

## COMPOSER INTERVIEW

# Leaving the House of Modernism: An Interview with Martin Bresnick

*Matthew Bieniek*

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I first met Martin Bresnick in January 2001, when I was a student in the composition course at the National Music Camp, held at the Australian National University in Canberra in January 2001. I came across him again at the International Bartók Seminar and Festival held in Szombathely, Hungary, shortly before the conclusion of his period as inaugural recipient of the Charles Ives Living Award. During this Seminar, Bresnick delivered a series of lectures outlining the development of his musical language from the early heterophonic works, composed during his period of study with Gottfried von Einem and György Ligeti, to his work with John Chowning, and his recent cycle of works for various ensembles (from solo to orchestral) entitled *Opere Della Musica Povera*.

I took the opportunity to speak with Martin on two separate occasions about some of the observations he had made during his recent travels, and about the influences and convictions that inform his work. The following is an edited version of those interviews, both held in Szombathely, the first on 15 July and the second on 17 July, 2001.

**In one of your lectures this week you mentioned that your family wasn't well versed in concert music but rather that folk music was a focus. Was that something they brought with them when they emigrated from Belarus?**

Yes, and it even persisted in the USA. My father's family was blasted apart because my grandfather died of tuberculosis (which was a common killer for people at the beginning of the twentieth century), so my father, who was actually born in Pennsylvania and grew up in foster housing, was only partially raised by his mother. It was a complicated time, so that family didn't have too much influence over my life, musically or in any other way. However, the family on my mother's side was mostly intact, once all its members got over from Russia.

They liked to sing a lot and make music, and my aunt became a semi-professional pop and folk singer. In a way she was the first strong musical influence in my life. One other part of my mother's family, immigrants and children of immigrants, became quite attached to

music in other forms. One became a drummer in a jazz singer's band—he played with pop singer Vic Damone, a very interesting singer. He also played in a band with the black American singer Billy Eckstine. He was one of these people who was politically very progressive.

**You've been talking recently about a re-engagement with tonal and quasi-tonal resources. Was that something that had been in the background and has come to the fore just now?**

A lot of folk music from that part of eastern Europe has tonal implications, but is often modal, and that remains a very interesting thing for me, providing opportunities for me to sidestep functional harmony when I need to. Functional harmony is a kind of straitjacket and leads inevitably to a certain kind of thing—I think there's more room for moving about in modal music.

**Some of the rhetorical structures in tonal music pull harmony and function in certain directions, whereas with modal music there is greater freedom.**

I think that's right. Not only does the rhetoric pull the tonal music, but the tonal music pulls the rhetoric. Between the two of them you end up sounding something like Mozart, Bach or Brahms. Because the native melodic sources I heard were often those of folk and popular music, it's probably not surprising that my music is engaged with modal harmony.

**Let's talk about literature and how that interest has informed your music, because that's a major source of inspiration for you.**

I've written so many pieces that have a literary source. Some of them are quite descriptive or suggestive, and some of them are ingeniously knitted from sole to crown to the music, so that if somebody actually took the trouble to try and figure out where these two things are joined, they would probably be astonished to discover how close they really are. The musical and literary strategies are woven very closely. In works such as those of the *Opere della Musica Povera*, there are so many different threads, all of which are interesting to me. The threads are like chum in the water when you're fishing. I throw these little fishheads out there, and if people are really interested, they'll come and grab the bait and then they're hooked. I like a good piece of music as much as the next person, and I'm perfectly happy to write one that has no literary references at all, such as my *Piano Trio*.

**Aside from the literary interests that inform your music there is a strong social and political sense. Do you have any idea where that comes from?**

The eastern European (especially Russian-Jewish) immigrants who came to America worked in the needle trades, and were politically conscious when they arrived. When they got to the United States, they ended up working in various places, but also organised unions with their Italian co-workers. The normative culture of these people was basically socialist, and went as far as anarchism, and orthodox leftism at the extremes. In my family we used to joke that we had no right wing, so we always flew in a circle. That seemed normal, but when I got out of the family and neighbourhood environment, I was shocked to discover that there were actually Republicans—people who didn't think it was better if the workers had power. I have a social

and political sense, but I hope I'm not terribly tendentious. I've known people who are politically committed who make life miserable for those who don't agree with them.

**When you write works with very specific historical contexts, and which address particular social issues (such as *Wir Weben, Wir Weben*), is a composition itself just an outlet for your personal reaction to the events that inspire the piece, or do you have a broader aim, like William Blake, of trying to enlighten or edify?**

I have the idea that you want to make visible what might not otherwise have been seen. You want to give a voice to an idea that might not have had utterance before, or has been suppressed. This is particularly the case in the kind of music you and I compose, which tends to be an artform that's typically practised for and by people of relatively proficient means. For example, they're often not the poorest people who play the viola, or go to symphony concerts. I feel it's important to keep people aware of the aesthetics and artforms of ordinary working people.

**After the Bartók Seminar is finished here in Hungary, you will travel to Brisbane to participate in the Biennale. Could you speak about your planned involvement in that?**

I'll be on a critics' panel, which will contain some quite important people, such as Roger Covell, Elmer Schoenberger and Lisa Moore. The panel will consider the question 'Is there a New Criticism?' I have to give a presentation talking about new paradigms for criticism.

**A few days ago some of the students and Professors here in Szombathely discussed the necessity for critics to understand the music they review. If the music doesn't touch critics or the critics don't understand it enough to speak authoritatively, how can they critique the music effectively?**

In my abstract I began with a kind of joke that I think is good, that the relationship between critics and artists is like the relationship between dogs and trees.

**In a way you can see that both need each other—one for relief, the other for a source of nourishment.**

I agree, but I'm not going to pursue that because it's not so interesting. It's much more worthwhile to talk about other ways of thinking about criticism. My aim is to try to discover whether it's possible to find a vocabulary to talk about aesthetic objects like music, a vocabulary which is not hugely dependent on style, but more on some other criteria for assessment.

**In his *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky argues that a piece of art rings true if the artwork expresses the 'inner need' of the artist, and if it doesn't, there is then a platform for criticism. It doesn't matter what the style is, as long as there is something about the way the artwork is put together that may communicate the 'inner need' to an audience.**

That's one good way to see it, but there are others. I think part of the project of Modernism, in the good sense, was to try to find out what the criteria of art really are. The spiritual is one, and there are others, as well, to liberate one from the tyranny of art-as-fashion, but this is a very limited way of viewing it.

One of the other arguments I make is that critics often see themselves as being like triage surgeons—they confront dying individuals and make a judgment, “Well, this one has no hope. Let’s just move along here and get to the next.” To me that suggests that critics see themselves outside the network of the problem, whereas I think they are just as engaged and compromised by the situation of new music, and music in general, as are composers, performers and everybody else. Often they seem to be suggesting that they are at a great distance looking objectively in, but they have to be simultaneously within and without.

**As new music continues to move on from a ‘common practice’ where people were able to understand music implicitly, critics today have to try and interpret for audiences, or otherwise aid the process of understanding. In the past it was really what composers did differently within the conventions of common practice to which people responded. Without a common practice audiences may not have reference or entry points into pieces of music, and then critics become integral to the process of understanding.**

Absolutely. I think the good ones do actually help. There are some who are very serious about it and recognise that the field, in some ways, is in a kind of crisis (for example, the shrinkage of audiences). In that kind of environment we need critics much more, as educators almost as much as anything else, to help the environment stabilise itself and respond to the issues that arise. Unfortunately, they generally don’t like to do that because it doesn’t sell newspapers.

**It’s interesting to hear you speak of critics as educators, because two eminent critics in Sydney, Roger Covell and Peter McCallum, are both educators at the leading universities in that city.**

That’s not always the case in the States—practically never actually. I wonder how it is in other smaller cities such as Canberra, Adelaide and Brisbane? Lisa (Moore) was interviewed about the project she’s doing with the Rzewski<sup>1</sup> and my piece,<sup>2</sup> and I think she had to help the critic remember who Blake was, which wasn’t exactly inspiring, I have to say!

**I’ve always found Blake interesting as an outsider. He noticed things that the majority of people didn’t, and he felt it was his duty to communicate his sense of moral outrage, or his sense of justice or injustice, to other people.**

Yes. In some ways, he paid a terrible price for being so much outside the paradigm of his time. People had a hard time figuring out what he was trying to do, and he was so impatient, that I don’t think he explained very well. One of the reasons why the *Gates of Paradise* project interested and attracted me so much was the idea that Blake made little books that have very direct, communicative images which you have to stare at, because you don’t quite understand what they’re about. Then there is his simple, but very exalted kind of language—poetry in multimedia editions which he printed himself. I think the idea of using a computer is just another amplification of a process he initiated. I don’t know if it would work so well with others, but with him it seemed to work really well.

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<sup>1</sup> *De Profundis* for vocalising pianist.

<sup>2</sup> *For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise* for piano and computer-manipulated images from William Blake’s eponymous book.

The music in *The Gates of Paradise* raises interesting questions, especially in light of the lectures you have given this week, in which you've mapped out the progression of your music from a modal, heterophonic approach through to the use of symmetries and the finding of an harmonic way that engages with tonality in a *non-functional* sense, as in *Opere della Musica Povera*. *The Gates of Paradise* seems to be a development even further towards a situation where functional tonality is more explicit. How were you thinking of harmony in this piece? It did indeed cause consternation among some of the other students here. They recognised that the music was extremely effective, but they still wondered, 'What's he doing?'

Yes, I know, but composers have to listen with different ears from those with which audiences have to listen. They have to pose the question: "What can I use that's there that I don't yet know?" Now, I think composers prematurely decide that what's there is material they already know, so they can't use it any more, which is a mistake, but an understandable one. On the other hand, audiences are completely spellbound. I was writing a movie score, and I think composers have to remember that. Music has to serve those images in some special way. Otherwise, it's presumptuous—a little pretentious. If you actually went through the music, you would find in it all the ingenuities of other music, but without the pretentions.

What changed my mind about things like this was an article about Bartók. The author is constantly apologising for Bartók when he's not being avant-garde; for example '... the *Divertimento* is not as avant-garde as the *Miraculous Mandarin*,' or, 'the third piano concerto is not as progressive as the second piano concerto.' There's always a kind of grudging sense of apology that the great master didn't live up to the cutting edge he aspired to in other works. Probably the biggest example of this is Boulez, because he doesn't conduct the *Concerto for Orchestra*, the *Divertimento*, or the third piano concerto himself. He directs pieces like *Miraculous Mandarin* and *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*, those works he identifies as being part of the great historical march of music into the avant-garde. One day it hit me like a brick that this was not a good way to look at Bartók's music, because if you actually consider the other music he wrote, it's incredible. There's nothing in it that's not also in the other music, except that he's turned it to more popular use.

**As composers operate in society, they need to be almost chameleon-like. They need to be multifaceted with their ideas, and with their methods of articulating them. The particular ideas of the Avant-garde or Modernism aren't going to be appropriate for certain audiences. Bartók was working with different ideas and different audiences.**

Yes. For me, a composer is not somebody who wears a certain kind of hat, but somebody who writes *music*. This means that when the situation demands a particular style, the composer should compose in that way.

**Kandinsky's 'inner need' ...**

Yes, but there's also the *outer* need. What if the outer need tells you: 'We need five yards of music to suit a particular need,' and the composer is uncomfortable with that requirement. If somebody asks you to write a piece for flute, and you know the person, you write the piece

for flute for *that person*. People have all sorts of fanciful notions about ‘the purity of the artform.’ A good composer is somebody who composes good music under any circumstances.

**I’ve always thought of film music as the ultimate example of this. Film composers need to have a kind of musical satchel that they can reach into and grab whatever music is needed for each moment.**

That’s right. Also, you have to be able to do something a lot of composers have forgotten how to do, which is when you are given a task, an image to elaborate, you try to make it as vivid and as clear as possible. I’m sure what makes some composers so uncomfortable is that in *The Gates of Paradise*, when the moon falls out of the sky, the music falls, and when the ladder climbs up, the music climbs up. One could be very arty and say: ‘When the moon falls, the music won’t—that would be too unsophisticated.’ I think Bartók would certainly have resisted anything that separated the artform into a ‘higher’ form and a ‘lower’ popular form. I think he would have been appalled by such a separation.

**It seems to me that your music is engaged with your surroundings, rather than being more abstract.**

It’s engaged with a part of the musical environment in which I live, but not wholly, by any means. I don’t actually live in the New Music Ghetto—my music is not so abstract. What’s interesting about the reviews of *Opere della Musica Povera* is that it was reviewed favourably by Robert Carl, who writes for the *Fanfare*, and he’s basically a more standard-issue critic of the concert music scene. However, it was also reviewed in a positive and interested way by Kyle Gann, who writes for the *Village Voice*, which is definitely a grungey, downtown thing, whereas the reviewer from *San Francisco Chronicle* can only hear Schumann in it. What can you make of *that*? It means that they can all hear something in the music to which they are sympathetic. I think that in the USA, the old Modernist vanguard has retreated to its castle, and they’re in a very strong position to defend themselves. The Modernist composers haven’t faded from the scene, but like any in an entrenched position in a defensive posture, the world has flowed around them and on down the stream. We’re in different state to that of Europe right now because the impact of Minimalism was huge in the States, and it was minimal in Europe.

**The Modernist cart, so to speak, has been upset. Minimalism set the States on a different course, whereas, here in Europe, Boulez still seems to be pre-eminent. That’s something I’ve been surprised to find amongst the students here. Some might joke about him, but they feel his presence, nonetheless. During the course of your recent travels, have you sensed any commonalities between the ways in which young composers are thinking, or in the issues that they are dealing with at the moment?**

Well, I think you observed something that surprised both me and you, and that is the extent to which the younger European composers are of a mindset which most Americans and Australians seem to have moved past. It’s something of a shock. On the other hand, when living in Berlin, as I did for the last four months, I noticed that young audiences went out to hear much more experimental and non-high art music, and were thrilled, delighted and

enthusiastic. Ultimately we are going to have to escape this idea that a tiny audience can sit and listen to highly abstract music played by a few virtuoso musicians. It's puzzling to me that the younger European students can still be so connected to it.

**I have a sense that things are still as Konrad Boehmer says in his article 'Dwarfs after Giants?' He describes the shadow cast by figures such as Stockhausen and Boulez as being so dark and cold, that composers in the late '60s and '70s couldn't (or wouldn't) see a way out, a way forward. That shadow seems to be quite long and still seems hangs over some young composers today.**

Yes, longer than I would have thought, especially over these younger people. I don't quite understand it. I thought, actually, that when I taught in Poland in 1995, the young Polish composers were more open to some of the things I was talking about than some of the young Germans I met recently, as were some of the people here in Szombathely who are really pretty hardwired into this, and have never even *thought* in a different way about things. I think one of the reasons is that, in some of these places, government support for the arts remains high, and the elites who sustain that kind of music are still in power. Therefore young composers on the rise can still assume that, if they do really well, they'll get commissions from the radio orchestra, and a network of career support will be available. However, in many places around the world, government support has collapsed, and composers have moved in other directions.

It's entirely possible that art music as we know it will cease to exist. There will be other great music written—truly wonderful music—but it won't be like *Repons*, for example, with a 4X computer that costs two million dollars, and four technicians to run it in a hall where there are eighty-four very well-educated people. That conception of art might continue to exist, but on such a specialised level that it will be completely irrelevant.

I, personally, have left the house of Modernism, and I am now wandering, maybe in the desert. Of course it's possible that young students looking at and listening to my music will be baffled and disconcerted by both its amiability *and* its intellectuality and craft, and it could fail. It is possible, but I don't have the option anymore to return. I can't go home again.