

COMPOSER INTERVIEW

Drawing together Strands of Influence: An Interview with Elliott Gyger

Stuart Greenbaum

Elliott Gyger joined the composition staff of the Faculty of Music, The University of Melbourne in February 2008. He is originally from Sydney, where he studied with Ross Edwards and Peter Sculthorpe, completing a BMus from the University of Sydney in 1990. Further study took him to Harvard University, where he worked with Bernard Rands and Mario Davidovsky. He completed his PhD at Harvard in 2002, subsequently joining the faculty as Assistant Professor of Music. He has described his music as essaying a synthesis of some of the bewildering diversity within Western art music of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century; grounded in the structural rigour of high modernism, it is concerned with the nexus between harmony and instrumental/vocal gesture. His instrumental works typically explore dramatic interactions between soloists and groups, whether in an orchestral or chamber context. His substantial vocal and choral output is similarly multi-layered, with many pieces setting texts in multiple languages. He is interviewed here by fellow-composer and colleague Stuart Greenbaum.



If you weren't a composer or musician of any sort, what would you be?

That's a hard question! I've thought of myself as a composer and musician for so long. It would have to be something that uses the whole range of skills and mental processes that I use as a composer; when I'm composing I feel that I use more of my brain than during anything else that I do. It would have to involve solving problems in multiple dimensions—and not purely for practical reasons, but for aesthetic reasons as well. Perhaps some niche in the computer world, I could imagine.

Did you have any particular epiphany that led to define yourself as a composer, or was it a series of events? How old were you?

I started writing in late primary school, but early in high school I encountered certain pieces or parts of pieces that intrigued me; I wanted to pull them apart and find out how they worked. I am thinking in particular of passages from two operas that I sang in as a boy soprano: the coronation scene of Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, and the end of Act 1 of Puccini's *Tosca*. Both of these use harmony in ways that were unfamiliar but utterly fascinating to me at the time. I remember hammering away obsessively at both on the piano.

What was the first piece you wrote that in retrospect you are still happy to have performed?

It would be a piece that I wrote in the course of my first year as an undergraduate at Sydney University: a choral piece called *Silence*. I think I found a personal way of dealing with harmony in that piece—quite instinctive and different in some ways to the manner in which I use pitch now, but I feel that my ears then were fundamentally the same as my ears are today, if that makes sense. The music also responds to the text in a way that I still find satisfying.

What was the text and why did you choose it?

A sonnet by the eighteenth-century English poet, Thomas Hood. I chose the text for the challenge of trying to find a musical image for the idea of silence. It's a poem that's not terribly well known but the first three or four lines of it are quoted at the end of Jane Campion's film *The Piano*. The poem deals with different kinds of silence and the way that the most powerful silence (for us) is not the absence of sound, but the absence of people—a personal rather than a physical silence.

You studied for your PhD at Harvard University and also worked in the composition department there. How do you regard your American experience in terms of the evolution of your music?

When I started at Harvard I was returning to study after a period of around five years of working as a freelance musician, so the doctorate was a very deliberate attempt to recontextualise what I had been doing professionally and compositionally. I feel that my time at Harvard greatly deepened my relationship to other music, both contemporary music and standard repertoire. As a result, my music became less obsessed with process, and more concerned with what I might call resonance, understood sonically and culturally. In my lessons with my main teacher at Harvard, Mario Davidovsky, we almost never talked about pitch or even about rhythm. He was always pushing me to think more about gesture, about timbre, and perhaps above all about memory.

In those conversations, what was meant by memory within the context of composition or a work?

Trying to deal consciously with a potential listener's experience of a piece as it unfolds: what is remembered from earlier in the piece, what might be expected to happen subsequently, and what devices a composer might employ in order to manipulate these perceptions.

And as a result of those conversations about the psychology of listening to music in time, did you find any particular aspects of your musical language or structure were altered?

I began to think about form in a less architectural way and maybe in a less linear way. One of Mario's favourite words is 'polyphony', but not used in the way that it is most commonly understood. His own music is fundamentally monophonic in the sense that there is mostly one thing happening at a time, but nonetheless he would hope that a listener's experience of his music would be 'polyphonic' in the sense that it always has several balls in the air: one is attentive not only to what is happening at the moment, but also to the consequences of previous events and their implications for later ones.

What does writing music as an Australian composer mean for you?

Before I went to America it meant very little to me, but fairly soon after arriving there it began to mean much more. I would characterise the Australian compositional outlook as being one that is conditioned by geography in two interacting ways. Firstly, we are too small a country to delude ourselves with the idea of complete self-sufficiency; and secondly, we are far enough away from the cultural capitals of the Western world to be able to treat their influence with a certain degree of detachment. Australian music still strikes me as refreshingly open-minded in certain ways. In the Australian context, my music probably sounds relatively European, but I would like to think that the way in which it draws together strands of influence reflects something of my point of origin.

You have a close affinity with the voice but also a penchant for unusual instruments or combinations of instruments. What new challenges lie ahead?

The big one has to be opera, as I grew up in an opera-loving household. In more general terms, I have written much for voices and quite a lot for instruments but haven't combined them as often as I would like. Similarly, I'd also love to tackle a piece for choir and orchestra; as a choral singer, I've had many opportunities to hear up-close other composers' responses to the challenges and opportunities of the medium, which have given me many ideas!

What approach would you take to an opera in terms of forces? What sort and number of voices and instruments would seem an appealing proposition?

I would probably feel I had maximum freedom with a large chamber opera: that is to say, an orchestra of up to 25, and a vocal complement allowing for the possibility either of large ensembles or a small chorus. I see opera as an inherently colourful medium, but one in which the solo line can have just as powerful an effect as an overwhelming tutti.

What sort of story or libretto would appeal to you and how long is a good length for a modern opera?

I think that the literary movement of magic realism is potentially an extremely fertile area for operatic exploration. I don't believe in realism in opera, but magic realism is full of the kind of heightened emotions and extravagantly surreal images that would give full rein to the musical dimension. Authors such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez or Salman Rushdie come to mind. As for length, I think that around two hours of music is plenty for an audience to digest at one sitting!

What are the ideal conditions under which you would like people to hear your music?

Primarily in live performance, in a context where the audience has a genuine interest in my piece along with the others on the program—as distinct from being made to put up with it in between the lollipops either side! One of my favourite non-compositional musical activities is devising concert programs, contexts in which pieces can genuinely talk to one another and not merely co-exist uncomfortably.

As a generalisation, do you have any preference for being first, last or in the middle of a program?

I've once or twice written sets of pieces designed to be heard within one concert program but not adjacent to one another. This is a way of really opening up a piece so that it cannot be perceived as an island.

Does style matter? When you start a new piece, is this even a consideration?

It's not a consideration when I start a piece. I used to worry about it a lot as an undergraduate student, but after a number of years, I looked back and discovered that a style had evolved without my noticing. Essentially, I believe that style is not a matter of technique but of using your ears in the most critical and imaginative way possible. The combinations of notes and sounds that pass muster will become the elements of your style.

A piece for me always starts as an idea that may be sonic, but is probably more often extra-musical. I will then spend weeks or even months living with this idea and mulling over its consequences before setting pencil to paper. I do feel it important to define quite closely the world that a piece inhabits early in the compositional process.

To what extent do you consider revisions for a piece that you have heard in live performance once the score is finished?

I'm not a big reviser, but sometimes I will try and address one or two particular problems, relatively soon after the piece is written and first performed. For the most part, if there's something that doesn't work, I'll regard that as part of the learning process for the next piece.

Upon reflection, at this point in time, what piece that you have written has given you the most satisfaction?

I've got at least two answers, maybe three, with the caveat that they really do apply only 'at this point in time': such perceptions can change and in six months or two years my answers might be quite different. One piece that I've found particularly satisfying because of the way that it allows the performers to show what they can do to the utmost is my children's choir piece, *Fire in the Heavens*. The thrill of hearing a world-class children's choir performing an intricately virtuosic piece is quite extraordinary.

In terms of instrumental writing and sonic imagination I am particularly fond of *A Garden for Orpheus*, which calls for an extremely unusual chamber music line-up (oboe d'amore, horn, guitar, harp, percussion, viola, cello, double bass). Although it was a difficult piece to write, upon its completion I would have happily written another piece for exactly the same combination, which by then had come to feel completely natural and infinitely flexible.

What is your view of ‘contemporary music’ as it currently exists?

In twenty-five words or less ... Maybe I can speak better to what I think it ought to be than what it actually is. Most composers are now over the push for innovation at all costs that dominated the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, but at the same time, there are many fascinating pathways that have been opened up but not yet fully explored. I think we are in a period of synthesis rather than experimentation, and I see it as part of my mission both as a composer and a teacher to make sense of some of these bewildering possibilities.

Is composition a political act? Does it have any place in ‘current affairs’?

Good question. I remember, like I guess many people after the September 11th attacks, wondering whether what I did was ultimately futile and meaningless. However, I came to the conclusion that in a world where destruction looms so large, a purely creative act like that of composition is an overwhelmingly positive contribution.

What music are you currently listening to?

I am particularly interested in much recent British music, which seems to me to combine colour, harmony and compelling dramatic narrative in very engaging ways. Some composers whose work I greatly enjoy for these reasons are Harrison Birtwistle, Oliver Knussen, George Benjamin and Julian Anderson. Among the twentieth-century greats, two figures of paramount importance for me are Stravinsky and Ligeti—who have little in common, perhaps, except that they are two of the greatest musical humorists of all time.

Stravinsky is often quoted as saying that music is ‘powerless to express anything’ other than itself. Contemporary music is not always famous for its humour; what is it about these two that make you think of comedy?

Their humour is genuinely musical as opposed to relying on extra-musical associations, and depends on two comedic universals: the absurd juxtaposition of incongruous phenomena and a split-second sense of timing. I’m not sure that my own music is particularly funny, by the way, but maybe one day I will find a way of making it so!

What recording would you most like to obtain that you don’t currently have in your collection?

At the top of the list I’d put two recordings that don’t actually exist (yet) but should! Some years ago the British conductor Oliver Knussen made a revelatory recording of several late Stravinsky pieces, featuring his final masterpiece, *Requiem Canticles*. There was supposed to be a second disc, including the major vocal-orchestral piece *Threni*, which never saw the light of day. Essentially the only available recordings of these pieces are still the ones made by Stravinsky himself in the late sixties, which for all their historical interest don’t actually make a convincing case for the music: among other problems, it’s often impossible to tell what pitches the vocal soloists are singing!

My second wish is for a new recording of Australian composer Nigel Butterley’s radiophonic work *In the Head the Fire*. While the Butterley discography in general is spotty at best, *In the Head the Fire* is a piece that by its very nature can only exist in recorded form: it’s a through-composed score for voices and instruments, employing the resources of the studio to create superimpositions and balances impossible in live performance. The original LP release is of

course long out of print—and the unavailability of the work in any form creates a major gap in our knowledge of Australian music from the 1960s.

What piece are you currently working on?

I'm making a setting of the last Ern Malley poem, *Petit Testament*, which I am scoring for two voices and piano, reflecting the fact that the poems were actually written by two poets ventriloquising as one. This poem is one that virtually confesses the poet's fraudulence, and I am having a lot of fun playing with this. I am also working on a percussion quartet, which I am designing as a piece of genuine chamber music for four independent voices, rather than a piece for a collection of instruments which happen to be played by four people.

What does the future hold?

I hope that it holds a process of continual growth and change for me as a composer. I'm not sure that I have ever yet written a piece that I have been completely happy with—and that persistent slight sense of dissatisfaction is what keeps things moving forward for me.