

The 'Sequenzas' amid playful art

By David Patrick Stearns
INQUIRER MUSIC CRITIC

Luciano Berio's *Sequenzas* are such forbidding music, hearing all in one sitting could make your ears fall off. Instead, one felt incredibly lucky to encounter all of them played amid playful, quirky art installations in separate rooms at First Unitarian Church in *14 Sequenzas*.

These dense, atonal works by one of the great 20th-century modernists sound like cadenzas too wild for any concerto. Instigated by A Change of Harp, coproduced by Bowerbird, and presented by the 2014 FringeArts festival for three nights starting Thursday, *14 Sequenzas* is about showcasing this music amid poetic, visual stimulation but also offering audiences graceful-exit options from some of the more aggressive pieces, said the event's mastermind, harpist Elizabeth Morgan-Ellis. Most *sequenzas* were played three times; the audience freely migrated among the rooms.

The visual element offered bits of historic context. The 1965 *Sequenza IV* for piano (played by Christopher Oldfather) was surrounded by video monitors showing a psychedelic fantasy on the late-night TV test pattern of that era. The 1963 *Sequenza II* for harp was played in a darkened room full of lighted candles. The 1967 *Sequenza VI* for viola (which is like a Bach partita after it has been scrunched by a trash compactor) had circuslike posters telling us to "Bow to her bow." "I was supposed to perform in a cage, but the cage didn't make it," said visiting New York violist Kristina Giles. "Maybe tomorrow."



Luciano Berio's "14 Sequenzas," at First Unitarian. ANDREW HUSTON

The works themselves relentlessly challenge their chosen instrument beyond normal limits. Fingers pounded on the body of a cello in the Sri Lankan-influenced *Sequenza XIV* (2002). Guitarist Jordan Dodson played the 1987 *Sequenza XI* with both hands on the fingerboard. The 1965 *Sequenza III*, written for Berio's vocalist wife Cathy Berberian, is part warmup exercises, part operatic mad scene with crazy scales sung by Alize Rozsnyai, with ominous shadow puppets projected on a scrim. A live bassoonist was absent in *Sequenza XII*, but was heard on recording in a pitch-black room with invisible speakers.

All performances I heard were mighty. I especially loved how cellist Mirjam Ingolfsson gave *Sequenza XIV* a sense of beginning, middle, and end. Accordionist Bill Schimmel gave *Sequenza XIII* such richness you wanted repeat performances. With music this challenging, that's saying a lot.

Additional performance: Noon Saturday at First Unitarian Church, 2125 Chestnut St. Tickets: \$20, \$15 for students. Information: 215-413-1318 or www.fringearts.com.

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