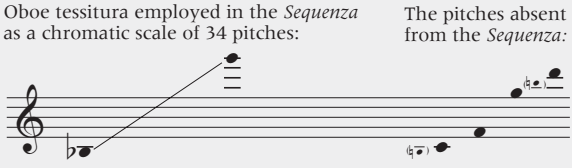
The layout of the score is very striking, and presents on a single large page thirteen systems of music each divided in the same way into thirteen proportionally notated bars of decreasing duration defined in seconds – a grid whose horizontal length is approximately twenty-three seconds. This visual presentation is not intended to imply any conclusive rigid formal structure as has been suggested.[5] In fact only four of the systems which are without pauses strictly follow this pattern. Of course the intention behind this notation is for the benefit of the performer, who within a controlled freedom will never play the piece in exactly the same way, even though the content and the character of the piece will always remain identical.

All commentators agree that the piece falls into two main sections played as a continuous whole. The first part is completed at the golden mean – calculated in the actual time elapsed and not in the number of bars – when the oboe finally arrives at the high *G* in measure 123 (already stated briefly in mm. 109, 118, and 121), consolidating the fact that this is the last of the twelve notes *and* the highest note that the oboe reaches during the course of the piece. This gives an impression of a separate eleven-note gamut that is gradually added around the central note *B*. In the first section, the slowness and irregularity in the unfolding of these eleven notes is almost diametrically opposed to the density of the different types of articulation and the velocity of the many rapid rhythmic cells and the typical obsessive reiterations of single pitches *(Example 3)*. The first twenty-three seconds are occupied exclusively by the presentation of the note *B*, and more than a minute elapses before a further five notes have been only briefly stated. The salient ordering as to how these eleven notes first appear in relation to the note *B* can easily be traced up to this point *(Example 4)*, but this is only a superficial explanation because, like the rhythm, it is not possible to provide a systematic account of the process leading to the high *G*. However, the internal structure of this first section becomes quite clear when one refers to *Chemins IV*, where the structure of this section is delineated by com-



mentaries played by the strings alone. These moments in *Chemins IV* (where the oboist is silent) correspond exactly with the six pauses to be found up to measure 121 of the *Sequenza*. Therefore there are seven sequences of different length and complexity, which also differ in their harmonic content and in the octave displacement of the pitches. These sequences, while differing in pitch content, show similarities in their harmonic direction and frequent returning back to the pivotal note *B*. During the first part of the piece there is a tendency to concentrate on small harmonic groupings which in continually different permutations progressively and gradually cover the whole oboe tessitura until after a few brief glimpses (including a high *E* in m. 106) the zenith is arrived at (mm. 123–26). The first and late appearance of the *G* is counterbalanced in this process by the absence of other pitches from the previous subsections (e.g. $G_{\sharp}$, which *first* appears in the third section is missing from the fourth, whereas only five different pitches are used in the fifth, etc.). This deliberate absence of certain pitches is also reflected in the fact that during the entire piece, apart from the note *B* (obviously never doubled at the octave), only four notes are completely absent from the thirty-four available *(Example 5)*. As a matter of fact, this technique of inclusion and exclusion may be frequently observed in Berio's music.

In contrast to the first part of the piece, from measure 127 on the pitches are more or less fixed in register towards the end. In addition the music remains mostly in the upper register of the oboe and soon dispenses with the notes which lie beneath the dividing line of the sustained *B*. The *B*, it-



Example 5

self now quite exposed in the harmonic texture, becomes almost a root, whereas up to this point it was literally an axis at the center of the harmony. This harmonic stasis is initially articulated and emphasized by rapid and more extensive intervallic groupings than before, but with the high *G* came also the last of the reiterated figures (see *Example 3*), which are here replaced by ever frequent pauses of varying length. During the final thirteen bars (which are elongated by forty-five seconds in pauses), further stasis is achieved by slower, regular rhythmic values, and the stability of the dynamic profile, allowing further timbral exploration including several well-placed extraordinary multiphonics (suggested by Heinz Holliger) which in 1969 were unprecedented in the oboe literature. Berio had of course already introduced multiphonics into the *Sequenza* for flute back in 1958.

The equality of the twelve semitones within the melodic discourse of the *Sequenza* is demonstrated by the fact that not only does the note *B* always introduce each new pitch (acting as an acciaccatura), but pauses appear over each of the twelve different notes at some stage, and this provides momentary focus to each of the pitches without excluding any. This local individual attention occurs always with a different mode of articulation, and the notes sometimes appear in combination as trills, double trills, or multiphonics. Even the "reiteration" figures (see *Example 3*) are also applied to each of the twelve notes, again always differentiated by the type of articulation and dynamic profile.

Although the rhythmic dimension of the *Sequenza* dispenses with a fixed notation, a whole range of durations are possible from 𝅘𝅥𝅯 – as short as possible – to 𝅝6" (not to mention the uninterrupted sustained *B*). Another notable aspect concerning the rhythmic parameter is that unlike the often angular intervallic content and movement of the melodic material, the rhythmic outline of the music is completely smooth. There is no foreground motivic presentation or development of recognizable rhythmic cells. Instead, flexible transitions of accelerandi and ritardandi pass from extreme velocity to long-held notes. However, this does not relate in any way to the decreasing size of the measures of each system of the score, where fast and slow values are distributed completely evenly. (This can be observed by reading the score vertically.)

The dynamic profile of the *Sequenza* which articulates the musical discourse is likewise extremely variegated. Maximum contrast is provided in the dynamics, which in great detail cover a scale of eight gradations from *fff* to *pppp*, further enhanced by the meticulous attention payed to the type of accents and envelope of each note. The loudness, type of attack, and timbre effected by specific fingerings change practically from note to note.

The virtuosic oboe technique required for the performance of this *Sequenza* is well known, and it should be added that this is complemented by the virtuosity of the *composition*, whereby the crystalline logic of the piece is not in the slightest impaired by the apparent difficulty for an analysis to

penetrate beyond the surface. This is the visible strength of the criteria employed, which have no need to be revealed simply to confirm what is essentially easy to grasp. Familiarity with the *Sequenza* deepens appreciation of *Chemins IV*, which acts as a prism in its fulfilment of what can only be implied within the monodic frame of the *Sequenza*.

[1] The *Sequenza XIV* for violoncello (2001–02) was premiered on April 28, 2002, by Rohan de Saram at the Wittener Tage für neue Kammermusik.

[2] This and the following quotations are taken from the most detailed programme notes that exist by the composer on the *Sequenzas*, contained in the booklet that accompanies the Deutsche Grammophon recordings of the complete series (Luciano Berio, *Sequenzas*, Ensemble InterContemporain, recordings 1994–97, CD published 1998, DGG 457 038-2).

[3] When writing this article, I was unaware both of Anne C. Shreffler's "Reti di collaborazione: Heinz e Ursula Holliger" (in *"Entre Denges et Denezy …" Documenti sulla storia della musica in Svizzera 1900–2000,* ed. by Ulrich Mosch, Lucca: LIM 2001, 106–16), and the existence (strictly not available for performance) of the "provisional version" of the *Sequenza* as it appeared at the world premiere, and where in Shreffler's words "al posto della notazione spaziale, il brano è notato in un implicito tempo di $^{3}/_{4}$ […]" (p. 110). Shreffler's article, whilst not presenting analytical details of the musical content, provides previously unpublished biographical information concerning the genesis of *Sequenza VII*.

[4] See, for example, Philippe Albèra, "Introduction aux neuf sequenzas," *Contrechamps*, no. 1 (September 1983): 90–122, and the programme notes on various recordings, by David Osmond Smith (Luciano Berio, *Ritorno degli snovidenia*, etc., Ensemble InterContemporain, Pierre Boulez, recordings 1989, CD published 1990, Sony SK 45 862), and by Paul Griffiths, Alain Poirier, and Michele Girardi (Luciano Berio, *Différences*, etc., Heinz Holliger, Juilliard Ensemble, Luciano Berio, et al., recordings 1969, CD published 1990, Philips 426 662-2).

[5] See note 2.