SEQUENZA III FOR FEMALE VOICE
BERIO

Background Information and Performance Circumstances

Luciano Berio (1925-2003) was an avant-garde Italian composer, who spent much of his career in America. He was a pioneer of **experimental** music and electronic techniques. He initially studied the piano but had to consider other options after receiving an injury to his hand while learning to fire a gun - on his first day conscripted into the army during the Second World War. After the war, he concentrated instead on composition. Nevertheless he continued to accompany singers on the piano and it was in this capacity that he met the American mezzo-soprano **Cathy Berberian**. He married her in 1950 and wrote many of his pieces for her. Although they divorced in 1964, they continued to work together and he wrote *Sequenza III* in 1965 and *Recital I* in 1972 for her to perform.

He began writing his series of *Sequenzas* in 1958. All, except no. 3 are for solo instruments, and all make extreme **virtuoso** demands on the performer. They require many **extended techniques**, often newly invented by the composer. His *Sequenza* for harp, for instance uses a variety of percussion effects produced by tapping on the body of the instrument. The pieces have tended to be performed at specialist modern music festivals around the world, rather than in conventional concert hall situations.

Sequenza III is a real showpiece for female performer. Like Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* the piece requires **acting as well as singing abilities**. It ideally needs to be experienced in a live setting. The CD recording accompanying the Anthology is by Cathy Berberian herself. Students might also be interested to hear a stunning performance by the soprano Tony Arnold on the complete Naxos recording of *Sequenzas* 1-14. There are videos available on the internet, including at this site: www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGNcd9Sooho&feature=related

Berio described Sequenza III as being a *three part invention* built on the elements of **text, gesture and expression**. Each element evolves during the piece. The text is gradually revealed, though in severely disjointed manner. There are all kinds of different sound types (often accompanied by hand **or body gestures**) and the performer is required to convey widely varying and developing **emotions**.

Performing

- Like all the pieces in the *Sequenza* series, the performer is **unaccompanied**.

- The music might sound improvised, but although **each performance will be very different**, the **directions** are very **precise**.

- The piece requires a **virtuoso performer**.

- There are essentially three main approaches to pitch:

1. **Speaking**, **whispering**, **laughing**, **coughing**, etc. i.e. **no discernible pitch**, indicated by a **one line stave**. This range of sounds also includes **non-vocal techniques**, like **finger clicking**.

2. **Singing, using relative pitch**, indicated by a **three line stave** – here the performer sings higher or lower (or the same notes), depending on the position of 'notes' on the stave. There is no particular intended pitch, and the intervals between the notes don't need to be exact.

3. **Singing with prescribed intervals**, indicated by a **five line stave**. Intervals between notes need to be sung accurately. As the singer can have a variety of possible voice types, i.e. soprano, mezzo-soprano or alto, the starting note of these phrases can vary. Pitches have a **wide range from high to very low.** Some of the **lowest pitches** are **at the end**.

A full list of techniques is described in the anthology.

- Various emotional states are also required from the performer, including *urgent*, *tense* and **nervous**.

Text Setting

The piece sets a very brief text by Markus Kutter:

give me	a few words	for a woman
to sing	a truth	allowing us
to build a house	without worrying	before night comes

- The words are frequently broken up into **disjointed** *phonemes* (the separate individual sounds of words), like *to, co, us* and *for* at the beginning.

- These are sometimes **repeated rapidly at random.**

- **Only gradually do audible words emerge**.

- When the words and phrases are finally heard, they are **disjointed**, i.e. separated from each other by other sounds.

- The words and phrases also appear in an **apparently random order**, often inserting words and syllables from elsewhere in the text, as well as words not contained in the original, e.g. *we build for us be us.*

- Some words are left out altogether, including apparently important words and phrases, like *without worrying* and *house*.

Texture

The texture in **monophonic**.

Structure

- The piece is **through-composed**, linked to a **disrupted text** (see notes on text setting). There are **no large-scale repetitions** of material.

- **Small scale repetitions** do occur. Some sounds or groups of sounds are supposed to be *repeated quickly in a random and slightly discontinuous way.*

- The music is organised according to **specific timings** indicated on the score.

- The piece **alternates between** the **different vocal styles** mentioned in the Performing section of the notes.

- Like the extract from *Pierrot Lunaire,* the music reaches an increasingly **lower pitch** at the end, and both appear to **fade** away.

Tonality

There is no discernible tonality, though in the rare performance where the singer observes the exact printed pitch value, the music gravitates to notes like B natural, and G flat at the end.

Harmony

In a monophonic performance there is no harmony, though there is a suggestion of a B minor outlined chord just after 3 minutes.

Melody

- Melody can only be noticed in the passages with **five line notation**, where **exact intervals** need to be performed.

- **Repeated notes** are an important feature, usually **set to different *phonemes*** (see above).

- There are occasionally very **large**, **angular leaps**, like a **diminished 13th** leap downwards on the words *noble truth*.

- **Minor 2nd** intervals are sometimes prominent, e.g. shortly before the end.

- **Minor 3rd intervals** are also quite common.

- *Intonation contours* are sometimes used to indicate the rough direction of pitch of a spoken passage.

Rhythm and Metre

- There is **no sense of metre**

- There are **no specific note lengths**

- **Speed** is, however **important**. It is governed by:

  o The timing, which divides the music into **10 second sections**

  o though at the beginning, as the performer comes on to the stage, the **timing depends** partly on the length of the **applause** (if any!).

  o The instructions indicate that phrases with specific invented rhythmic groupings need to be *as fast as possible*.

  o Other **new types of rhythmic grouping** indicate a **range of speeds** from slow to fast.