

## Comparative Rhythmic Study between Editions of *Sequenza I* for Solo Flute by Luciano Berio

### 1. Introduction

Luciano Berio (1925–2003) composed between 1958 and 2002 a series of fourteen pieces for solo instruments entitled *Sequenze*. The title refers to a sequence of harmonic fields that served as the starting point to the compositions. The solo flute *Sequenza I* is the first piece of the series, which was originally composed in 1958, and dedicated to the Italian flautist Severino Gazzelloni (1919–1992).

One of the reasons that made *Sequenza I* (1958 ed.) a widely known piece was its non-traditional rhythmic notation, that uses proportional notation. Also called spatial notation, time-space notation, or proportionate notation, in this type of writing the durations of the notes and rests are determined by the spatial distribution of the pitches on the score rather than assigned by traditional rhythmic figures such as crotchets, quavers, etc. In this work I will adopt the term proportional notation. (It is worth emphasising that such terminology does not establish any relationship with that used in ancient music.)

Proportional notation was pioneered by American composers such as John Cage in *Music of Changes* (1951), and Earle Brown in *Folio* (1952–1953) and in *Music for Cello and Piano* (1954–1955).<sup>1</sup> Several theorists and musicologists consider this type of writing as being less accurate, but easier to be performed. Kurt Stone contrasts proportional notation with complex traditional rhythmic notation adopted by composers such as Pierre Boulez and Luigi Nono:

“Simultaneous with the tendency of toward ever greater complexity, a trend has developed in the opposite direction: less notational precision and ever greater interpretative freedom. ... Measures (if any) represent units of time (usually one or more seconds or a certain number of metronome clicks), but no meters” (Stone 1980: 96).

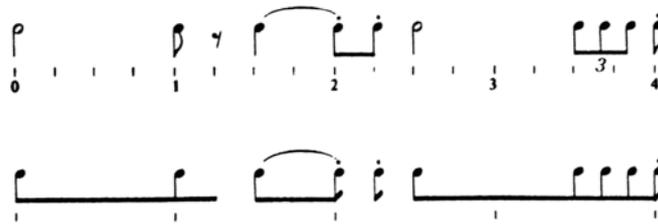


Figure 1. Rhythmic lengths in proportional notation (Stone 1980: 136)

In *Sequenza I* (1958 ed.) Luciano Berio used proportional notation to write rhythms, conserving traditional notation in other musical parameters, such as pitches, articulations and dynamics. All pitches were written either by noteheads with stems and beams (the majority) or by noteheads without stems (usually under fermatas). Although the appearance of the noteheads with stems suggests quavers, here they do not follow any metric hierarchy once their durations are associated with the distances between each note. In the leaflet accompanying the Suvini Zerboni Edition there are the following instructions:

“The performing time and the durational relations are suggested: by reference to a constant amount of space that corresponds to a metronomic constant beat; from the distribution of notes in relation to the constant amount of space ...” (*Sequenza’s* leaflet, 1958, my own translation).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Formed by a series of pieces without defined instrumentation, *Folio* is considered by its composer as a “sequential search for a new notation” (Brown *apud* Alden 2007: 315), and *December 1952* is one of the most famous works of this cycle. Brown defines proportional notation as “durations extended in *space* relative to *time*, rather than expressed in metric symbols as in traditional notation” (Brown *apud* Alden 2007: 331).

<sup>2</sup> “Il tempo di esecuzione e i rapporti di durata vengono suggeriti: dal riferimento ad una costante quantità di spazio che corrisponde ad una costante pulsazione di metronomo; dalla distribuzione delle note in rapporto a quella quantità costante di spazio ...” (*Sequenza’s* leaflet, 1958).

The constant amount of space mentioned by the leaflet refers to segments (or temporal fields) of approximately 3 cm, divided by small lines that cross the fifth line of the staff (Figure 2). The metronomic constant beat is indicated by Berio as 70 measure mesures (MM) from the first staff to the beginning of staff 42, where there is another indication of length equal to 60 MM. In staff 44 there is the designation of 72 MM until the end of *Sequenza I*. In other words, each segment between small lines corresponds initially to a 70 MM metronome beat, which is equivalent to about 0.8 seconds.

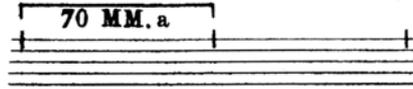


Figure 2. Spacings which lengths correspond to about 70 MM (*Sequenza's* leaflet, 1958)

Having established the relationship between space and time, *Sequenza's* leaflet indicates that notes with separated beams should be performed *non-legato* and that notes with extended beams should have their values extended until the subsequent note (Figure 3). Thus, the writing of the beams refers to the articulation parameter – linked naturally to the durational one, since the sound produced by the performance of the notes is shorter in the first type, with the temporal space between two notes filled by silence (as in traditional notation).<sup>3</sup> The leaflet also recommends that *appoggiaturas* should be performed as fast as possible and that the fermatas' value is *ad libitum*.



Figure 3. Notes with separated beams (type 1) and notes with extended beams (type 2) (*Sequenza's* leaflet, 1958)

The excerpt taken from the first staff of *Sequenza I* (1958 ed.) exemplifies a possible rhythmic interpretation of proportional notation. The first temporal field suggests a binary division, whereas the second, a ternary one.



Figure 4. Temporal fields suggesting binary and ternary divisions (staff 1)<sup>4</sup>

The distinctive rhythmic notation became a peculiar characteristic of *Sequenza I* and it made the piece one of the most mentioned examples of proportional notation in contemporary music. Reginald Brindle, author of *The New Music: the Avant-Garde since 1945* (1987), mentions *Sequenza I* in the chapter about *Indeterminacy, Chance and Aleatory Music*, and considers proportional notation too precise depending on the context in which it is applied:

“For example, the proportional notation used in Berio’s *Sequenza* (1958) for solo flute has been used (with various modifications) ever since. It is easy to play and represents the composer’s requirements precisely (perhaps too precisely where real time indeterminacy is aimed at) ...” (Brindle 1987: 63–64).

<sup>3</sup> It is also possible to find extended noteheads in other compositions that use proportional notation from the XX century. In this case, noteheads are both responsible to determine the pitches and to show the durations, although such writing is less clear, especially in chordal or polyphonic textures.

<sup>4</sup> Due to the absence of barlines and in order to facilitate understanding, the staves are enumerated from 1 to 46 according to the score edited by Suvini Zerboni Editions (1958). Thus, in this paper the musical examples drawn from the score are identified by the staff’s number in the edited version. Since the original score omits the clef, I kept this omission emphasising, however, that all examples refer to the treble clef.

Stefan Kostka in *Materials and Techniques of Twentieth-Century Music* (2006) emphasises the ametria aspect on the flute *Sequenza* (1958 ed.):

“Luciano Berio’s *Sequenza I* (1958) uses a short barline, and the ‘measure’ itself is assigned a specific tempo – M.M. 70 at the beginning. This composition is definitely ametric, however, because the actual durations are specified only by the placement of the notes within the measure. ... Notational of this sort is sometimes called *proportional notation*. ...” (Kostka 2006: 125).

It is really possible to consider *Sequenza I* (1958 ed.) as an ametric piece due to the absence of a pulse that would determinate strong and weak beats, *anacrusis*, and on and off-beats that would generate metric groupings. Despite the ametria, the proportional relationship in the spacing between notes should be respected. Thereby, the great innovation of proportional notation was allowing the performers to adapt certain rhythmically dense passages according to their abilities. According to Berio:

“... Notation of *Sequenza I* is according to the principle of a ‘visual metronome’ that gives very important benchmarks for performance. This principle allows adapting the piece to the personal virtuosity of each musician. But the difficulty that naturally grows in rhythmic imprecision makes me think of a re-write of *Sequenza I* in rhythmic notation. Someday, when I have time ...” (Berio<sup>5</sup> *apud* Stoianova 1985: 400, my own translation).<sup>6</sup>

Over the years the rhythm in *Sequenza I* was increasingly mischaracterised from that that once idealised by the composer. In 1966, when the French flautist Aurèle Nicolet was going to record *Sequenza I*, Berio answered to a letter from Nicolet explaining that, to him, the absolute time was not as important as the maintenance and consistency of rhythmic proportions. In addition, the composer rewrote the first staff of the work, using traditional notation and scoring it in 2/8 (Folio; Brinkman. In: Halfyard 2007: 13–14).



Figure 5. First staff of *Sequenza I* rewritten by Berio in letter to Nicolet (Folio; Brinkman. In: Halfyard 2007: 17)

Below there is one among numerous reports in which Berio expresses his dissatisfaction with the excessive freedom adopted by performers in *Sequenza I* (1958 ed.):

“At the time I wrote *Sequenza I*, in 1958, I considered the piece so difficult for the instrument that I didn’t want to impose on the player specific rhythmical patterns. I wanted the player to wear the music as a dress, not as a straitjacket. But as a result, even good performers were taking liberties that didn’t make any sense, taking the spacial notation almost as a pretext for improvisation” (Berio. In: Muller 1997: 19).

Referring back to the initial composition of *Sequenza I*, it is surprising that proportional notation was not the first choice in the conception of the work by Berio. According to Nicholas Hopkins, Berio’s former musical assistant, ‘he originally wrote it in exceptionally fine detail (almost like Ferneyhough in the original form), but Gazzelloni could not handle it, so Berio decided to use proportional notation’ (Hopkins<sup>7</sup> *apud* Weisser 1998: 38).

According to Paul Roberts, another assistant of the composer, who worked with Berio from 1989 until the composer’s death, in 2003:

“The truth is that Berio originally composed the flute *Sequenza* in standard notation back in 1958. It was written using very strict serial rhythms, and was barred in 2/8 from start to end. The notation was very similar to his other works published by Suvini Zerboni, for example the *Quartetto* (1956), or *Serenata I* (1957). ... Unfortunately, over the years,

<sup>5</sup> Berio, Luciano. *Interview with Ivanka Stoianova*. Paris: 23 Oct. 1979.

<sup>6</sup> “[...] La notation de *Sequenza I* est conforme au principe d’un ‘metronome visuel’ qui donne des points de repère très importants pour l’exécution. Ce principe permet d’adapter la pièce à la virtuosité personnelle de chaque instrumentiste. Mais la difficulté qui pousse naturellement à l’imprécision rythmique, me fait penser à une ré-écriture de *Sequenza I* en notation rythmique. Une fois, quand j’aurai le temps...” (Berio *apud* Stoianova 1985: 400).

<sup>7</sup> Hopkins, Nicholas. *Letter to Benedict Weisser*.

he became increasingly disappointed with how flute players approached this notation which is by no means as free as it seems. (This was the case, in effect, with all his proportionally notated pieces) ... The Suvini Zerboni publication is in reality a renotated version of the original” (Roberts<sup>8</sup>. In: Folio; Brinkman. In: Halfyard 2007: 15–16).

From these statements and contrary to what one might assume, the notation of the flute *Sequenza I* was not a major issue during the compositional process by Berio. It emerged as a solution to a problem: excessive rhythmic complexity alongside the great exploration of other compositional parameters such as dynamic, pitch and morphological.<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting that *Sequenza I* in its original conception had a quite complex rhythmic notation compared to the solo flute repertoire until the late 1950s. It was about ten years later that other rhythmically elaborated pieces proliferated, such as *Cassandra’s Dream Song* (1970), and *Unity Capsule* (1975–1976), by Brian Ferneyhough.

## 2. Comparative rhythmic study between editions of *Sequenza I*

Thirty-four years after the first edition, Berio published by Universal Edition, in 1992, a new version of the flute *Sequenza*, replacing proportional notation with traditional notation, although without using barlines.<sup>10</sup> The 1992 edition was actually drawn from the original manuscript of *Sequenza I*, referring to the late 1950s, before Berio had readjusted the piece in proportional notation and had it published by Suvini Zerboni Editions. This rereading featured a simplification of the more complex rhythms in traditional rhythmic notation. (Weisser 1998: 49). According to Heinz Stolba, from Universal Edition, the new version of *Sequenza I* was actually made by Berio’s assistant, Paul Roberts (Folio; Brinkman. In: Halfyard 2007: 15).



Figure 6. First staff of *Sequenza I*, 1992 edition

In the beginning of the 1992 edition there is a metronomic indication equaling a crotchet to 70 MM (Figure 6). In this new score, fermatas have their durations specified in seconds and the shape of a triangle with no base (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Utilisation of fermatas in the 1958 and 1992 editions (staves 8 and 7)<sup>11</sup>

The 1958 edition was taken as a basis to accomplish this rhythmic comparative study between editions of *Sequenza I*. Given that the dimensions in proportional notation can not be changed, I have adapted the layout of the 1992 edition to fit under the 1958 edition in order to emphasise the visual equivalence between temporal fields and crotchets. The example below (Figure 8a) shows that blanks in proportional notation correspond to rests in traditional notation. The figure also reveals that the division into temporal fields is in many cases emphasised by ties in traditional rhythmic notation. In another situation (Figure 8b), the adaptation between proportional and traditional notation made use of an *appoggiatura* to approach the rhythmic values.

<sup>8</sup> Roberts, Paul. *Email message to Cynthia Folio*. 12 Dec. 2005.

<sup>9</sup> As presented by Berio in describing the compositional process of *Sequenza I* (Berio 1985: 97–99).

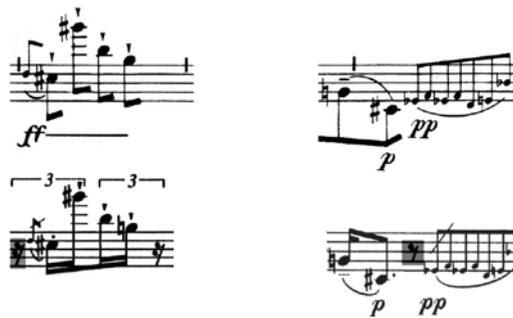
<sup>10</sup> Although it is traditionally known that the version published by Universal Edition is from 1992, it is curious that this date is not included in the score (which only refers to the year of *Sequenza I*’s composition), nor in Luciano Berio’s catalogue at Universal Edition (Marinitsch 2008: n/p). The information that Universal Edition’s version is a new edition from 1992 was only found on their website (<<http://www.universaledition.com/sheet-music-and-more/Sequenza-I-fuer-Floete-Berio-Luciano-UE19957>>). The fact that Sophie Cherrier (Brindeau 1998: n/p) mentions the new edition as being from 1997, while Umberto Eco (2012: 14) refers to 1998, contributes further to this mystery.

<sup>11</sup> The musical examples drawn from Universal Edition’s score (1992) were numbered according to the staves’ order, from 1 to 38.



**Figure 8.** a) Equivalence between temporal fields and crotchets (staves 5 and 4–5);  
 b) Utilisation of an *appoggiatura* to transform proportional notation into traditional notation (staves 7 and 6)

The 1992 edition has no barlines and it avoids, to some extent, a regular beat. Nevertheless, abstracting completely any kind of grouping is a very difficult task. Below (Figure 9a), a situation is shown in which groups of triplets in traditional notation suggests an off-beat. This off-beat is not implied according to the proportional notation version of the same excerpt. In the same passage, the rest is not functioning equally to a blank space in proportional notation due to the presence of an *appoggiatura*. The leaflet of the 1958 edition indicates that *appoggiaturas* should be performed as fast as possible, but it was only in the 1992 edition that *appoggiaturas* were transformed into brief *appoggiaturas* (*acciaccaturas*), and therefore have no rhythm value within the length of the bar. Another situation making use of *appoggiaturas* is shown below (Figure 9b). In this case, a quaver rest in traditional notation would be incoherent if there were no *appoggiaturas*.



**Figure 9.** a) Implication of an off-beat in traditional rhythmic notation (staves 5 and 4);  
 b) Apparently inconsistent rest in traditional notation (staves 10 and 9)

There are three situations in which *appoggiaturas* of the 1958 edition were transformed into real notes – demisemiquavers – in the 1992 edition:



**Figure 10.** *Appoggiaturas* transformed into demisemiquavers (staves 7 and 7; 20 and 16; and 30 and 24)

According to Cynthia Folio and Alexander Brinkman, authors of *Rhythm and Timing in the Two Versions of Berio's Sequenza I for Flute Solo: Psychological and Musical Differences in Performance* (In: Halfyard 2007: 29), although there are no barlines in the 1992 edition, its time signature is deductively 2/8, with constant metric changes due to the addition and subtraction of rhythmic values. Early in the beginning of the piece there is

indeed the addition of semiquavers in the transformation of temporal fields into crotchets (Figure 11). According to Folio and Brinkman, this addition makes the 70 MM pulse slows down by a fifth, thus being equivalent to 56 MM (Folio; Brinkman. In: Halfyard 2007: 16).

Figure 11. Addition of rhythmic values in the transformation of temporal fields into crotchets (staves 1 and 1)

Further on in equivalent parts, there is the addition of a quaver (Figure 12a); a rest exceeding its value in a quaver (Figure 12b); or even the omission of a rhythmic value corresponding to a semiquaver (Figure 12c).

Figure 12. Addition and subtraction of rhythmic values in the transformation of temporal fields into crotchets (staves 5 and 4; 6 and 5; and 13 and 11)

In the excerpt below (Figure 13), the subtraction of rhythmic values occurs in a passage formed by the use in maximum degree of tension of morphological and temporal dimensions. Due to the omission of rhythmic values corresponding to semiquavers, there is the presence of asymmetric rhythms in combination with the use of key clicks (whose first occurrence is not displayed on the 1958 edition). This asymmetry highlights the use of such extended technique.

Figure 13. Subtraction of rhythmic values in the transformation of temporal fields into crotchets (staves 33 and 27–28)

It is remarkable that traditional notation is often more intricate visually, requiring the performer to read attentively. Below (Figure 14), there is a syncopation formed by a succession of demisemi-quaver, semi-quaver and demisemi-quaver concomitantly with *frullatos*. These rhythms resemble a group of three semi-quavers in a careless reading.



Figure 14. Syncopation in traditional notation resembling to a group of three semi-quavers in a careless reading (staff 28)

Among divergent interpretations promoted by proportional notation in comparison to traditional one, there is below a gradual acceleration written in traditional notation that does not match its equivalent in proportional notation (Figure 15). The spacing between notes in the 1958 edition suggests homogeneous durations, mainly in the last three notes.



Figure 15. Homogeneity in proportional notation versus gradual acceleration in traditional notation (staves 34 and 28)

At the end of the piece there is an extra *B* in the 1992 edition, and immediately after, a rest whose spacing in proportional notation does not correspond to its duration in traditional notation (Figure 16).

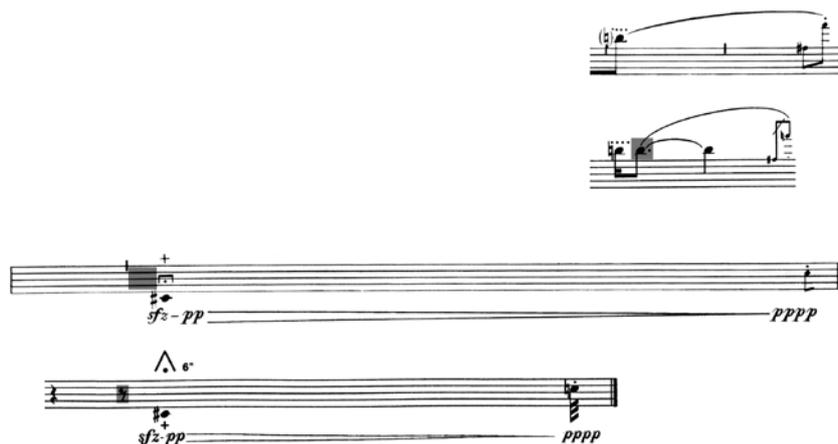


Figure 16. Extra *B* in traditional notation and non-equivalence between blank and quaver rest (staves 45–46 and 38)

Despite the rhythmic differences between the 1958 and 1992 editions so far presented, there are some passages in which the correspondence between temporal fields and crotchets is quite accurate and there are no additions or subtractions of rhythmic values. This is presented below (Figure 17), although a subdivision of the traditional notation version was necessary to clarify this equivalence.



Figure 17. Accuracy in the transformation of proportional notation into traditional notation (staves 19 and 16)

Concerning aspects of proportionality, Folio and Brinkman observe that the transformation of temporal fields into crotchets is far from precise. ‘In many instances, the proportional spacing of 1958 is translated into rhythms that exaggerate the proportional distances between notes or even contradict them’ (Folio; Brinkman. In: Halfyard 2007: 16). The authors demonstrate that, in traditional notation, the first note of the piece is twice as long as the following two. The spacing between these three notes in proportional notation, however, does not represent the same proportionality, and an optical illusion is created by the direction of the stems (Folio; Brinkman. In: Halfyard 2007: 33).



Figure 18. Spacing and proportionality between the first three notes of *Sequenza I*, 1958 and 1992 editions (staves 1 and 1)

Regarding performance issues of both editions of *Sequenza I*, Folio and Brinkman have assumed that the two versions might suggest radically different interpretations. Therefore, they did a computer analysis of eleven professional recordings. Among them, seven flautists used the 1958 edition; three aggregated information of 1992 edition, while still using the first edition; and only one used the 1992 edition.<sup>12</sup> The hypothesis that the 1958 and 1992 editions of *Sequenza I* would present significant differences in performances has not been confirmed and, according to the authors, it is difficult to determine which edition is used from timing information alone (Folio; Brinkman. In: Halfyard 2007).

### 3. Final considerations

The controversy surrounding the rhythmic notation in *Sequenza I* gave notoriety to the piece, having great verbal and literary impact. The horizontal spacing in proportional notation is correlated to tapes, and the length of the piece is equivalent to the tape rotation. Thus, it is plausible that Berio was inspired by his work with electroacoustic music, especially on RAI's *Studio di Fonologia Musicale*, since 1955. Another possibility is based on Berio's contact with new explorations within rhythmic notation through American composers in 1952 – a period when the first compositions using proportional notation flourished, and when Berio went to the United States to participate in the *Berkshire Music Festival*, in Tanglewood. Berio also had a deep contact with John Cage, one of the pioneers in using proportional notation, during the residency of Cage at the RAI studio, in 1958 – the same year that *Sequenza I* was composed.

<sup>12</sup> The recordings are from Sharon Bezaly (2000–2001), Sophie Cherrier (1998), Robert Dick (1990), Roberto Fabbriani (1994), Anna Garzuly (1996), Severino Gazzelloni (1961), Erich Graf (1991), Peter-Lukas Graf (1989), Aurèle Nicolet (1991), Harvey Sollberger (1975), and Karlheinz Zöllner (2003). Although Sophie Cherrier is on Folio and Brinkman's list as the only performer to use the 1992 edition, there is a statement from 1998 (the same year of her recording), where the flautist says that she makes use of the 1958 edition: “...I studied the new version, but only for the small, detailed elements; because my previous study sufficiently prepared me, I work only with the original notation” (Cherrier. In: Brindeau 1998: n/p).

The 1992 edition is closer to the original conception of the piece by Berio, as he originally conceived it in traditional notation. Thereby, proportional notation emerged as a facilitator, as a viable option to the complex rhythms in traditional notation. The interpretation of proportional notation, however, had a different effect and promoted misinterpretations of the work according to Berio. However, I would argue that the differences between the two editions of *Sequenza I*, illuminated in this comparative study, create the possibility for distinct, multiple interpretations of the same work in an open, rather than closed, way.

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## Santrauka

### Luciano Berio *Sequenza I* fleitai solo redakcijų lyginamoji ritmo studija

Straipsnyje pristatoma lyginamoji dviejų Luciano Berio (1925–2003) *Sequenza I* fleitai solo redakcijų ritmo studija. Pirmojoje redakcijoje (*Suvini Zerboni Editions*, 1958) naudojama proporcinė notacija. Antrąją redakciją (*Universal Edition*, 1992) kompozitorius pertvarkė – joje pritaikė tradicinę notaciją.

*Sequenza I* (dedikuota italų fleitininkui Severino Gazzelloni) yra pirmas kūrinys iš keturiolikos kompozicijų serijos *Sequenze* solo instrumentams. Sukurtos per 44 metus, *Sequenze* tapo gerai žinomais XX ir XXI a. solinio repertuaro kūriniais, kurie išgarsėjo visapusiškai techniškai ir rafinuota muzikine kalba bei aukšto lygio virtuozizmu. Didžiausias iššūkis, kurį kelia *Sequenza I*, yra ritminio pobūdžio – tinkamai dešifruoti notaciją, nepriklausomai nuo to, ar ji proporcinė (*Suvini Zerboni Editions*, 1958) – dėl užrašymo neįprastumo, ar tradicinė (*Universal Edition*, 1992) – dėl sudėtingų ritmų.

Proporcinė notacija *Sequenza I* Berio užrašė ne iš karto – pirmiausia ją pateikė tradicine ritmine notacija. Vis dėlto sudėtingos ritminės sekos, išplėstinių technikų naudojimas, pasikartojantys platūs melodiniai intervalai, artikuliacijos įvairovė ir ekstremali dinamika taip komplikavo pjesę, kad Berio tada pasirinko proporcinę notaciją, siekdamas palengvinti kūrinio atlikimą. Taigi šio kūrinio 1958 m. redakcijos ritminės trukmės lemia natų tarpusavio atstumas penklinėje.

Po kelerių metų kompozitoriui ėmė nepatikti atlikimai bei įrašai pagal pirmąją redakciją. Anot Berio, absoliutus laikas proporcinėje notacijoje buvo ne toks svarbus kaip siekis nuosekliai išlaikyti ritmines proporcijas. Per didelę atlikėjų laisvę (jie proporcinę notaciją interpretavo vos ne kaip pretekstą improvizacijai) paskatino kompozitorių po 34 metų perrašyti savo kūrinį ir pakeisti proporcinę notaciją į tradicinę ritminę notaciją.

Remiantis šia perspektyva, straipsnyje aptariamos idėjos, išdėstytos Folio ir Brinkmano straipsnyje „Ritmas ir laikas dviejose Berio *Sequenza I* fleitai solo versijose: psichologiniai ir muzikiniai atlikimo skirtumai“, taip pat kai kurie kūrinio struktūriniai ir techniniai aspektai. Aptariami ir kai kurie abiejų redakcijų skirtumai ir panašumai.