

Somewhere Between Memaw and the Academy

A Compositional Balancing Act

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Abstract

This essay, accompanying a portfolio of compositions, is being submitted for a doctoral degree in composition. It describes the results of my engagement with questions of classical music, how it fits within the wider world, and how these ideas are encompassed in the accompanying music. The questions of how the marketplace mentality of the world affects its thinking about classical music, classical music's subsequent relevance, and how classical music is presented via the concert, lead to points of increasing musical specificity such as my use of discourse, determinacy, tonality and modality in the compositions, and my belief in the validity of the classical concert ritual. To make these points, I specifically turn to the musicological work of Julian Johnson, Christopher Small, and Milton Babbitt, engaging with and questioning each so as to describe how I decided on various aesthetic positions. Following this, I analyse three pieces of music by Arvo Pärt, Howard Skempton, and Martyn Harry to demonstrate how these ideas have been realised by other composers and what inspiration I took from them in my own compositions. The essay is closed with a detailed discussion of two large projects; one that was undertaken in 2013, and one that is currently in progress. In doing so, I hope to show how my engagement with larger questions has affected not only the music I have written, but also the way in which the music is presented. The essay is intentionally written with a more personal tone so as not to cause a discrepancy with the music in my portfolio, all of which was written with genuineness as the paramount concern. Lastly, I begin my argument by starkly contrasting different viewpoints. It has admittedly been challenging to find a balance in describing the extreme positions in a way that isn't unnecessarily provocative to my aims. Provocation is certainly not my intention. So, in short, stick with me; all will be made clear as the dissertation progresses.

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Introduction

This essay has its genesis in the many conversations that I have had with colleagues, friends, and family in regards to contemporary music and its practice. Most poignant of these conversations was one which I had with my Grandmother ('Memaw') who at the time was nearing her 76th birthday. Memaw, along with other family members, had travelled to England to attend my undergraduate graduation service at Durham University and in the days leading up to the ceremony, she and my family were curious to know exactly what a 'composer' did for an academic degree. Naturally, they wanted to hear the music I had written, an act which I had up until then, successfully avoided. I was steeped in the music of Lachenmann, Kurtág, and Cage at that time, and was acutely aware that my family was not acquainted with this type of music and would most likely not take to my version of it. One evening I finally relented and played a semi-decent recording of one of my first not-so-decent attempts at mixed ensemble writing. True to Southern-American propriety, the majority of my family politely listened with conspicuous and ill-hid looks of confusion behind open-toothed smiles. When the piece finished, they all looked up from the ground and said 'very good...' or, 'that's very impressive – I'm not sure what was happening – but, very impressive...', et cetera. The exception to the myriad of platitudes was Memaw.

Memaw grew up in rural Georgia without electricity or indoor plumbing until the age of 18 and had lived a piously utilitarian and pragmatic life. Despite her love of constant and inappropriate humour, she is not known for mincing her words or espousing anything less than the truth as she sees it. While the piece played and during the episode of niceties that followed, she sat uncharacteristically silent waiting for the moment that she could air her



mind. ‘Why do you want to write *ugly* music?’ she finally asked. ‘All that effort into something that sounds so horrible – I just don’t understand.’ After a desperately pitiful attempt at explaining in simple terms the particular evolution of the language of Western art music, Arnold Schoenberg, and art’s critique of society, she cut me off. ‘Well, *who are they* to sit and criticize the rest of *us*? Because they have degrees or big ideas?’ She then lowered the boom; ‘I’ve lived 75 years without Mr. Schoenberg and I reckon I’ll be just fine going on without him.’

Needless to say, my pleas of open-mindedness in relation to musical style and of the importance of the philosophy of why, and the way, the music is written fell upon purposefully closed ears. She had heard enough explanation and it did not justify the visceral qualities of the music. Nevertheless, I trudged forward with my simple aesthetics lecture while explaining

that the music is not necessarily criticising individuals but imploring us to see things differently. As she sat politely feigning attention, it suddenly occurred to me – in mid-sentence – that I, firstly, didn't understand half of what I was spouting and, secondly, had serious misgivings about that which I did understand. I too had lived for sometime without Mr. Schoenberg and all that followed him and had admittedly been very happy without them. Things had changed for me and I had come to an understanding, even an appreciation, for Schoenberg's music and his place within the canon, but Memaw had planted in me a contradictory question that has festered ever since.

This initial question of 'ugly' music and its intended message has manifested into a great many other questions. It has provided a foil to many of the more abstract and sometimes outlandish questions that I have faced within my academic studies. I think it's safe to say that academia is a place where following an idea to its utmost reaches is our *modus operandi*. Memaw might say that we've just over-thought it to death. She has asked, 'what good will come from all this?' in relation to my research. In the many iterations and variants of this question, it is always clear that there is no judgment attached. As she has been one of the strongest supporters of my education, it is her way of imploring me to ensure that the knowledge and experience garnered from my education can be put to a collective good and that it not end up somewhere in the outer reaches of Earth's gravitational pull where very few people could benefit from it. In short, she wants to be sure that I keep the question of relevance omnipresent.

While Memaw's question has kept me grounded in a sense, the academic *modus operandi* has propelled me ever-outwards. But which side should I gravitate towards? Was one side 'right' and the other 'wrong'? What *should* the music I write sound like? What should it mean? For a young composer, so far as I can tell, there are no more important questions than these. They are the driving force that directly affects any music written. But

they are only the beginning; the opening to a complex world that composers will deal with for the whole of their lives. These questions beget other questions which both expose existing contradictions, as well as create new paradoxes, that must be grappled with. I came to find over the years that there is no right and wrong necessarily, but that there was a question of balance (something that both the academy and Memaw ended up teaching me). In the case above, Memaw's position and the position of much of the New Music crowd (who mainly congregate within the academy) are extremes, and it was here that I found an important point; the further one moves to one extreme or the other, the number and severity of the resulting paradoxes grows proportionally. In some cases this can result in out-and-out hypocrisy, arrogance, vanity, and, above all, a lack of genuineness. Though achieving an intellectual and subsequent musical balance doesn't completely remove the possibility of hypocrisy, or any of the other pitfalls, it does safe-guard against them; a balance is achieved, and therefore perpetuates, a self-aware and self-critical mindset on the part of the composer.

This thesis, written in conjunction with a portfolio of compositions, is my attempt to answer how I seek to achieve a balance. How any composer does this is undoubtedly individual to that person and based on their own personal life experiences and education. This thesis then is in many ways autobiographical in that I describe not only various studies that have influenced the compositions in my portfolio, but also people and events that have taken place in my life that have directly affected the how, what, and why I have composed the music. I should be clear now that, in some of the topics that will be discussed, I have not yet found my position. In such a case, I will examine various methods of thought and describe the argument which is occurring in my head, but fall short of deciding upon a belief. In *Music as Philosophy*, Michael Spitzer reflects in the Acknowledgments on his own doctorate, writing, 'A lot older, and a little wiser, I now realize that Ph.D.'s are beginnings, not endings.'¹ Insofar

¹ Spitzer 2006, xi

as I can tell, I believe that he's right. I felt an immense pressure to find where I stand in certain situations for this thesis. Lacking that, I thought I should at least attempt to fake it. This flew directly in the face of the genuineness that I felt was essential to a work like this. My attempt here is to stake the ground where I stand and present to you, the reader, my beliefs at this point and how they affected the music in the portfolio. In the end, there is nothing to say that the beliefs I am more firm on won't drastically change in the years to come. If the process of writing this thesis and the number of topics that I have evolved on is any indication, then they certainly will.

One last disclaimer: much of the style of this essay could rightly be criticised for its colloquialism and its folksy-ness; there is a lot of storytelling in this essay. There are attempts (such as they are) at humour. I admit freely this is the case and furthermore admit that it is done with complete intention. I hope to demonstrate that my academic standards and methodology is of the utmost importance to my process and is something I hold in the highest regard. However, in terms of the way I communicate the content of this methodology, I have chosen to take a more upfront and, perhaps, personal tone. To do otherwise would not only be counter-productive to my positions, but more importantly, it would stand in stark contrast to the music contained within my portfolio.

Chapter I: Navigating Crises of Pragmatism

Nothing can be taken for granted. I am a composer who composes discursive, determinate, and traditionally-notated contemporary classical music. I have a proclivity for linear narrative structures, and while I increasingly explore the non-linear, I avoid fragmentation as much as possible. I utilise tonal and modal harmonies in conjunction with dissonant harmonies to create, as suits a given narrative, a dramatic interplay between dark and light. I do care what an audience thinks. I am not afraid of a tune. And I do all of this with the aim, and hope, of the context of a staged, classical music performance in which human performers perform.

At first glance, one should rightly ask what precisely is contemporary about any of that. Indeed, I have spent the last decade asking those, and many other subsequent questions which naturally follow. Below, I will attempt to concisely explain how I arrived at these decisions and why I believe they fit in with the contemporary world.

If the sheer volume of academic and popular critical studies, not to mention art forms, is any indication, we, as a species, are more self-aware than ever before. Moreover, the extraordinary range of topics and thought contained within the volumes exposes deep fault lines that exist between every one of us. Music, and art in general, is clearly not excepted. There is the wide rift between the dominant popular musics and classical music. But then classical music itself exists in a thousand aesthetic shards. For a composer to be born into and survive such a multifarious, and often chaotic world, he or she must embark on a life-long engagement with the musical and wider world around them. The musical world we live in follows the work of Arnold Schoenberg, Pierre Boulez, and Milton Babbitt; as well as John Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Morton Feldman; and then LaMonte Young, Terry Riley,

Phillip Glass, and Steve Reich; and also Sir Harrison Birtwistle, Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, Brian Ferneyhough, and George Crumb. Even this short list demonstrates a warning to the assuming composer: you do so at your own peril. Every aspect of modern (that is to say, Twenty-First century) music making has been questioned and critiqued, destroyed and rebuilt, and thought and rethought by these composers and a great many others. Thus, every musical choice a composer makes within and without the score, no matter how obvious, has meaning and thereby also has consequences. Nothing can be taken for granted.

Through active engagement with the thoughts of the musical and wider world, a composer gains both an aesthetic and practical context that defines the choice-elimination process of composition; what tones to use, how to structure them, how they are presented, and for what purpose. In other words, finding where we stand amongst the cornucopia of current and historical arguments defines what we say, how we say it, where we say it, and why we do it all in the first place. It defines us as composers; it moreover defines us as people.

The Big Picture

I'm not certain the world really cares about us in classical music. I'm not certain that they're truly aware we exist at all. Whenever I tell non-musicians I study classical music, I often get the impression that they must think we all sit round in powdered wigs, drinking port and snuffing, while revelling in the holy structured musical - and social - order given us by Johann, Wolfgang, and Ludwig. It's an old, tired and infinitely annoying cliché, but one that apparently persists. It may be curious to classical musicians that this myth has been perpetuated, but it is not without good reason.

More curious to us perhaps is a non-musician's reaction to classical music of the last hundred years. Aside from Memaw's more pointed 'ugly music' assessment, almost invariably I get, 'Oh, it's a horror soundtrack...?' Or, more worryingly, a reaction of pure

shock; not just at the sound itself, but that music like this exists at all. There is further astonishment when I tell them that this kind of music (this ‘sound’) has been around for quite some time and, believe it or not, there are reasons why it sounds as it does.

Now, I do try to be tactful in what music I play the un-initiated (or, the ‘happily un-jaded’), giving a range of styles and pieces, depending on the context of the conversation. However, and parody aside, the facts that I must attempt to ‘sell’ contemporary classical music and that the person is shocked by the music and the existence of this music, is indicative of a much wider problem: how classical music fits in and doesn’t fit in with the rest of the world. It is a problem that a composer simply can’t ignore as every musical thing he or she does will be decided with this wider-lensed issue hovering above, besides, and below.

The fact that classical music, and music in general, is fractured only makes this problem exceedingly complex. The causes of this splintering are based not only from without the classical music world, but also from within. In the first instance, classical music holds a tenuous place within an *entertainment* environment which trades exclusively on what will sell. Classical music simply isn’t entertaining, at least not in the immediately gratifying way that much popular music is. Because it isn’t entertaining, it doesn’t sell. Because it doesn’t sell, a classical musician’s job, indeed livelihood, becomes precarious. Because it doesn’t sell, we don’t have the money, — nor are we justified in asking for the money — necessary to create new works and curate new events. Because it doesn’t sell, the values and methodologies of classical music are in danger of fading away into the nothingness of a forgotten past resulting in market-driven dominant culture becoming Culture.

In a world where money means everything and makes everything, we, as classicists, have no practical choice but to pull up a chair and get dealt in. So overwhelming is the logic of the marketplace that asking the fundamentally important question, ‘should classical music, or art for that matter, need to sell at all?’ *almost* seems asinine moot. Money is unfortunately

everything and if we are to survive, we must continue to engage and adapt to the demands of the larger world around us. But only to a point. While we engage with the demands of the market, we cannot throw the baby out with the bathwater. In order to survive and still function as classical music, we must also negotiate with an entertainment infrastructure that functions with a different — even an antithetical — set of values from those that we maintain. To do so enters us into a vicious cycle based on differing values of art and opinions on what art even is. It is an argument that, if it has an end at all, will not end quietly.

So then why doesn't classical music sell? Why isn't it popular? The answer is in many ways obvious: classical music is boring and long; it speaks in a different way than does every other kind of music; it's anachronistic, the product of another time and place; its practitioners are awkwardly unaware how irrelevant they are and are uncompromising, therefore elitist and arrogant; classical music concerts are the physical embodiment of all of the above. When musicians converse with folks on these matters, we may be able to dispel some of these qualms, but bring up contemporary music, and we're back at square one. Dare say anything on the 'higher' values and purposes of classical music as opposed to the music they identify with, and we're back at square one. I've found that just about any substantive conversation on music often ends where it began and features the platitudes, 'to each his own' or 'whatever floats your boat, ya' know?'

Yes, we do know. It may seem benign enough to leave the conversation at that. After all, the social sin of insisting one's views are right and another person's wrong, especially when it comes to something as personal as music, has been avoided. Yet, there is a nagging lack of the settled. Something isn't right. There is no way of escaping the fact that the conversation has accomplished nothing, other than perhaps a mutual agreement to retreat back to our own camps; classical music is — *we* are — still left facing the inanity of powdered wigs and port. I cannot begin to tell you how many impassioned, spitting, desperate

conversations my musical colleagues and I have had in which we are convinced of objectivity in music; conversations where we realise that the moral relativity of the wider world condemns all that we do and all that we believe to irrelevant futility. And yet, ultimately, we won't perpetuate the stereotype of arrogance or elitism because of the assurance that we know we aren't those people; that we won't allow ourselves to be those people. So, we back down and go back home. Are we really sure of objectivity? Are we really sure we aren't those people? It goes to show that this small and unthreatening acorn of musical taste, if left to grow, begets a Live Oak smack-dab in the middle of the gateway between classical music and the rest of the world. Any discussion, no matter how well thought out, informed, or overwhelmingly relevant, will be syphoned off and discarded as only matters of individual taste. And we have gotten no where.

I'd like now to turn to a book that has had an irrevocable impact on my thinking and the compositions I've written: Julian Johnson's *Who Needs Classical Music?*. Johnson's study is compact but expansive, not only refuting the 'vacuous' and 'circular' musical taste argument, but also showing that the issue is far from inconsequential; there are very real repercussions with publicly-funded arts organisations and education, as well as within society and our own personal lives. The key to unlocking the cycle is understanding that music operates in much the same way language does. He writes²:

'The activity of making and listening to music involves us in something that is never merely personal. In this sense, music is like a language; when we "speak" or "listen" in musical language, we participate in a signifying system that is communally shared and defined, something that is larger than our own use of it and that we enter whenever we involve ourselves with music.

This linguistic aspect means that music is always more than a "matter of taste."

² Johnson 2002, 11

He also identifies the supposed freedom of the market as one of the culprits for the preservation of the argument, for where better could we see freedom enacted than in the marketplace: 'The right to exercise choice, the judgement of value, and the sovereignty of the individual are all mutually confirmed in the act of buying. Nothing would cause a greater affront to the popular notion of democracy than a restriction of what one could buy.'³

According to Johnson, with whom I agree, the never-ending musical tastes argument and the logic of the marketplace go hand-in-hand. Their symbiosis is formidable to anything that stands outside or opposes it. But, in order to have a fuller picture, we must go back and ask why classical music does not fare well in this system. The reasons I list above for the unpopularity of classical music, valid as they may be, are in many ways only superficial; the music itself hasn't even been considered yet. The answer is, again, pretty obvious. Classical music doesn't function as mere entertainment. It does something more than just satisfying a moment in time. As a young music student, preparing for university, I had chosen classical music as my area of study, but I don't think I knew why. I knew I loved the music, I knew it was different than other musics, but I couldn't have conceptualised that difference, much less have verbalised it. It really was nothing more than a feeling. As my studies progressed, I, very slowly but surely, began to understand that the complexities of the music served a different purpose other than complexity for its own sake. There were times when I would get frustrated with the whole piece and only listen to the 'good bits' that met my current mood. Eventually, I overused these bits and grew tired of them. But then there would occur instances in which I would hear the whole piece again and the bits that had lost meaning suddenly returned to sending chills down my spine and with every hair stood on end. It was through moments like these (and the constant insistence of my tutors) that I finally understood musical narrative; I understood why the 'good bits' were good in the first place.

³ Johnson 2002, 26

Through the unfolding of a musical narrative, we find not only emotional gratification, we also find meaning which could only come from musical sections temporally unfurling to other sections. The good bits were good - and had meaning - because they had musical context; and the piece of music as a whole had meaning within itself, and thus beyond itself. This, I understood, was why this music was different than much of the rest, and why it had viscerally enticed me.

But herein lies the problem; it requires work to understand how classical music works. Furthermore, for it to work, one must actively engage with the music; if we mentally shut down and expect the musical equivalent of an entertaining dancing bear, we will miss the point entirely and the music will not function as it was designed. This means that, not only is classical music boring, and its participants and rituals stuffy, it also requires effort to understand. It's not hard to see why many would wave a polite hand and say, 'nah thanks - we're fine where we are.' Indeed, many classical musicians, including myself, will express that sentiment some of the time; we don't want to listen to classical music exclusively.

Johnson's study centres on this notion: 'My argument is based on the idea that we value music for what it does for us and that our musical choices reflect these values.'⁴ Different musics have different functions. We value club music insofar as it facilitates dancing. The same is the case with dinner music; Slip Knot does not best complement the atmosphere in which people eat and converse (though I suppose it depends on what kind of dinner you're having). So on the logic goes. Classical music functions differently and we thus gain a different reward by engaging with it. And that's the point; one cannot approach classical music the same way as popular music and expect to reap the benefits classical music offers, and vice versa.

⁴Johnson 2002, 33

What we offer as classical musicians is both a pursuit of the mind as well as the body. What we offer is the whole human experience⁵; the heart and the head, the intellectual and the visceral, Cartesian Duality set in temporal poetic motion. It is a point Johnson consistently returns back to throughout the whole of his book. Much music in the popular sphere, but certainly not all of it, is constructed in strophic forms, utilises simple repetition (as opposed to that used in Minimalism), lasts for three minutes or so, and is utterly reliant on the melodic or linguistic ‘hook.’ It is designed to function for the here and now, and it does so exceedingly well. It’s also designed to sell. But that’s all it does. I liken it to only ever eating dessert. A dessert is wonderful and can sometimes be the point of an entire meal. There are times when dessert is all I want. But, dessert does not provide a balance from either an aesthetic point of view or a nutritional one: firstly, I’ll quickly tire of eating only sugar due to a lack of other tastes and I’ll stop appreciating it as part of a larger ritual (the full-course meal) where one part leads to another complementary part. Secondly, I’ll weigh eighteen stone and my body will rot before I’m actually dead. Classical music offers a contextual balance that gives its constituent parts meaning beyond the notes written on the page.

Now, before we go any further, let me give some disclaimers before any reader unfortunate enough to read this essay has an aneurysm. I am not saying that all pop music does the same thing. I differ in my perspective from Johnson in this regard (Johnson does not directly address this issue, but does tend to paint over popular music with a broad brush⁶). Indeed, with the existence of artists (and yes, I do mean artists) like Radiohead, Joanna Newsom, Punch Brothers, and Edgar Meyer, it is clear to see that while these folks operate generally in the popular music sphere, they demand more intellectual engagement - function differently - than do other musicians like Katy Perry or Taylor Swift. I’m not being nasty

⁵ Johnson agrees: ‘Being both physical and intellectual, classical music enacts the repeated exceeding of one by the other that is a condition of being fully human.’ Johnson 2002, 71

⁶ Johnson’s views on rock music, for example, demonstrates his lack of engagement with it: Johnson 2002, 59

with the latter two, but am only drawing a distinction which can be clearly heard in the music and seen⁷ in the people. I think it is reasonable to ask the question as to whether the former are actually ‘classicists.’

The reciprocal is also true; not all classical music achieves this optimal balance. There are of course varying degrees of success in given pieces of music. There are also deeper questions on the effectiveness of some styles and their meanings. Moreover while we’re here, I’m also not suggesting that a person must be inherently intelligent to comprehend classical music. I believe that if one has an interest in classical music, it only takes listening to it and actively engaging with it to begin to understand it.

Nevertheless, it’s the fact that classical music by and large denies the immediate gratification that popular music has readily at hand that keeps it from being popular, and thus from selling. If it doesn’t sell, the wider world pays no heed. It is easy for those who don’t know classical music to then only see it as one choice amongst many other, equally valid, types of music which anyone is free to pick from the democratic marketplace.⁸ They don’t really know we classicists exist because they don’t know what we do nor what we offer. And what we offer is different than other music; an artistic experience that uses the heart and the head to give a vision of something more than ourselves; more than today, or tomorrow; indeed outside of time itself.

I obviously owe a great debt to Julian Johnson and *Who Needs Classical Music?* (he will making a number of other guest appearances throughout the rest of this essay). His work provided a clarity of purpose in both my thinking and the music I subsequently wrote that I did not anticipate. While I did not engage, nor continue to engage, with Johnson uncritically, I must acknowledge a profound debt to him. That being said, as I read his book as a

⁷ While it’s not definitive, I do think it’s fair to say that fashion and the way one *looks* in the pop music world is equally as, if not more, important than the music itself.

⁸ Johnson 2002, 27-32

composer - being primarily concerned with *doing* something - I began to worry slightly. All the while I read, I could not shake the image of my composer colleagues and myself setting up a cheap, folding table in the middle of Cornmarket Street in between the Save the Bees stall and a county councilperson's election campaign. We'd have clipboards filled with lined paper, ready to take a mailing list and we'd make silly placards which read something like 'Why's Haydn Hidin'?' or 'Save the BEethoven.' There would also have to be a mainly empty placard with '(Cage)' written in small letters at the bottom. Maybe we'd sing a Bach chorale to draw attention.

Again, before any conniptions are had, I am of course making light. I am in no way denigrating the efforts to understand and save dwindling bee populations nor the importance of a local election. Quite the reverse in fact. The disappearance of bees causes considerable worry in regards to climate change as well as the pollination of crops, i.e. food (and there's also honey). The election of a local councilperson has much more of a bearing on our everyday lives than does the election of a politician at the national/international level. These, and quite a few others, are far more immediate and pressing concerns and one should rightly question the effectiveness, and the justification, of a campaign to save classical music. This is especially so when we remember that most people don't see much of a difference in the function of classical music from any other music. Rightly or wrongly, if the worst that could happen happened tomorrow, there would not be clamouring to get musicians into the bunker, the plane, or the space pod.

But what else are we meant to do? How are we to look at another person and insist that, while their life is complex and busy, this music is stuff they should learn about, pay attention to, pay for, and engage with? Johnson's silver bullet to the perfect beast of entertainment culture is education. Right so; fair play. We also must go about the difficult job of convincing the wider world that it's worth the trouble, and money, in the first place.

Johnson has done his part by writing *Who Needs Classical Music?*³ (as well as, I'm sure, many other efforts). But I, and we, as composers and performers have the responsibility to demonstrate that what we produce is important and can have a real effect on people's lives.

I hope that I have shown, however briefly, that engaging with this wider responsibility is of paramount importance. How a composer grapples with this large question can have a marked affect on the musical choices they make in a piece of music. Even the choice to completely ignore the wider world must come from an understanding of the world in the first place, and thus from an engagement with it. But before I go on to increasing specificity, I must further define my own position in relation to the rest of general music making and its various functions. My conviction and ever-reaffirmed passion for classical music comes from a belief that the arts, and specifically classical music, offers a genuine alternative to the processes and products of the rest of the world; a distinction that is made clearer, and more urgent, every day. By genuine, I mean that what we do is funded differently, it is made differently with different intentions, and functions differently to those who partake in it. But it's not difference for difference's sake; rather, it is difference that breaks the cycles of a world increasingly obsessed with the here and now, the vain, and the disingenuous. Nor does our difference arise out of some simple contrarianism; our methodologies and thoughts and functions have existed in every age of human life back to before we can remember.

In the end, the ancient wall that exists between the world and classical music (the one with the aforementioned Live Oak in the gateway) is one that both sides built, with every subsequent generation adding a few more stones. I agree that there is an urgency to figure out how to either cut down the oak, or better yet, knock in a new gateway (leaving the oak as a reminder of what happens when we become too entrenched on our respective sides). But there is also a positive aspect to having been walled off from within and without. Our genuineness and the alternative it offers flourishes in a place where big money doesn't hold

sway. Imagine what would happen were classical music to start making pop star money. Investors (as opposed to patrons or benefactors) would circle and swoop like buzzards on a rotting carcass. The problem with investors is that they expect to not only make their money back, they also expect a healthy return on their investment. At the very least, this would stifle the essential creative processes and progression of classical music and render our genuine alternative to not much of an alternative at all. More likely to happen however, is that the value system of classical music would be flipped on its head. The prerogative of the investor and big money is big money, not the content or function of any art it pretends to patronise.

This is where we come back to metaphors of babies and bathwater. Essential to classical music's ability to offer an alternative to the world's market-driven, mainstream, entertainment culture is a concerted opposition to it. The form of that opposition is variable, but I am certain that the moment we take on the central tenet of the market place - the incessant need to sell above everything else - will be the moment that the baby has been flushed out and lost.

Now, there is a ridiculously massive difference between an opposition to the entertainment culture and an opposition to people in that culture. I think that we in classical music are all guilty of forgetting that difference at times. Nevertheless, this is cornerstone of everything I believe and all the musical choices I have made are built on top of it. Yes, people must come to us and approach the music we make on its terms and not theirs. But we need them to come to us in the first place. Any and everyone who wishes to come through our new gate must be welcomed and bid to sup at any one of our tables. At the same time we must offer them something that they cannot get outside our wall. The whole of the time I have been speaking about classical music's 'survival', I did not mean mere perpetuation; I mean surviving intact so as to continue to offer an art that functions differently by transcending the mundane and superficial. Without that, there is no reason for anyone to join us. We'll have

sold out. Compromise we rightly must, but we cannot sacrifice the thing that defines and justifies our existence. In selling out, we do not ensure our survival, we ensure our death and the death of any alternative. All that will remain is an empty husk of a sound that demurely sits amongst the other sounds; all of them meaning the exact same thing.

On that happy note; ask me to tell you how to put in a new gate and invite people in while telling them they have work to do, and I won't be able to tell you (and nor will, I think, anyone else). I can say that everything that follows in this essay, and every piece contained in my portfolio, is an attempt on my part as an individual composer to walk this impossible, paradoxical balancing act.

The Primary, Optimal Product

In sharpening the lens, we must consider the main intersection where classical music and the world meet: the live performance. As mentioned above, classical music's snags with the rest of culture stem from both the outside and the inside, and, Good Lord, is this issue no different. To get into this, I'd like to turn to another influential work: Christopher Small's *Musicking*. In it, Small contends that music isn't a thing at all but an activity whose true meaning can only be found in 'exploring, celebrating, and affirming' the relationships made in the activity. This is the true *gesamtkunstwerk*⁹; a rich interlocking set of relationships (between all the participants, the music, the venue, as well as how we behave while musicking) which generate meaning. Whether it's singing in the shower, a rock concert, a blues jam session, or a symphony concert, for an individual to musick is to enact a set of ideal relationships; it is to say, as Small reiterates throughout the book, this is who I am and this is who we are.

⁹ Small 1998, 75-76

It does not take long for Small to make his discomfort with the modern symphonic concert known. For the majority of the rest of the book, he examines in detail all of the participants of the concert (those present, as well as those, like the composer, who aren't), the venue, the music, the score, and the historical precedence for all of these aspects. He then demonstrates how the generated meaning of the relationships can be seen — from a certain point of view. For instance, he raises from the dead the Rotunda of the Ranelagh Pleasure Gardens.¹⁰

Small had found a Canaletto painting in London's National Gallery of the Rotunda, in which there is an orchestra playing while a crowd meanders around. The point that he makes is that, in a concert circa 1742 (the year of Ranelagh's opening), there is no differentiation between people socialising and listening to the music being played, as there is in a modern classical concert experience. In the Canaletto, the people are 'standing or walking about, talking in pairs and in groups, or just coming and going, in much the same way as people do in the foyer of a modern concert hall.'¹¹ The loss of the audience's societal ability in the modern concert hall is one that Small clearly laments in this section of the book. Just a little later on, he expounds further on the modern audience's restrictions within the performance proper in discussing the silence that is expected of them. To him, this is passivity and not the hallmark of an active audience. In concerts past, Small quotes and paraphrases historian James H. Johnson in describing how the audience's noises of approval or disapproval during Parisian performances of Mozart or Beethoven were commonplace and expected. Small then writes that the audience's noises 'do not suggest inattention, and certainly not disrespect, but betoken rather an audience that is active rather than passive in its attention, that considers, in fact, that its own audible responses are a legitimate element of the

¹⁰ Small 1998, 29

¹¹ Ibid, 29-30

performance.¹² After stating that the modern concert experience is very different and those who wish silence and ‘perfect communion with the composer through the performance can have it’, Small then sums up his view:

*‘Who we are, then, is spectators rather than participants, and our silence during the performance is a sign of this condition, that we have nothing to contribute but our attention to the spectacle that has been arranged for us. We might go further and say that we are spectators at a spectacle that is not ours, that our relationship with those who are responsible for the production of the spectacle - the composer, the orchestra, the conductor, and those who make the arrangements for tonight’s concert - is that of consumers to producers, and our only power is that of consumers in general, to buy or not to buy.’*¹³

His views of the performer’s and the conductor’s roles in the musicking are equally squalid. The performers, uniformed and lacking in individuality, are in a world set apart from the rest of the audience. They are furthermore disavowed the ability for personal musical contribution to the music of the concert as they are required to play the notes given them by the composer and the gestures authorised by the conductor.¹⁴ And the conductor; a narcissistic authoritarian whose authority comes from ‘outside the ensemble’ while he imposes his will on it, who keeps all of the glory of the applause for himself:

¹² Small 1998, 43-44

¹³ Ibid 1998, 44

¹⁴ Ibid 1998, 64-74

‘It is he who receives the audience’s homage and applause, he who bows on behalf of the orchestra, and if he makes an occasional gesture toward sharing the applause by getting the orchestra to stand, we know it is a courtesy only. The blank expressions on the faces of the musicians as they do so shows that they know where the applause is really directed.’¹⁵

All of these elements are constituent parts of a type of musicking whose primary meaning to Small is rooted in economic class; this is the ritual of the wealthy industrial middle classes saying, ‘*this is who we are*.’¹⁶

I’m not going to say Small is wrong because I believe there is much truth in what he says; but he’s not right either. In the first place, I don’t agree that silence, nor the sound of an audience’s approval/disapproval during a performance, is necessarily indicative of passivity. It could very well be the case that the audience wants ‘perfect communion’, as Small calls it, with the composer and they’re not wrong for doing so. Classical music by its very nature is complex and full of multiple levels of subtlety that could very easily be missed. I think of all of the applaudable moments in a piece like Beethoven’s Ninth and I imagine my consternation at not being able to hear the fast contrapuntal lines in the violins, or the words being sung by the soloists, or missing a bit of the organic structure that will later return in a big way because the Parisians won’t sit down and shut up.

The same goes for socialising during a performance. I would attend a concert of Beethoven’s music so that I could listen to Beethoven’s music. To do otherwise relegates the music to a secondary function and rather insults the composer’s, the performer’s, and the conductor’s efforts. It’s also rude and inconsiderate to the audience members who do wish to hear the music. It’s a completely different kind of musicking I suppose, but one that hardly

¹⁵ Small 1998, 80; or for a more detailed account of the conductor’s role, see 75-86

¹⁶ Ibid, 108

seems different from having a smooth jazz trio playing at a corporate function; the point isn't the music but the people around you. I'm not denigrating this form of musicking, but there is no way around the fact that the music isn't the reason for the gathering. One might rightly ask why you wouldn't just play a recording over speakers instead.

Furthermore, I think there is another way of viewing the implications of 'to buy or not to buy.' As mentioned above, money is unfortunately everything, and musicians unfortunately have to eat like everyone else. But within this difficult and flawed system, there is something important in the act of buying itself. For the majority of us, we earn money in exchange for hours of our lives doing a job that, perhaps, we'd rather not do. For us to then hand over what amounts to nonrefundable hours of our lives in exchange for a concert ticket, and to then spend hours more of our lives listening to this music, is no small thing. At the bare minimum, not taking into account all the costs that go alongside the music, the expense of having eighty-plus educated and practised musicians playing in tandem with one another is immense. With the exchange of money, dangerous though it may be, we enable professional musicians. Through this exchange, we demonstrate a priority we have as individuals and as a society, and, so far as I'm concerned, professional music patronage as a priority is a very positive indication.

In regards to Small's view of the performers and conductor, I don't think anyone would be too far off the mark in asking how he could possibly know what in the world any one of those folks are thinking? The conductor may genuinely be acknowledging the performer's effort. Not every conductor is an egomaniacal despot. The performers may be proud of their ties, coattails, and dresses as this is the garb that was worn by the performers who came before them. There is also the question of dressing with seriousness of intent in mind. There is no doubt that history and tradition play a real and tangible part in a symphonic concert but not all of it is malicious.

As to the roles these players play in the concert, a conductor, tyrannical or not, does serve a practical purpose. There are a lot of musicians on a concert stage and someone not only needs to keep the beat, but also needs to direct the style of the music. If left up to the wills of eighty-plus musicians, there is the real possibility of a gestural train wreck. This is not to say that it's not possible, but it certainly is more pragmatic to allow a seasoned conductor to take the helm and help shape what happens in a score. Moreover, the performer's role is not necessarily diminished in such a situation. Yes they have notes given them by the composer and gestures shaped by the conductor, but there is still room for a performer to bring those moments of sublime subtlety to a piece, especially where soloists and solo passages are concerned. But no, this isn't going to happen every time, for every player, in every piece. In such a case, I draw on my own experiences and the experiences relayed to me by numerous performer friends; there is something so beautiful and powerful about being one of a collective, playing a part without which the piece doesn't work, and being able to do this with people of a similar mind with similar goals. I don't deny that this is a bit kitsch, and it certainly doesn't happen in every performance, but in my experience it is a heavily meaningful event in which one can walk away a different human being. And, furthermore, as Memaw would say, 'it beats digging a ditch.'

Now, I cite all of the above examples and respond to each in this rather clunky manner for a couple of reasons. Firstly, all that is required to call Small's argument into question is having a different perspective or a different set of experiences. He does make allowances for this by maintaining that no one form of musicking is inherently better than another,¹⁷ but all the while contending that if your set of ideal relationships is that of a classical, symphonic concert, then you're a passive rich person happy within a segmented, hierarchical society, basking in the opulence of some gilded concert hall where you believe

¹⁷ Small 1998, 213

you belong in the first place. There is undeniably truth in this, but let's say that there is a rich person in the room; why is it inconceivable that that person is there for only the music just as I, a poor music student, am? Rich people are people too, and they have ears that like music just like the rest of us. And, just to say it, not all rich people are rich because of the blind, stupid luck of being born to rich parents; nor are they all rich by nefarious, parasitic means.

In any case, the point remains that *Musicking* returns us to an argument of opinions, floating boats, and oaks in gateways: 'If the judgments we make in a free marketplace are constitutive of our individuality, the value of that individuality is undermined if all judgments are equally valid.'¹⁸

The rabbit hole here goes deeper into questions of autonomy and reification (central to the difference between Johnson's and Small's arguments) that could easily swallow the rest of this essay; so I shall leave them for another time and place. In the end, *Musicking* reduces the role of the music itself to one more point in a web of relationships. Small simply doesn't find the music nor the performance of it to be enough, saying it's 'impoverished' compared to the meanings generated by the 'rich' web of relationships created.¹⁹ I'm not going to argue with him on this point, but will only say that the music and the efforts of the performers, conductor, and composer, are indeed more than enough to personally justify my attending a concert. As an audience member (as opposed to a composer, which carries a different perspective; to be discussed below) the relationships within the concert ritual and the meaning they might generate are of a secondary importance at best, and a distraction at worst.

This belief stems from an idea I've been consumed with in the last few years. There have been many concerts that I have attended (and to my shame, curated) where a great deal of effort and thought was clearly given to the concert space and breaking down historical

¹⁸ Johnson 2002, 26

¹⁹ Small 1998, 185

barriers between audience members and performers. In some of those cases, the concert space was very well thought out and resulted in newly generated relationships of what it means to be an audience member at a concert. But the music wasn't terribly good. It was obvious that the music had been of a secondary importance to the organisers. Interestingly, because of this, the effort put into the space seemed suddenly trite and insincere — it felt like nothing more than a gimmick. As a consequence of these experiences and to avoid disingenuousness, my friends and I decided that, if we were to put on a concert in which music was played, the music would be the focal point, for, indeed, that's why people would attend. If there were to be experimentation with the concert hall in an effort to minimise aesthetic space between participants, then it would be justified by the music, and the music alone. A perfect example of this is the opera *The Handmaid's Tale*, composed by my friend and cohort, Dr. Chris Garrard. In it, he had the audience sit on the stage with the action happening in the hall. By doing so, he opened up the dramatic possibilities provided by the balcony, the use of the doorways, and having action occur directly below the audience's point of view. It was highly effective in this regard, but it avoided gimmick and worked as a total artwork because the music confirmed the action, which confirmed the unconventional use of the room.

While I remain wary of any gimmick musical or otherwise, *Musicking* did give me pause. Small does make a number of excellent points which require serious consideration, particularly in the 'Prelude', the three 'Interludes', and the 'Postlude' of his book. I am aware that I believe anything other than the music in a performance is not as important and therefore not worthy of too much time or effort due to the risk of gimmick. I believe that if the music is good enough, it justifies the event on its own. But what Small demonstrably shows is that the meaning of musicking is not superficial or vain; there is real substance behind those meanings. Other people, particularly those who haven't been to many classical

concerts (or, in sooth, those who have read *Musicking*), may find these relationships more important, more meaningful, than I do and they are certainly not wrong to do so. If care and consideration are not given by the curators, these factors could perhaps do harm to the music itself; folks may be uncomfortable or trepidatious to the point that the music is missed and thus loses its ability to function effectively. The concert would ultimately be a failure and no participant would walk away any better than as they came.

My wish to eschew the superficial and leave the music as the sole focus was driven by the ideological belief that every person involved was better served in such a situation. Small's book made clear to me that my belief was simplistic and without nuance. I can hear Memaw now: 'Are you the only one that's going to be at that concert? Then why are we doing everything just your way?' So, in order for me to do my part in making the entry gate into classical music as wide and welcoming as possible, *Musicking* provides an example of a very fair compromise. I still maintain my belief that the music is of central importance and the basic reason why a concert happens at all. I do think attention should remain focused on the performance and therefore silence is necessary and appropriate. Yes, depending on the circumstances, the musicians will need some form of payment and a ticket price may be necessary to enable the concert in the first place. However, left to me, I will do everything in my budgeting power to keep the ticket price as low as numerically possible.

In these ways, I am prepared to continue on with the status quo of our classical music concert ritual. But what about aspects such as the performer's dress? I don't see any reason why performers must be uniformed in style or colour. It doesn't change the music. In a chamber music gig, is a stage essential? It will depend on lines of sight; but sonically, it could work to have the performers and audience on the same level. They could even be spaced more intimately with one another. The performers may not need to go from green room, to stage, to green room; they could be and remain amongst the audience. Cases could be left

visibly out. There may be clutter, but concerts are played by musicians, musicians have instruments, and instruments have cases. It's a demonstration of genuineness by doing away with curtains, smoke and mirrors, and the segmentation of roles.

These points of compromise still seem vain to me when compared to the act of music being played, and perhaps they do to other people. But Small's argument indicates that these simple reassessments can have the weight of meaning. We, as musicians, are already asking people to pay for a concert in which they must intellectually engage and not expect simple entertainment. The music is not changed, nor is the meaning inherent within it; only the mode of transmission is different. And while I believe we must remain ever vigilant to gimmick, there is no need for us to make that mode unnecessarily difficult. If we do so, the music is done an injustice. Of course, every concert will have different circumstances, but I believe we are behooved to concertedly identify those circumstances and find ways of being as open and welcoming as possible.

The Essential Collaboration, but are We Pandering or Preaching?

Up until now, I have discussed classical music's relationship with the wider world and the point at which that relationship meets. It is left now to ask how my decisions in relation to these wider points have affected the ways and means I have used to compose music. In order to give proper context, I must first define how I see my role as the composer to the other essential parts of any kind of music making: the audience and the performers. My view is simple and basic, but I have discovered that it has to be so as there will be much complexity built on top of this foundation.

In order for the ritual of Western classical music making (about which this essay is primarily concerned) to work, there must be someone who has written the music, someone who plays the music, and someone who listens to the music. These roles exist in a floating

equilateral triangle; there is no top, no bottom, and if any one of the sides ceases to exist, neither the ritual, nor the music, functions. So, I do not believe any role is more or less important than another role. Believing and compositionally operating in this way thus opens up the fundamental idea of collaboration. Collaboration between people is, to me, by far the most meaningful part of getting to be a musician; so much so that I will likely reject an idea if it doesn't centre on collaboration. Obviously there is a practical element at work here as well in that I can't play, say, twelve instruments at once. But the point that I am making is that, even if I could, I would not want to. At the end of the day, I can only ever offer a coded sheet of paper to this ritual; only empty signs — that is until a performer makes them come alive. Yet, I do not desire for a performer to simply make the signs sound. My intention is that there is enough musical space for them to shape the notes based on their years of training and experience, but more importantly, based on who they are as people and how they hear music.

How does a composer, or more to the point, how do I achieve this? After all, I'm still telling the performers which notes to play and in which order. I recognise that this is dangerously shaky ground and I do tread cautiously. There is the idea of incorporating improvisation, but this is tricky as many performers without a given wider stylistic rubric, such as Baroque or traditional folk music, would prefer to be given all of the notes (a point Small makes as well²⁰). It is a point which my performer friends assure me I should not worry too much over, but one that I still wish to address. I readily admit that I haven't yet figured out a mutually satisfying way forward and it is a topic that will continue to occupy a significant part of my thinking. However, in the mean time, I have attempted to give a performer as much freedom as I can. This varies depending on the piece and the context of the performance, but I try to leave room for ornamentation, for melodic shaping (which I leave entirely up to

²⁰ Though his point is more about who gets credit at the end of the night; if the composer left room for improvisation, then the performers had a part in the composition and therefore deserve that credit. Small 1998, 68

them), and I listen to every idea a performer has. I have also found simply communicating that they have this freedom often makes a tangible difference in the final product.

The audience also has a role that neither the performers nor myself can fulfill. I, as the composer, can never achieve a truly objective hearing of any piece I write. Their part in this ritual are to be those who engage from an objective distance, having no part in the creation of the music. But for the music to function, they must be present and attentive; why else would I have written music and why else would the performers play? We could be self-indulgent I suppose, but that does comparatively few any good. This is why Small's book is important and why we as musicians must keep the audience as listeners, and not money-givers, as a central thought in our minds.

All of this comes from a desire on my part to have a piece or a project cease to be about any one person, but to become *our* project out of a shared musical experience. This idea is not as hokey as it may sound. It has its roots in a lesson my composition teacher has maintained throughout the ten years I have studied with him. He taught all of us to understand that there comes a point in the composition process where a piece takes a life of its own and begins to make demands of the composer rather than the other way around. There have been a great many pieces I have composed in which I thought I knew what was going to happen, but then got into the process and found that what I had planned simply didn't work. The piece had other ideas and needs, and I could either follow it or continue trying to fit a square peg in a round hole. It still sounds hokey — but only until one takes the linguistic aspect of music into consideration. If music communicates using a culturally shared 'signifying system', then it must be built with that same system as well. Therefore, a composer both responds to and utilises that system to compose music, including when introducing something new; a sign to something else, a signal to a new meaning. In that sense, the music is more or less already 'ours.' Agreed, it's being filtered through my individual brain, full of

its own signposts, and being built with my own logical patterns, but that does not detract from my use of the shared system which everyone in my culture uses.

However, before discussing musical ideas such as narrative, tonality, melody, et cetera, there is a deeper question to be asked. Should a composer musically, compositionally consider the audience or the performers in the process of composition? Should these roles play a part in what notes are written? To attempt answering this question in relation to the compositions I've written, I would like to turn to a veritable punching bag for composers of the twenty-first century: Milton Babbitt's 1958 article *Who Cares if You Listen?*. Babbitt believed that new music (of 1958) had become a specialist's game. The uneducated 'lay' person could not understand this music, regardless of how well-meaning they may be, without a specialist's training; 'At best, the music would appear to be for, of, and by specialists.'²¹ The 'divergence' between new music and the general public he found analogous to the strides made in physics and maths which had surpassed the poor lay person generations before. Rather than allow this music to remain within the uneducated public's access, Babbitt suggests that the composer remove 'himself' from that sphere entirely so he be spared the inevitable persecution of a misunderstanding public. He says,

And so, I dare suggest that the composer would do himself and his music an immediate and eventual service by total, resolute, and voluntary withdrawal from this public world to one of private performance and electronic media, with its very real possibility of complete elimination of the public and social aspects of musical composition.²²

²¹ Babbitt 1958, 1. From Harvard University's isites.harvard.edu

²² Babbitt 1958, 4. From Harvard University's isites.harvard.edu

Babbitt's argument is quite reasonable. He's not suggesting that all composers take up this mantle, but advocating that those who wish to seek the ultimate goal of a 'genuinely original composition'²³ may find it necessary to keep this music for people who understand it. His position very much considers the audience and, with the goal of originality in mind, a 'lay' audience is at best a distraction and at worst a detriment to the function of the music. Thus, an audience of specialists who can appreciate the processes of this music and who are able to benefit from the function of the music are the best suited for that particular ritual. It is as Richard Taruskin asks when considering Babbitt's article, 'Why not allow that there could be a musical equivalent of an audience of math professors?'²⁴ I can't help but agree. As a young music student, my initial contacts with this advanced music were not positive. My inability to understand what was happening and what this music was for did not serve the composer's intentions nor the function of the music.

This is of course an extreme position to take. It is also a rather old argument, the article itself coming up on its sixtieth birthday. The reason I bring Babbitt's argument up is because one extreme inevitably begets another, and when defining my positions based on a balance, it is useful to sketch out the parameters of that balance. In this case, the opposite pole from Babbitt's stance is one that I find infinitely irritating. I am quite certain that one of the lower circles of Hell is reserved for composers who have ever written or uttered the words, "who cares if you listen?" I do! Now, I joke, but if one wants to get into pandering and gimmicks, then this is a great place to start. In the first instance, I would be willing to bet large sums of money that I don't have on the fact that most composers who have expressed that phrase have never actually read Babbitt's article. If one reads it through to completion, he's making a suggestion; making the point that composers who have the inclination to take

²³ Babbitt 1958, 6. From Harvard University's sites.harvard.edu

²⁴ Taruskin 2009, 87

music to its utmost reaches might find the world a bit of an easier place if they withdraw to an environment that fosters, rather than impedes, their efforts. Secondly, and more important, is the indication that a composer is far more concerned — perhaps only concerned — with the thoughts of an audience above concerns about the music. Implied in this stance is that a composer's only intention is an audience's approval, which testifies to a vain self-centredness in which the only measure of success is the adulation of a crowd and the money they'll bring. Where's the music? It's only a vehicle to that end. All that matters is that it gets the composer to the applause; whether it does anything for anyone else is merely an accident because the composer certainly didn't care.

Again, I reiterate that this is polar opposite to Babbitt's argument. It is an extreme view that a composer, who outwardly panders that phrase for all to hear, *could* take. I am not saying everyone who believes the phrase necessarily selfishly panders their music. Of course, I must add that caveat because I'm a hypocrite, but one who is at least aware of it; the sentiment of the phrase verily applies to me. I do care if they listen. But I differ in that I don't do so for my own sake, nor will I intentionally compose music to achieve that specific goal.

Both extremes involve a self-centredness and self-importance that makes me wary. I cannot judge the motivations of other individuals, but I can say that for myself, neither one offers a reason worthy of taking up either position. On the Babbitt pole, I have serious concerns about the practicalities of such motivations. Babbitt contends that the removed specialist composer, free of the detriments and distractions of the public, can, by continued research, add to the 'sum knowledge in the particular realm.' He then asks, 'what possibly can contribute more to our knowledge of music than a genuinely original composition?'²⁵ Is a truly original composition possible? Based on how music has thus far evolved, with each

²⁵Babbitt 1958, 6. From Harvard University's sites.harvard.edu

generation adding to the ‘sum knowledge’ by interweaving innovative ideas with music that has already been written, it seems that there will always be something of the past contained in any ‘new’ music. Thinking of music as cultural linguistics, how would we know if a piece is genuinely original? By our inability to understand any of it? Who decides the music is really original? The specialists?

If original music of this calibre were written, I’m sure the context of the music’s creation and its function would give a greater understanding to these questions. Nevertheless, the point I’m making is that, in an aesthetically fractured musical world, divining originality in music would not be straightforward if it’s possible at all. But for argument’s sake, let’s say that such music were possible in the early 21st century and had been written. What are we meant to do with it? Babbitt was prepared for this question and he cites Anton Webern, unappreciated in his own time, who in spite of this had his life’s work recorded by a ‘major recording company, primarily - I suspect - as a result of the enormous influence this music has had on the postwar, nonpopular, musical world.’²⁶ So, essentially, the world will catch up with the innovations of the original composer. Fair enough, but I think Anton is still considered specialist’s territory in 2016; most people don’t know Schoenberg, much less one of his students. This stance keeps innovations in the specialist’s world to only the specialists and thus upholds the divide between the world and classical music. It destroys any gateways and walls us off completely.

It’s a self-centred stance, one that demarcates a self-confident piety in the importance of the music over people. We have a saying in the South for when a person is bemoaning something that another person fully empathises with or understands: ‘you’re preaching to the choir!’ It’s an effort on our part to let the person talking know that they don’t have to describe the situation; we fully understand and get it. It seems to me that Babbitt is actually

²⁶ Babbitt 1958, 5. From Harvard University’s sites.harvard.edu

advocating for preaching *only* to the choir because they are the only ones who'll understand and appreciate what's being said. I simply don't understand the point of such a belief. I don't understand the point of art that purposefully pushes other people out and refuses to relate. That refusal betrays an arrogance and elitism that I don't believe is necessary to art and it's progressive evolution. More importantly, it threatens the existence of art; it threatens our ability to offer a desperately needed alternative to the entertainment-obsessed world. And it's a world we classicists share in too. In a democracy, the majority will make decisions that will affect the whole, and we as musicians must play our part in that process by not only sharing in the research we have undertaken, but also involving anyone who wishes to be a part in the research itself. In so doing, we might add to the 'sum knowledge' of the majority *of people* and enact a positive change in the process of democracy.

The other extreme is just as skewed, equally detrimental, and more self-centred. In such a belief, the music I might have written will always have been created using whatever means necessary to ensure my own glory and fame. It will have no other positive consequence to any other person (save by accident of course). It is the textbook definition of selling out. It is the complete removal of the wall and the option of any alternative. Musical evolution would indeed cease because all that is being composed speaks only for the here and now, using the means of the here and now. The 'hook' is paramount and so long as I can keep reeling them in, I can sustain my narcissism and greed, caring for nothing and no one else.

There is however a healthy balance between the two. What that looks like for each composer will largely differ based on that composer's choices through their engagement with the questions and quandaries of the world and all that is contained within it. For myself, the gateway metaphor works on every level: between the wider world, how we meet the wider world via the concert, and also in the *music itself*. I have no desire to preach to people, much

less the choir. Where would I possibly find the justification to do such a thing? An interesting bi-product of the higher educative process is learning how little any one of us actually knows. I have found that my own musical rabbit hole is bottomless. But I also found out that there are a lot of other, equally deep rabbit holes that I know categorically nothing about. And I don't just mean rabbit holes as a result of universities and formal institutions of learning. While an undergraduate and working as a part-time janitor, my supervisor was something of a renaissance man. His understanding of machinery, plumbing, and electricity was overwhelming to a young person like me. He utilised a pragmatic logic, full of caveats and 'if this, then that' situations, that allowed him to assess a scenario, fix it, and, throughout the process, keep everyone alive. It was nothing short of an artist at work. Who would I be to musically talk down to a man such as that, to Memaw, or any individual person whose lives and experiences I do not know? Where would I find just cause to do so? Because they're in the concert hall, my wheelhouse? They certainly have not been that stingy nor arrogant with their knowledge. I do them a disservice in writing music that they can't understand. But I equally do them a disservice by pandering and denying them the alternative that classical music offers. They may not be able to see that at first, wondering why this music sounds as it does. But through the music, and only through the music, I must give the people collaborating with me everything I have in content and form so that the end justifies the means. Giving my all in this way is achieved through striking pandering and preaching in twain; somewhere betwixt lies an answer where the music includes people and requires something of them. When that happens, the beauty of 'us' does away with the vanity and inanity of a collection of individuals.

How I attempt to create a musical gateway takes a number of forms, but to go into that most specific of musical discussion now is to get slightly ahead of myself. I must first describe where I find the subject matter and what mental and musical processes I consider

before writing a note. But to sum up my view on the balance between pandering or preaching to an audience (or performers), I would like to quote a letter written by a hero of mine, Ralph Vaughan Williams, which encapsulates what I believe in a far superior way than my verbal ability allows. In his later years, RVW wrote to Michael Kennedy:

‘If anything in my life, music included, has enabled anyone to have a fuller enjoyment of life then I feel I have not lived in vain . . . I hope people feel this, but so few of them take the trouble to say so . . . I wish I could be all you think and say I am - but it gives me an ideal to live for. You write of being true to oneself. That is a thing I always try for and hope I may sometimes achieve it . . . I wish I could start life all over again and really become, approximately at any rate, the sort of person you describe. Nevertheless I loved having your letter because the affection of a good man is worth having anyhow.’²⁷

Southernness, Genuineness

A bit of context before embarking on the stories below: I am originally from and currently live in Atlanta, Georgia in the US. Apart from the years I lived in England (which, by the time I had left, constituted just under a quarter of my life) and the first years of childhood, this city has been my home. So I was raised in the South by Southerners; for better or worse, this is my culture. From an early age, I understood that the South was a particular place that differed from much of the rest of the US. If Atlanta had an antithesis, I was told, it was New York City. It wasn’t a malicious belief, but definitely one that smacked of a benign envy. I remember the phrase ‘bless their hearts’ being used often in relation to Northerners (in the south, that phrase has more of a negative undertone; i.e., ‘the boy does try, but he’s an idiot, bless his heart.’) Apparently, all the money, education, sophistication, and all the things you could ever want were contained in the North and in NYC. This comparison brought home

²⁷ Kennedy 1980, 332

the point to my young mind that the South must not have any of those attributes. So, to be a Southerner is to, at best, have a slight inferiority complex, and at the worst, a chip on one's shoulder.

I recently visited New York City for the first time. I wasn't there long, only about ten hours or so, and I spent my time in a four-block radius on the Lower East Side. I found it an amazing and wonderfully vibrant place. I was there playing a concert with an ensemble and, after arriving and setting our gear up before the gig, we decided to go find something to eat. A block over from the concert venue, we found a Southern-themed barbecue restaurant. Being a Southerner, I had no desire to eat food I could get at home, and so opted for a piece of New York pizza (which, for the record, was as good as everyone says). Our violinist however, having spent some time in the South and liking the food, decided on said barbecue restaurant ordering collard greens and cornbread. Upon opening the lid of the take-away container, we found the collards to still be bright, vibrant green, still crunchy, and in a thin brown broth. They were cut incorrectly and didn't have nearly enough salt or vinegar. Collard greens, a leafy vegetable related to kale, are meant to be stewed for so long that they turn a blackish-green colour and should fall apart on your fork. And they aren't served in the broth. We all laughed at this Yankee (though admittedly healthier) attempt at cooking Southern food and went on to play the concert. Later, after the gig had finished, we went looking for a proper meal and in the process of going over these four blocks, I was surprised to count three more Southern-themed restaurants serving shrimp and grits, chicken and waffles, and more barbecue. All of it was over-priced, and I decided I would just eat Memaw's version of it back in Atlanta rather than pay for it here.

A few weeks after arriving back home, I attended a contemporary classical concert in the heart of downtown Atlanta. On the programme was a piece by a youngish composer (about my age) in which he drew inspiration from Appalachian folk music and Southern

religious music. The composer was, appropriate to my point, living in New York City. The piece was a bold statement to be sure, full of strains and fragments of distantly-related pentatonic scales, wailing violins, schizophrenic mandolins and banjos, all coalescing in a complex tableaux. The piece was a bit confused to my ears, having too many good ideas, and, while I could appreciate it from an intellectual point of view, I wasn't very taken with it.

The past decade or so has seen a ubiquitous use of aspects of Southern culture; the food, the music, and the folklore of the South can be found just about everywhere. I found it heartening to see so much of the culture that bred me acting as inspiration to other people from different cultures. This seemed a sort of redemption to me, considering that a Southerner knows, or at least thinks, that he is considered 'less-than' by those on the other side of the Mississippi River and above the Mason-Dixon Line. To observe other people taking the music or the food of the South and re-appropriating them to their own needs and creativity caused us all to have a joy in who we are. And long may it be so; in the end, the North may have had all the money and sophistication, but we in the South had manners, a sense of propriety, and, above all, hospitality. Anyone who has ever eaten a Southern meal in a Southern home knows that, regardless of how much you might have just stuffed yourself, a Southern host would not let you leave without insisting you take some more fried okra, an extra piece of pound cake, or some banana pudding ('It's good in the fridge') home with you in case you got hungry later on. In fact, my Grandfather had a rule in his house that he would make all visitors aware of in his own no-nonsense way; 'There's the fridge and there's the bathroom. Don't ask me for anything. This is your house and you help yourself.' In my adult life, I have too adopted this 'what's mine is yours' rule not only in my home, but also in the music I write and the projects I undertake.

However, the two stories I relate above caused a series of thoughts and feelings I had been wrestling with for a few years to coagulate. While I take heart in aspects of Southern

culture serving as inspiration and will do all I can to ensure that that part of our culture remains a priority to me, I realised that no one outside the South actually engages with Southerners proper in their re-appropriation. The music, food, and folklore of the South are cultural effects, not causes; the cause being Southerners. There is a discrepancy here that can be easily seen in modern storytelling on film and television. There is still much of the Comedia dell'arte in modern cinema and TV, and if one of the characters has a Southern accent, there are usually only two stock possibilities: either the character is the bumbling, archaic, religious zealot who provides comic relief in his ineptitude with the modern world which long ago surpassed him; or, if the character has a brain, he's the villain. I use the pronoun *he* deliberately as either character is almost invariably a male.

The annoying thing about stereotypes is that, in some cases, there is an element of truth in them. I make no bones about this fact as it relates to Southern stock characters. We do have some zealots and some villains; we are different than folks in other places. And the facts that there is a discrepancy between cultural causes and effects, and that Southerners are largely portrayed this way in modern culture, are not insulting or offensive; we're usually laughing just as hard at the comic relief's inability to understand the modern world because we can relate. I'm not making some grand call for people to start seeing us as we are, nuanced and complex like everyone else. I'm not advocating that the wider world understand that our relationship to the past is very different or that there is more than one Southern accent. No, as I say, I hope that what we have to offer can be taken and used in whatever way benefits another person's needs.

But this doesn't change the fact that Southerner's themselves aren't really being considered in another culture's re-appropriation of our culture. A Southerner would never cook food the way the NYC barbecue restaurant did. Our food calls for the full stick of butter, the whole cup of sugar, and yes, *that much* salt. The Yankee version was healthier no

doubt, but Southern food (also known as ‘soul food’) isn’t meant to sustain life as much as it is to remind you why you live at all. People eat healthy food as a responsible way of living, with the hope that doing so will prolong life. Southerners do this too - we certainly don’t eat our traditional food all of the time. But we ask why you’d want to live a long life and not live? This food, and, just as importantly, the ritual of eating it, reaffirms the good in life and why we want it to last longer in the first place (despite the paradox of being unhealthy). The Southern-inspired piece of music is much the same; there is Southernness in the music, but it’s not Southern. Much contemporary classical music on the whole seems to be understood by people like Memaw as the music of somewhere, and somebody, else. I can see the point; the stylistic languages in a lot of contemporary classical music are difficult to understand even for those of us who have studied them.

The revelations these two events brought on have further sharpened a desire on my part to compose music that observes my enculturation and also seeks to include Southerners in its construction. This desire has its roots in an essay written by Ralph Vaughan Williams titled ‘Should Music Be National?’ In it, he writes:

‘Every composer cannot expect to have a world-wide message, but he may reasonably expect to have a special message for his own people and many young composers make the mistake of imagining they can be universal without at first having been local. Is it not reasonable to suppose that those who share our life, our history, our customs, our climate, even our food, should have some secret to impart to us which the foreign composer, though he be perhaps more imaginative, more powerful, more technically equipped, is not able to give us? This is the secret of the national composer, the secret to which he only has the key, which no foreigner can share with him and which he alone is able to tell his fellow countrymen.’²⁸

²⁸ Vaughan Williams 1996, 9

Anachronistic language aside, I found a great deal of inspiration in this. No composer is bound to follow RVW's advice, as some composers are able to compose with a much wider appeal that goes beyond regionalism. To compose in this way must be a choice and, for my part, I found the idea teaming with possibilities whereas I'm sure some of my compositional brethren would find it stifling.

But right away, issues of balance quickly arise. Firstly, inherent in this idea is the danger of pandering. Writing Southern music with the specific intention of 'hooking' Southerners into a concert is deplorable and something I have no intention of allowing to happen. Rather, my goal is to draw on my life experiences as a Southerner which, musically realised, I hope will then relate to other Southerners. In that relation between us is an invitation to be a part of the music; to have a stake in it. It is a musical gateway. But there must exist a careful and concerted balance. Depending on the narrative context, the music may be very difficult to listen to. Just as in every culture, there is light and dark, and the South is no exception. 'Southern music', in this sense, must reflect that reality to some extent. It seems to me that I would do no good to romanticise a falsehood that does not exist using easy musical materials meant to entice the people in my community; now I'm not just a sell-out, I'm a regional sell-out.

Secondly, there could be the mistake of writing music *only* for Southerners, which I also don't wish to do. As mentioned above, I spent a quarter of my life in England and have thus gained, I hope, a different perspective on my own culture by adopting another. I think of England as Home every bit as much as I do Georgia. The lessons I learned in the UK both inside and outside the University walls have irrevocably changed my life for the better. Those experiences are an essential part of every piece I've written or will write. Fortunately for me, this innately causes a balance in my mind in which both sides, the Englishman and

the Georgian, mediate each other. The answer to the balance in this case then is writing music that has a Southern ‘accent’, but retains elements that invite anyone who cares to listen.

To write music of this kind, I have to undertake numerous musical challenges while keeping balance a priority. Choices of harmony (tonal/modal and atonal), rhythm, and sonic qualities (instrument choice and orchestration) are vitally important, but I believe variable to each piece. The key, however, to writing music of this kind is form. One of the great benefits of growing up in an ‘older’, more agrarian culture is that some of the more time-honoured traditions remain alive and a part of contemporary living. Essential to the South is the art of storytelling. With regularity, one can find oral storytelling happening around dinner tables and family gatherings. More often, this pastime occurs around campfires (camping being a pastime almost every Southerner I know partakes in). It may come as no surprise that the greatest storyteller I know is Memaw. The whole of my life, I have listened to her stories and paid attention to how she tells them. There is no doubt that much of what is contained in this essay, and in my portfolio, is a direct result of having listened to her for so long. Her stories are funny, historical, anthropological, warnings and lessons. The structure is often helter-skelter with the original point easily being lost in a turn to another caveat resulting in a new story. As a listener, you don’t really care that the point may have been muddled because there was so much meaning in the journey that it justifies the trip. That, and she’ll get to all of the points eventually.

It’s the discursive element that holds the story together. It’s the discourse that makes the story meaningful. The drama of each unfolding moment to the next brings in new tensions, new resolutions, and new meanings that go well beyond the here and now; well beyond the story itself. Sharp fragmentation of the kind our Modernist forebears used would only destroy what might have allowed the music function. I thus choose the discursive because it makes possible a music which has as its heart, a story.

I have mentioned a few dangers along the way in this section, and in the whole of this essay. But there are many, many more. Seeing all of the pitfalls and points of criticism can be paralysing to a composer; we have to engage with the wider world and make decisions through that engagement on what kind of music we want to write and how we want to write it. Nothing can be taken for granted. And then we must actually write the piece. To make a decision, no matter how well thought out, is to risk criticism, or worse, offense to one side or the other. I'm terrified of the latter; especially so of offending accidentally. There is no way round the fact so far as I can tell. Take the last point for instance; discursive music, as opposed to the fragmented and more abstract, of the kind I am describing is old hat; the provenance of the great composers of the past. But I genuinely believe that it is the best way to compose music that engages with my enculturation, with the people in my culture, and thus further afield. The lords of the avant-garde (such as it is), the contemporary purists, all will lambast me if they have anything to do with me at all. The issue is that they won't necessarily be wrong to do so, for they have arrived at their positions with as much thought and diligence (probably more so) as I have.

This is the nature of the many beasts a composer faces and the only way I have thus found to navigate the pragmatic crises of composition is to continue to engage while realising in all I do the decisions I have made; in other words to be genuine. No where is that more important than genuineness in the music I compose. I compose for the music itself, which is created to both serve and require something of the people who participate in it, including myself. I do not compose for the glory of originality, nor for money and fame. At the close, my mind will likely change, and the music with it. But I feel that so long as I continue to genuinely seek and realise a balance while avoiding puritanical extremes, I'll continue to serve music and the people who make it.

Chapter II: Analyses

In moving on to discuss the musical consequences of an engagement with the issues above, I thought it best to begin by providing examples of pieces that realise the musical gateway metaphor that I have been using throughout this essay. This metaphor implies that somewhere in the music, there is an element of *comprehensibility* and *intelligibility* that any participant in the music is able to grab a hold of. I use the word ‘intelligibility’ after Vaughan Williams and, as he says: ‘This surely is the prime motive of the act of artistic invention and to be intelligible he must clothe his inspiration in such forms as the circumstances of time, place, and subject dictate.’²⁹ Having this idea as a basis provides someone listening to or playing the music terra firma upon which increasing levels of musical complexity can be built. Without solid ground, any meaning arising from musical complexity, or any potential innovations for that matter, becomes muddled and unintelligible to everyone other than the composer. The practical outcome is that the composer’s efforts are rendered to futility. The aesthetic ramification is that there is no invitation to be a part of the music; that there is no gateway at all. This by no stretch of the imagination means that a composer should compose only for comprehensibility at the expense of what the music itself calls for. Again, there exists a balance that I attempt to find and walk with each piece I compose.

Intelligibility and comprehensibility, and a composer’s intent to achieve it in their music, can take a variety of forms. Complexity arises when bearing in mind how, and to what extent, a composer seeks to make the music intelligible. In each case (if a composer has chosen to compose in a way which is comprehensible to an audience of course), the complexities will take the form of a highly individualised style and to attempt to address them

²⁹ Vaughan Williams 1996, 3

all here would be clearly ill-advised. Therefore, I will focus instead on three pieces of music and their composers which have been directly influential and informative to the music I have written.

Arvo Pärt's *Fratres*

I would like to first turn to Arvo Pärt and his belief in structural comprehensibility. It think it best to start with his own words. In *Arvo Pärt in Conversation*, Pärt describes this belief to Enzo Restagno:

‘A logical structure can work as a foundation when it is based on simple, comprehensible concepts. If things become exaggeratedly complicated, as if [sic] often the case with much contemporary music, people can no longer follow the musical thoughts of the composer and they don’t even grasp the important innovations in the sound-world of the composition.

This sort of music is often difficult to listen to and to understand - and I am not talking here about harder or softer musical languages, but I refer simply to the functional technical structuring of the piece, whose construction should be perceivable. It doesn’t need to be all so complicated!’³⁰

Clearly contained within this, at least in part, is Pärt’s consideration of a musical invitation; people should be able to understand what is happening logically in the music. In so doing, innovations and aspects of originality that the composer has interwoven will then actually be perceivable, and therefore meaningful. Complexity, depending on how it is conveyed, could obscure the logic of the music and render the audience’s experience to confusion, causing them to perhaps miss any advances the composer wishes to communicate.

³⁰ Pärt in Restagno 2010, 59-60.

I think an excellent example of Pärt's perceivable structural logic is his composition *Fratres*. Initially written in 1977, this piece exists in numerous iterations, each with a different ensemble.³¹ Each version has slight variances in the music (such as a virtuosic solo part that does not exist in some iterations), but the structure and harmonic current remain the same throughout. For my money, the best iteration is for string orchestra, sans soloist, and percussion. Though the virtuosic solo part adds an entirely new dimension of meaning, I think it can shift the focus away from Pärt's extremely clear structuring and logic.



Fig. 1. First violin line in Arvo Pärt's *Fratres*; bars 3-5.

From the very outset, the listener is able to hear the internal logic of the piece. A simple clave line announces a drone in the lower voices. A melody in the higher voices is then heard (see fig.1). The first long note is followed by a faster one that moves down by step. This is followed by another faster note leaping up to one note above the first note. This note then falls back home to the starting note, again held longer. The starting note sounds again, but this time there are two falling notes, followed by a leap up to two notes above the original pitch, which lead back home. A third iteration of the melody ensues, only now there are three faster pitches which fall away, a leap to three above, which falls back home again. A tiny pause (in the score, a breath mark), and the melody begins again, slightly different in that the second note ascends rather than descends, but retaining the one away, one to lead home; two away, two to lead home, et cetera. Once this inverted second half has completed its cycle, there is a longer pause in the higher voices allowing us to hear again the drones and the

³¹ According to Paul Hillier, initially the 'question of scoring was left open.' Hillier 1997, 106

claves. A new melodic cell begins, but now the notes are different. So the entire piece goes, speaking in relentless six-bar cells, each one slightly different than the last, over a bed of an unchanging drone and a lonely clave line.

I write all of this out because this is exactly how I first heard the piece, and I imagine it is how many others heard it as well (my wife, who has no formal music training, included). All of my musical education seemed to be irrelevant in this world which I was sure I knew, but somehow didn't recognise. What makes this piece so special to me is that, through Pärt's deliberate efforts for comprehensibility, I felt that I wasn't just permitted into his world, I was invited to join in it. Inside, there was at once a warm embrace, but also tension. At once, there was a call to be still, but to get up and do something. In effect, I found this piece to be one where Memaw and my academic colleagues could all enter into and find meaning. Based on the impossible good standing Pärt has with both critics and the audience, I think this is probably true.

It takes a composer of considerable skill, and courage, to achieve all of this with such a simple structural foundation. The complexity that certainly exists in this piece comes from Pärt's Tintinnabuli technique³² and, as much as I would like to dive head-first into it, I think there is a more important point to make in regards to the comprehensibility of *Fratres*. Though the logic of this piece is perceivable due to its simplicity, it also runs the risk of becoming very boring, very quickly for the same reason. As this is the case, the six-bar cells are in danger of fracturing from one another with each pause. Not only does neither happen, the piece is charged with cyclical energy and a cohesiveness where each cell enacts a perpetual narrative of leaving, but always returning, home. Pärt does not accomplish this with some dark, medieval alchemy. The means are, again, incredibly simple. In terms of

³² For an introduction to the tintinnabuli technique, see Leopold Brauneiss in, Shenton (ed.) 2012, 49-75. For a discussion of how tintinnabuli works in *Fratres*, see Hillier 1997, 103-106

dynamics, the first half of the piece is effectively one big crescendo and the latter half a big decrescendo. Each one of the nine iterations of the six-bar cells is marked up or down a dynamic level from the one before it: the first is marked *pianissimo*, the second *piano*, and so on, until the fifth and sixth (both marked *forte*) when the decrescendo begins. In so doing, the dynamics provide an effective expressive tool, but they more importantly provide large-scale structural cohesion. In the twelve beats between each cell, it is as if there are invisible hairpins which we don't experience. The effect of this is akin to closing one's eyes for a moment only to open them and find that what we were looking at has subtly, but irrevocably, changed.

The ever-present A and E drones in the lower voices are also an obvious point of cohesion, but they are a bit too obvious. They also provide a great amount of dramatic tension and harmonic interest throughout the piece as the upper harmonies occasionally play against them. For example, at bars 27 - 32, where what begins as a D major-minor seventh chord with the fifth omitted (but ends as a straight D minor chord) is pitted against the A/E drones.

When considering the drones as well as the fact that the piece begins and ends with an A major chord (and dwells for sometime in between), one would be forgiven for thinking the tonal centre to be A. But Paul Hillier highlights another point of tension that exists here. The scale that exists 'on paper' is actually D harmonic minor.³³ In conjunction with the drones and the fact that this 'slightly irregular' scale naturally contains an augmented second (between B-flat and C-sharp), the harmonic texture is imbued with a certain richness and drama. Due to Pärt's work towards comprehensibility, we as the audience can fully indulge in this richness.

³³ Hillier 1997, 104

Again, Pärt's treatment of these components is simple and effective, but novel. When placed in tandem with one another, it makes for music that is at once familiar but still otherworldly. In this dichotomy I have found a wealth of inspiration. I will not belabour this point however, as much has been written on Pärt's ability to be of this world, but not. Nevertheless, his skill in utilising simple means which, through intentional comprehensibility, to say something entirely new is one that I wish to emulate. I have yet to find my own method of doing that of course, but that is the point of this degree.

Howard Skempton's *Lento*

In the way of music with perceivable and logical structures like Pärt's, there is much that I would cite, such as the simple, but overloaded canon (pun intended) in the first movement of Henryk Gorecki's *Symphony No. 3*. However, I would like to discuss one other simply-structured piece which has had a marked effect on me: Howard Skempton's *Lento*.³⁴ Skempton, through his association with Cornelius Cardew, Michael Parsons, and the foundation of the Scratch Orchestra³⁵, is, I think it's safe to say, an experimental composer. While in the company of greats like Cardew, Skempton has been in search of (and I'd say, found) a new tonal language. Within his search for a new tonality is also a priority in the communication of form. In his words as quoted in Michael Nyman's *Experimental Music*:

³⁴ Commissioned by the BBC and completed November 1990. The premiere was given by the BBC Symphony Orchestra and Mark Wigglesworth at the Barbican Centre on March 12 1991.

³⁵ Nyman 1999, 132

‘The composer is concerned with communicating the form, and concerned with sound as the most powerful means of communicating the form.

The form is the single idea motivating the piece; without this concentration of attention there is no unity.

And without economy there is no power; and without self-control there is nothing.’³⁶

As with the Pärt quote above, Skempton’s efforts towards intelligibility are clear. His use of the word ‘communication’ is, of course, key. In *Lento*, Skempton’s communication of form and self-control are extraordinarily realised. Firstly, there is no over-arching melody. If one exists at all, it is only due to the harmonic movement that is central to the construction of this piece. The harmony takes as its basis only the humble major and minor triad. There are no seventh-chords, no non-chord tones, only the basic building blocks of tonality itself. Yet, as Skempton is concerned with finding a new tonal language, his use of triads, or his marking the piece in G minor, should not be taken at face value. The tonal centre is indeed G minor in the sense that we begin and end with it, but by and large, the harmony moves non-functionally. There is no tonal hierarchy nor a narrative of a move from i to V back to i. Much in the same way Pärt treats *Fratres*, Skempton utilises materials that are familiar and accessible to us, but then subverts our expectations by craftily changing the rules. In so doing, our interpretation of the meaning is also altered.

³⁶ Nyman 1999, 167

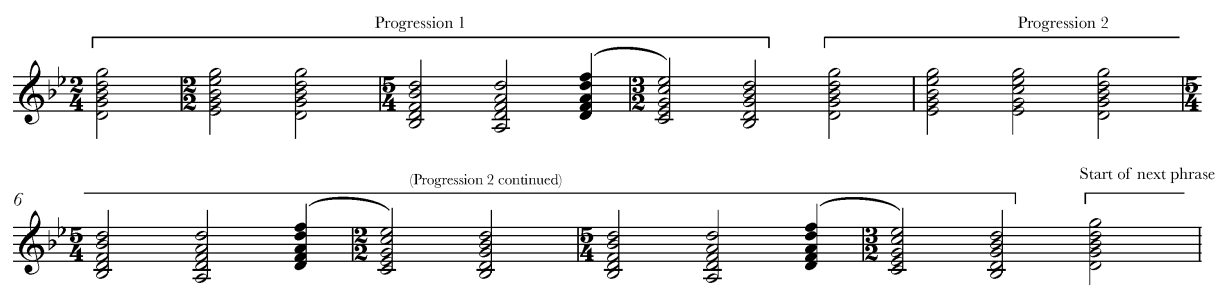


Fig. 2. Opening violin harmonies in Howard Skempton's *Lento*; bars 1-9.

As with *Fratres*, clarity by means of simplicity necessitates skilled handling of the material in order to achieve musical communicability. Skempton does this in a number of ways. In organising the form of the music, Skempton groups the chords into phrases made up of progressions. The first progression (g - E-flat - g - B-flat - d - d - c - g)³⁷ is followed by an answering progression that begins and ends similarly, but is altered in the middle (g - E-flat - c - g - B-flat - d - d - c - g - B-flat - d - d - c - g) (see fig.2). This is then repeated to make up the first phrase. This phrase is the focal point, or perhaps even the 'theme' of the piece. Skempton treats the phrase like a cornerstone and moves it, intact and harmonically unaltered, throughout the piece (it is repeated twice in the middle and is then used as the ending). After the initial statement of the theme (I admit that I'm tempted to use the word 'exposition') and between each reprise, he composes other similarly-constructed, but musically contrasting, phrases to complete the form. Given the tempo and the fact that most of the triads are rhythmically long, there is a danger that the listener could momentarily lose sight of Skempton's formal intentions. Yet he prevents this with his repetition of the theme. Doing this provides for us a point of reference which allows us to fully perceive the form.

³⁷ Lowercase letters indicate a minor chord and uppercase a major.

For the harmonic impetus, one may notice that the theme is largely based on mediant relationships.³⁸ In this type of harmonic movement, the changing of just one note in a triad results in a new chord. For example, the first chord of the piece is a g minor in second inversion being played by Violin's I and II (both divided into four parts). All the violins playing a D move up by a half-step to an E-flat while the other violins hold their G's or B-flats, all of which results in an E-flat major chord. This kind of harmonic movement is kaleidoscopic in its effect, with colours constantly shifting from warm to dark.



Fig. 3. Contrasting progression in violas and cellos; bars 18-23.

The contrasting material in between the theme statements however, is slightly different. These phrases are largely not based in mediant movement. For example, the progression which begins at bar 18 is: (g - a - f - B-flat - d - a - a - c - g - d - d - g) (see fig.3). Moreover, the E-flat has been raised to E-natural to allow for the A minor triad. This harmonic shift is subtle, but effective. Viscerally, the way the colours change feels differently than it does within the theme. This contributes, intuitively at least, into how we perceive the structure.

Perhaps the strongest tool at Skempton's disposal in *Lento* is his orchestration. With this he clearly demarcates the form of the piece, highlighting each phrase with different ensembles in the orchestra. As stated above, the theme is initially stated in the violins alone. At the repeat (in the middle of the phrase, bar 9), the lower strings join in, accompanied by a

³⁸ Perhaps it is because of the mediant relationships - a hallmark of much popular and rock music - inherent in this piece that I think of the structural phrases as containing chord progressions.

brilliantly effective bass line which gives weight and definition to the triads. At the first phrase of contrasting material (bar 18), the violins fall away, leaving the violas and cellos to play alone.³⁹ Another highly successful point comes at bar 78, where the trombones usher in another contrasting phrase which is eventually taken over by bassoons (bar 89). Up until this point, the piece had only involved strings alone (with one underlaying timpani roll) and the entrance of another texture has a particularly striking effect.

There is much more that should be said about this piece, but from the simple aspects outlined above, I think it is clear that Skempton's adherence to the communication of form results in an emotionally moving piece. I refer to emotions because, based upon the musicological points listed above, and Skempton's penchant for self-control, it may not be an obvious description. Indeed, Michael Nyman describes the 'new tonal language' in Skempton's *Waltz* of 1970 as 'nostalgically unsentimental.'⁴⁰ Though the two pieces are somewhat similar in their treatment of repeated tonal material, I would not describe *Lento* as either nostalgic or unsentimental. Though the repeated blocks of triads are neutral as they stand, Skempton communicates them in such a way that they are saturated with humanity. He is able to accomplish this precisely because of the balance he strikes between a simple form and his skill at communicating it. As with Pärt, this is a trait that I have sought to mimic in the music I have written, insofar as I can.

Martyn Harry's *Regenstimmen*

I intentionally saved this piece for last because of its importance to me as a person and as a musician. I was twenty-one years old, studying music at university, and holding down a part-time job as a janitor. I was on call at work (janitors often must wait around during functions

³⁹ At bar 34, the violins return with another phrase of contrasting material.

⁴⁰ Nyman 1999, 167-168. It should also be noted that Nyman was not being pejorative.

in case something goes wrong) and I was online researching various composers and universities in the UK, harbouring hopes of one day attending graduate school there. In the process, I found Durham University and its head of composition Martyn Harry. A link on his bio-page led me to a link of this piece. I listened to the sample and then paid £.99 pence (around \$1.83 if I remember correctly) for the whole track and listened to the 8 minute piece a number of times. It was the first piece of genuinely contemporary music (in that the composer was still alive) I'd heard that I not only understood, but *liked*. At that point in my musical studies, we had broached the second Viennese school and *Pierrot Lunaire* while simultaneously looking at George Crumb, Ned Rorem, and Joan Tower; the logic of that I still can't explain to this day. Nevertheless, I did have some context, limited though it may have been, of contemporary music and *Regenstimmen* was markedly different. The piece was complex and seemed to constantly shift in colours and feel. I certainly didn't understand most of what was musically happening. But I was able to understand what this composer was saying — there was a gateway into his music — and he was saying it in a way that I didn't expect.

The complexity of the piece I found challenging but my uncertainty was somehow assuring; this teacher would challenge me; he would introduce me to something new and a new way of thinking. So not terribly long after finding the piece and after gathering as much information on this composer that I could, I made the decision to request to transfer into the undergraduate music programme at Durham. I was accepted in and remained with Martyn Harry as my teacher (I daresay mentor) and friend for ten years through Durham and Oxford Universities.



Fig. 4. Opening bars to Martyn Harry's *Regenstimmen*; bars 1-12.

Harry says that *Regenstimmen* can loosely be translated as 'Rain Voices'⁴¹, but one hardly needs the translation to understand that. The piece was written in 1998-99 for solo harp and is effectively a study of that instrument. The score is full of enharmonic spellings due to the harp's pedalling ability. This allows two adjacent strings to play the same note, an aspect which Harry utilises throughout. The harp's pedagogy is thus essential to the construction of the piece. *Regenstimmen* begins in the highest register of the instrument with a pentatonicism on A with a spiced F-natural (see fig. 4). The rhythms are quirky (a hallmark of much of Harry's music), especially at first, but eventually they settle into a motion of an underlying semi-quaver pulse. There are moments of a quaver or semi-quaver rest and the rhythms retain their quiriness, but due to Harry's 'L.V.' marking ('let vibrate'), the strings continue to vibrate through the rhythms achieving the effect of a wash of rain rhythms that constantly fall. Slowly and methodically, the register of the piece falls to about the mid-range of the harp and, with the introduction of D-flats and B-flats, the colours begin to shift. All the while the rhythms continue to fall. At bar 136, the arrival of a palate-cleansing octatonic

⁴¹ Contained in the notes to the score.

glissando written in semi-quaver triplets marks a textural shift; the piece up until now had contained a mainly two-voice counterpoint, but now exists only as one harmonically shifting line in the upper voice. The counterpoint returns a few bars later, but decidedly different. The upper voice now contains an unflinching chordal pulse that feels like it is remaining in a simple time signature; the bass line however interjects and reveals to the listener that in fact we're now in a complex time signature (6/8 in this case). This almost has a jazzy feeling with the upper voice droning its pulse while the lower voice betrays much deeper undercurrents. This texture takes us to the end where, in one final splash, the harpist plucks a chord of a high G-sharp and octave F-sharps.

The effectiveness of this piece is due to Martyn Harry's judgment of timing. To use a phrase of his that all of his students hoped to hear in tutorials, 'it's well-heard.' In the first place, the piece is only about eight minutes long. The harp is somewhat limited in its ability to produce varying tone colours, especially for a polyphonic instrument. Though Harry does achieve piano-like tones as well as tones that sound shockingly like a classical guitar, the harp could quickly lull the audience to a disengagement if the piece lasted too long.

Second and more important is that the piece is episodic in its micro-construction. As with the Pärt and Skempton, *Regenstimmen's* greatest attributes could also be its undoing if not handled in a skilful way. The omni-present pulse and the assurance of continuous quirky rhythms in conjunction with the sonic qualities of the harp could create monotony and the audience could lose their way. Keeping all that in mind, where Harry's piece could greatly fly off the rails is his use of harmony which seems to shift far more than it actually does. This is where this piece greatly differs from the two pieces above; the harmony is less obviously stable. All these factors combined could result in a boring, unintelligible piece of music. However, Harry prevents this from happening by using the factors, as well as clever points of accented punctuation, to differentiate each small episode from the next. Just at the moment

where someone might begin to become distracted by the extra-musical, there comes a moment which keeps them in the piece. Examples of this can be seen in the aforementioned octatonic glissando or at bar 43 when octave F-naturals in the lower voice are marked both marcato and staccato out of seemingly no where. Fundamentally important here is that these moments are not simply loud or different sounds meant to jerk the audience's attention back; these moments have harmonic and structural consequences. They each mark something new and different, and thus highlight changes in the music. In the case of the marcato F-naturals, a few bars before saw the introduction of D-naturals, and D-flats and a subtle shift in harmonic colour. The octatonic glissando indicates an entirely new texture which will close out the piece.

By marshalling these elements, which left on their own could lose an audience, Harry generates meaning by audibly distinguishing each wave of quirky rhythms and shifting harmony. In so doing, he creates a gestural ebb and flow of waves of rain voices that are distinguishable from one to the next. But he invites the audience into the piece by providing solid ground in a perceivable pulse and effective timings. The success of this piece, and the reason it has meant so much to me, is down to a balance of thoughts and musical materials. To my young ears, the less stable harmony and odd rhythms didn't get in the way of my perception nor my enjoyment of the music. It was revelatory in that regard. I have been mindful of this balance in every piece I have composed and, as with the compositions above, sought to emulate. I admit that this is a special piece to me, but I think it's one that clearly demonstrates a composer who regards the people around him and makes an effort to invite them inside. This factor led to my wishing to study with this composer and is one of the many reasons I continue to do so.

Chapter III: Attempts of Realisation

A composition teacher and friend of mine at Oxford once relayed a story to me of a tutorial he'd had with his teacher. His teacher asked him if he was 'satisfied' with a piece of music that he had brought in for a lesson. He answered his teacher in the affirmative and was quickly met with a rebuke: 'you are never to be satisfied with a piece of your own', she said. 'Beethoven wrote the Ninth Symphony because he was dissatisfied with the other eight!' For this reason, I title this chapter 'Attempts.' I have rightfully been criticised in earlier attempts of this thesis for not having enough confidence in what I've composed and written. I have sought in this final version to redress this as much as I can, but at this point where I must discuss the music I've composed, I feel I'd be lying in saying otherwise. If I seek genuineness in the music, then surely it stands to reason that I should do so here as well. In the end, I would much rather be accused of a lack of self-confidence than a lack of self-critique. I don't have everything figured out and I can see, as objectively as possible, places where I can continue to improve. I feel that if ever there was a moment to speak frankly and truthfully, it is now. I return to Michael Spitzer's words and say that I believe this DPhil is indeed a beginning.

With that in mind, what follows in this final chapter are two examples of my attempts at addressing the impossible balance that exists on all levels of music making. Here, I will discuss the music itself, the context of how it was made, and the context of its presentation. In these examples I hope to demonstrate my adherence to the aesthetic decisions and the musical embodiment of those decisions that have I listed out in this thesis.

Floyd's Row Project and *Caedmon's Hymn*

This project was conceived from the outset as essentially collaborative in nature. The idea was to take three musicians from three different musical backgrounds and have them collaborate on a body of newly composed or arranged music. The musicians were Alistair Anderson playing English concertina and Northumbrian smallpipes; Andrew Arceci playing viola da gamba and double bass; and myself playing plucked strings. Each musician composed or arranged twenty minutes of music and we then all collaborated to realise the music from our various points of view. Ideas were shared, techniques were tried, notation styles were questioned, and jovial confusion, at times, bound us all. However, in traversing the challenges we faced, I believe it made for a more interesting and meaningful musical experience. In the end, our goals were met and we finished a studio-length (seventy minutes) album that displays a multitude of musical variety.

Before discussing this piece in relation to the Floyd's Row collaboration, I must first describe my debt to Pärt and Skempton as they relate to the initial composition process. In the first place, I sought to make the basic structure of the piece as comprehensible to the audience as I could. This process was not nearly as prescribed, nor as clever, as in the processes of either *Fratres* or *Lento*. Nevertheless, I endeavoured to start composing the piece with the basic formal idea of having two voices which are at first far apart slowly come together, and finally meet in the end.

The motivation for this came from my initial discovery of *Caedmon's Hymn* and then reading the Venerable Bede's description of how it came to be written. Bede, writing in Latin, gives a translation of the Anglo-Saxon Hymn, but then says this: 'This is the sense, but not the words in the order in which he sang them in his sleep; for verses, however well composed, cannot be literally translated out of one language into another, without losing

much of their beauty and dignity.⁴² This admonition of translation stuck in my head and, although I was sure I wanted to set the Hymn, I wasn't entirely positive of how to go about it. After searching through a number of English translations, I became convinced that Bede was right. Yet, if I set the Hymn in Anglo-Saxon, surely only a very few people would be able to understand the text. Realising I was coming dangerously close to inadvertently pleasing Babbitt's ghost, it finally occurred to me to use both Anglo-Saxon and English in two voices.

In planning this format, Skempton's use of ensembles within the ensemble to designate structure became very useful. For the Anglo-Saxon part, I decided to support the voice very sparsely at first, beginning only with harmonium and lyre. This was done to allow the ancient language to be heard as clearly as possible with the hope that, although the vast majority would not understand it, the audience could comprehend the role it was playing in the narrative of the piece. The English line would also utilise the harmonium, but then be joined by the concertina and, in particular, the double bass. My thought process was to prioritise the establishment of the roles of the individual vocal lines at the outset of the piece. Once those roles were clear, I would be able to start meshing the ensembles towards the focal point in the latter moments of the piece so as to heighten the dramatic tension.

I also took inspiration from Skempton in the harmonic plan of the piece. By using different tonal centres for each line, I hoped to further elucidate the structure and make clear to the audience the points of demarcation. The Anglo-Saxon line centres largely on A minor and is furthermore relatively more structurally bound to the main melody (which begins and ends the piece). The English line stays mainly in G major with a melody that is much more free and improvisatory in nature. The modal progression of A minor to G major is one that is extremely common in much folk and traditional music, with many tunes being harmonised

⁴² Bede in Williams, Ward (eds.) 2012, 136. The legend goes that Caedmon was given the Hymn by an angel in a dream.

with only these two chords (i - flattened-VII, or vi - V, depending on the mode). I hoped that using this progression would spark in the audience an aesthetic connection with the folk element inherent in our project. I was however intently stretching the connection a bit due to the Memaw/academic balance. At this point in the process, I had decided on a simple formal idea and had resolved on modal harmonies - nothing revolutionary and very much in danger of banality if not addressed. I needed to find a Skempton-esque or Pärtian method for subverting the audience's expectations with this familiar material. Therefore I chose to stretch out the simple progression, making each chord a tonal centre which would then also serve the form. Moreover, I also decided to distinguish the focal point of the piece (at bar 151) with an F major chord. Before this bar, the piece contains either F-sharps or avoids F's altogether due to the G major harmony. Though subtle, I intended for this to mirror *Lento's* subtly changing harmony at key structural points.

Perhaps the most difficult challenge in writing this piece was considering tempo. Due to the contemplative narrative and mood that I wished to convey, my instincts were telling me to keep the beat very slow and very steady. This however posed a considerable problem in relation to the recording process. We had decided to record the album as an ensemble, rather than utilising the Popular music (and easier) method of recording each individual part and then combining it all together in the studio. Trying to maintain so slow a tempo with the ensemble was simply not pragmatic. There was no doubt that we would rush the beat and hence topple the intended feeling of the music. Regardless of the ease that the more standard recording method offered, we all initially felt very strongly that we should not resort to that temptation. From my vantage point at that time, there was a lack of humanity in the palpable inauthenticity of pretending to perform music as an ensemble, but to have truthfully resorted to an assembly line pragmatism where the musical connections made in the recording were artificially fabricated.

In more than a few ways, this project was a lesson in the colossal difference between theory and reality, for the quandary persisted. It was in discussing the issue with our producer, Dan Jeffries (also a skilled composer of acoustic and electroacoustic music), when light finally broke through. I had to decide which aesthetic idea was more important, and I was convinced that a steady and slow tempo would better serve the piece. I realised that an unwavering beat in *Caedmon's Hymn* could potentially fulfill a structural purpose, while at the same time providing a point of dramatic tension. The A/E drones in *Fratres* suddenly came to mind. In Pärt's piece, our attention is focused away from the drones until the higher voices pause, or when there is a harmonic clash between the two registers. In much the same way, the tempo of this piece is too slow to be intuitively maintained in the minds of the audience (or the performers for that matter, as the recording process attested to). Therefore, despite its steadiness, the audience's focus would slip in and out of feeling where the beat was. And so, a decision was made. We decided to split the ensemble up in the recording sessions and provide a click-track to hold the piece together. Doing this supplied fertile ground for experimentation and subversion, the main proponent of which was the improvised lyre part where I attempted to both uphold the beat (such as at bars 25 to 46) and obfuscate it by playing off the beat or by concocting awkward melodic-rhythmic lines (such as at bars 122 - 127).

I should lastly point out that, though I took a great deal of inspiration from Pärt and Skempton, I differed in many ways. For the sake of the word-count, I will only point out the main difference. As I mentioned above, there was nothing clever or prescribed in much of my treatment of the musical materials. The harmonic movement, though broadly mapped out, was decided mainly by my own musical instincts. I admit that this subjectivity in some ways contradicts the rational and logical intent that exists in both *Fratres* and *Lento*. I certainly can't be accused of much logical self-control here, but I allowed myself this divergence for the

purpose of originality. It would mean that I did not simply copy or blindly mimic the composers who inspired me. Though I wish to learn as much as possible from these people and their techniques, I do want to achieve my own musical voice. This is advice that has been given to me many times, especially by my teacher, Martyn Harry, and Memaw. Thus, I chose to allow what I affectionately, and derogatorily, call, Schmaltz, to have its place amongst the other more rational facets of this piece.

Recording Caedmon's Hymn

The success of a piece like this is completely dependent upon finding precisely the right vocalists to sing the lines. I was aware that I wanted two contrasting vocal types and, ideally, a male and female voice. Fortunately, I was aware of two people whom I thought would be perfect for the intention of the music. In the first place, I approached classically trained baritone Josh Copeland. Having heard him sing both in concert and on recordings, I was certain that the trained and earthy quality of his voice would bring out the Anglo-Saxon line in a striking way. I furthermore knew that I could push him to the lower registers of his voice and that he would be able to maintain his musical ability. The vocalist I approached to sing the English line is well-known folk singer, accordionist, and clog dancer Hannah James. Again, being well aware of the quality of her ethereal, and yet grounded, voice through her multiple recordings, I knew that her involvement in the project would add a new dimension of musicianship to the music that we collaborated on.

Once the musicians were recruited, the score was sent out. One will notice the barrenness of the score. Obviously, as the music itself is sparse, there is a musical point underpinning this, but there are also pragmatic ones. Of the musicians playing with us, two of them were folk musicians who were unaccustomed to sight-reading or following a score in performance. Upon Anderson's advice in projects past, I decided not to over-load the score

with instructions or markings so as to allow for intelligibility and ease on the part of the musicians. The most important point related to the score is that, in a recording such as this, the score is only the very basic aspect of the music made and far from being the point of the process. It is essentially nothing more than a road map to allow people to find where they are at any given point. Even so, there are times when a score can actually debilitate the process.

Nevertheless, I suppose that biggest difference in the role a score plays in a recording as opposed to a concert is that the music is not being made in time. After the sessions are over, the producer takes the material and shapes it to one degree or another. In a concert, the music happens immediately and does not have this mediating buffer. As I stated above, I was very concerned with limiting what I saw as artificiality as much as possible. Yet, as we went along the road through the sessions and into the post-production phase, it became clear to me that my thinking was not wholly sound. There was a middle ground between the immediacy we wanted to capture and the expressive capabilities that a studio possessed that did not pass into the realm of inauthenticity. We still erred on the philosophy of ‘capturing a good performance’, but we opened ourselves to including things which could add to, and become part of, the music itself.

A prime example of this is the introduction to *Caedmon's Hymn*. Playing the harmonium part is musicologist and performer James Percival. The harmonium he brought to the sessions was well over a hundred years old and had in its age acquired a number of wonderful creaks and squeaks. I had been concerned with the way the Hymn should start and whether it needed some kind of introduction. While listening in the control room during the sessions, I heard these creaks and an idea formulated. I wondered if our producer Dan, also being an electroacoustic composer, could take these sounds and devise some kind of introduction. I approached him and he immediately agreed that this could work. The result is what is heard on the recording. This part is in every way an aspect of the piece itself, and a

keen listener will hear that it returns in the middle of the piece just before the second entrance of the Anglo-Saxon line (around bar 107). Elements such as this, as well as collaborative experiments in improvisation, were not included in any of the original scores,⁴³ yet they became a fully functioning part of the authentic music that was made.

In summing up the recording process, I should say that we did end up splitting the ensemble for the sessions. The harmonium, concertina, and double bass parts were recorded together to a click-track, and then the lyre, viola da gamba, and vocal lines were done separately afterwards. In the session with the three instruments an instance occurred where the score ended up causing more issues than benefits. I have learned that asking a performer to play a complex rhythmic pattern or a virtuosic line is often easier than asking them to count rests or beats in long held notes. The entire ensemble struggled with this and found the score difficult to follow even with the metronomic click-track. This was understandably difficult for Anderson who is accustomed to playing melodic lines, the slowest of which doesn't hold a candle to how slow he had to play in *Caedmon's Hymn*. In the end, I had follow the score and call out rehearsal marks into their headphones to keep the ensemble together.

In spite of this, the players took the piece and the recording process very seriously and played with sincerity. Even in a piece where every player is a cog in a much bigger machine, they all found ways of singing out their part. At the concertina's small melodic lines at bars 132-133 and 140-142, Anderson picked his concertina up off his knee (where he'd been resting it during the long notes) and phrased the little line. Due to the way the concertina is played, Anderson has developed a trademark way of phrasing music by literally moving his arms around. In this instance, he placed emphasis on the run-up to the C's by moving his

⁴³ In *Caedmon's Hymn*, there is an improvised viola da gamba line that was done by Andrew Arceci which I have not included in the score, firstly because it highlights the improvisatory nature of the project. Secondly, I am paranoid about, and therefore implicitly follow, the academic rules in relation to plagiarism. Though, as the composer, I approved and made suggestions to what Arceci did, I feel it a safer to not include something I was not entirely responsible for.

arms up and then back down as the line fell. This piece is not a terribly good example, but in every other piece on the record that we played with Alistair, the optics of his physical phrasing influenced how we then phrased our parts. In a way, then, he was acting as conducting and in doing so, there were many points on the record that were more stylistically cohesive because of it.

In terms of success and the many definitions that can take, whether Caedmon's Hymn achieves this or not, I cannot say. I certainly hope that it does, but that isn't for just myself to decide. What I can say on the other hand is that this piece as a formative and personal experience was certainly worth the effort. Finding simple and communicative ideas of form and language like the Pärt and Skempton pieces above, and then collaborating on that material with musicians whom I have the greatest respect for, was more than just an excellent learning tool: it was meaningful. It was a significant point in the Memaw/academic balancing act that is my compositional context. Asking questions as to where certain ideas fell within that balance and whether I was achieving them were ever-present in my mind and I hope that I have struck a meaningful place in that balance. In the end, Caedmon's Hymn probably falls more to the Memaw side of that polarity, but as this essay has made clear, I am always going to err on the side of caution.

Atlanta Performance of *Georgian's Songs*, and *Local Quarrels*

This project is one that is being planned as I write this chapter. Indeed it came about only a few weeks before writing this section of the thesis. The project will be the first time that any composition of mine has been played in my home city, much less in the US. As a result, I am careful not to say too much, as pragmatics remain abstract. However, despite the fact that both the composing of the piece and the planning of the event are still ongoing, the efforts that I am currently making towards this project, as with the Floyds Row recording, are a

direct result of all that is contained in this thesis and therefore I chose to include this material. At the point of writing this, I have secured a number of excellent musicians most of whom are lecturers at universities in the Metro-Atlanta area. The soprano who has agreed to sing is an internationally recognised performer of new music and has been responsible for the premieres of a number of works by accomplished composers in recent years.⁴⁴ I do not say any of this to brag, but to demonstrate a profound gratitude in my fortune and also to show that the seriousness of this project increased ten-fold when she agreed to perform.

Georgian's Songs, a song cycle, came about as a result of piece I wrote for the Floyds Row recording called *Local Quarrels*, which is a setting of a poem by former Georgia Poet Laureate David Bottoms.⁴⁵ After the completion of the recording project, I had sketched out a number of other settings of David's poetry that I felt could coalesce into a song cycle. In approaching David to ask for his permission to compose this cycle, I also asked him if he'd be interested in staging a concert in Atlanta in which he could read each poem followed by an ensemble playing the musical setting. He readily gave his permission, agreed to take part, and the project was set.

In terms of a collaboration between a poet and composer, I could not think of a better way to uphold the work of the poet. All too often, a composer will take another person's work and effectively destroy it in creating a new work of art. Collaboration in such a case clearly isn't even thought about. It seems to me an arrogant and inconsiderate way to treat another person's efforts. In a musical setting of a poem, the narrative flow, the metre (if there is one), alliteration, syllabic stresses can all be sacrificed in the name of a composer having a springboard into creativity. I am simply unwilling to ever make that sacrifice.

⁴⁴ I do not say her name in the event that practicalities prove to get in the way and she is unable to perform. Experience has taught me not to count on anything until the deed is done.

⁴⁵ This poem and the others in *Georgian's Songs* are used with his permission, as well as the permission of his publisher, Copper Canyon Press.

Having David read the poems allows the audience to hear genuinely (from the horse's mouth so to speak) the poet's intentions; in his voice, his intonation, his cadence, and his emphases. This factor alone justifies the concert in my mind. Moreover, I have avowedly tried to musically respect the poem and poet as much as I can; my job as the composer is to respond *to* the text, not recreate it.

With David's involvement and many of the musicians set, I have been looking for a venue in Atlanta proper. In being mindful of the musical gateway(s) as well as Christopher Small, I am purposefully avoiding concert halls. Instead, I have been looking at a number of craft breweries that have sprung up in Atlanta in the last few years. All of these breweries have rentable spaces for various functions and one in particular is housed in a reclaimed historic building in the middle of Downtown. It has a contemporarily-decorated large room which contains a short stage (about a foot and a half) that could easily accommodate the thirteen performers (including David). The room itself has been created with the intention of being welcoming and is less intimidating than a traditional concert space. The place is undoubtedly 'hip.' The shortness of the stage I think will allow for a good line of sight for the audience, but it will also incur less segmentation between the audience and performers. There is no green room and I will ask the performers to leave out their cases. There is no need to keep up appearances; no need for smoke and mirrors; no need for the performers and audience to exist in two separate worlds.

Of course, my intention here is clear; the focus will indeed be on the poetry and music, but it will be done in a space and in a manner that doesn't hold unnecessary historical baggage. Every effort will be made to provide a new and meaningful musical experience, and an experience that goes out of its way to include everyone. My consideration for the performers is no different in this regard. Of those confirmed to play, I have made them aware of my desire to be thought of as a 'dead' composer, despite the fact that I'll be playing

one of the plucked-string parts. In the same way of respecting the provenance of the poet, I wish to give the musicians as much freedom for expression as I can; the performance is their territory and if there is a question as to how to shape a passage or an individual phrase, I wish for them to do as they see fit. This of course means that I must relinquish some control, but that is a price I will happily pay if it means that this event is one that is thought of as ‘ours’ rather than mine or David’s. In the event that a performer is uncomfortable with such a decision, then I will of course ‘resurrect’ myself and help in whatever way needed. Yet, thus far, the confirmed musicians seem to be very happy with thinking of me as dead; a little too happy if I’m honest.

The music in *Georgian’s Songs* is meant to vary not only in style, but also in function from song to song. *Under the Vulture-Tree* is relatively abstract and meant to be more of a cerebral piece. The form and abrupt changes in harmony are meant to reflect the poem’s dichotomy of the ugliness and beauty of a vulture. *Local Quarrels* on the other hand is a bit more direct in its presentation and though it contains ‘ugliness’ within it, my intention is that it should provide more of a visceral function. Within the individual songs themselves, I have not made many efforts towards balance. Instead, my efforts have been spent in thinking of balancing the cycle as a whole which thus allows a bit more freedom in each song. The cycle does tend to fall more to a sombreness and even a melancholy, but that is reflective of David’s poems. Many of them aren’t ‘happy’ in that simplest of senses, and while a poem like *Slight Nod to Slick Pope* contains elements of humour which I have tried to represent, there is still an underlying darkness that imbues most of the texts and thus much of the music.

Balancing the cycle on every level of thought, musically representing the narratives of the poems, and creating an inviting event around the music have remained of primary importance. Much could happen that would require a change in plans, but I will continue to operate with these goals at heart. If practicalities prove to be too much and require a

fundamental shift in ethics, then I will simply wait. I have found that, if one wants to maintain moral stances as those that I have listed, one must acquire a necessary patience in order to actually realise those convictions. I could plough ahead and relegate my positions to a secondary importance, saying that ‘if they happen, great; but they can be put aside in order to see the gig happen.’ To do so places the event itself as the primary goal and not what happens in it. I cannot see how that better serves classical music or its practitioners. The only repercussion of such a stance will be that classical music’s offer of a genuine alternative will continue to fade away. I choose to maintain my beliefs in order to offer that alternative; an alternative that I am sure is needed.

A Stake in the Ground

I am a composer who writes tonal, determinate, and discursive music. I care what the audience and musicians think. But no matter how conservative or traditionally ‘classical’ all this may sound, every decision I have made has come as the result of an engagement with the thoughts of the worlds around me. It is a counter-reformation; a wish to redress the divide between classical music and the rest of the world by demonstrating that what we have to offer is more than powdered wigs and anachronism, or arrogance and elitism. What we offer as classical musicians is important and can, I believe, make a positive impact. But to do so requires that we stick to our beliefs and maintain one of the last genuine cultural alternatives the world has left. The lessons of the past, specifically the last hundred years, are indeed important. Those composers certainly offered a true alternative and there are lessons that we in contemporary music can take away from the examples they gave us. But they went too far and forgot, or actively pushed away, most people. My use of what might be considered ‘traditional’ is a critique on that specific part of our musical heritage. I wish to have Memaw, the academy, and anyone else who cares to join in to do so. I am not so naïve as to think that I will be able to make music that results in the fulfilment and happiness of all people; it is a truth that we all must accept. Nevertheless, the balance between Memaw and the academy is my effort, small as it is, to bridge that divide.

The required acts of balance are next to impossible to traverse, and I have much left to figure out; my mind will likely change and the resulting music with it. But I find this somewhat comforting in the end. It means that there are ideas yet to be tackled, new music left to write, and life left to be lived. The study that went into this degree has taught me far more than I anticipated and I could not be more grateful for the experience. The result of

that study is the belief that remaining genuinely committed to the engagement of ideas, and genuinely committed to enacting those ideas in music and deeds, is all the reason to keep going.

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