

RESEARCH REPORT

Unravelling Contemporary Creative Processes

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In recent years, the most important outcomes of my research, so it seems to me, have been attempts to unravel aspects of the contemporary creative process, primarily through sketch-based studies. To date, my principal focus has been on late modernism, initially (and still) Karlheinz Stockhausen and Brian Ferneyhough, and more recently somewhat younger composers such as Richard Barrett, Chris Dench, and Robert HP Platz. This is mainly because all these composers have produced many works which I personally find fascinating, and I have been fortunate enough to have had access to their sketch materials, or sometimes failing that, at least to have been able to engage in extended dialogue with them. In the latter instance, e-mail often proves invaluable; matters which used to take weeks to resolve can now often be resolved in a matter of hours. The initiation of projects, too, is far easier and quicker than it used to be. Lately, in the wake of a Ligeti monograph and various contributions to *New Grove II*, I have been engaged in work involving György Kurtág, Toru Takemitsu and Mauricio Kagel, and I am planning articles on Benedict Mason and Walter Zimmermann.

Yet although, as far as I know, I have no masochistic traits, it seems to me that the piece of recent research that it might be most instructive to describe is one that ended (at least provisionally) in failure. Early in 1998 I was asked to contribute a chapter to a book on Brian Ferneyhough, to be published by IRCAM (the Parisian Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique et Musicale); the chapter was to be an analysis of Ferneyhough's recent String Trio (1996). I was initially reluctant to take this on, for three reasons. First, the deadline was relatively tight, "a few months," and Ferneyhough analyses tend to take a long time. Second, in recent years Ferneyhough has been making use of the Patchwork composing software developed at IRCAM, and I have only a casual knowledge of this software. Thirdly, Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf (a composer who had formerly studied with Ferneyhough) had recently published a good article on the trio, and it seemed to me that the simplest course was to translate his article.

However, both IRCAM and the composer insisted that they wanted something 'more detailed,' and Ferneyhough undertook to send his (mainly handwritten) sketches. This he duly did, and at first sight it seemed that they were not only reasonably voluminous, but also relatively familiar in character (that is, similar to the Ferneyhough sketches I had worked with previously), with the exception of the numerous computer printouts, which mainly involved rhythmic structures. On this basis, I agreed to write the chapter. Alas, when—after a slight delay—I started looking at the sketches, it gradually emerged that relatively few of them addressed the key factors involved in composing the String Trio. One accepts that sketches will often document what might have happened, as opposed to what actually did happen—that is part of their fascination—but in this case, I found that nearly all the handwritten sketches documented ideas that were partly or totally rejected. Why? Because the viable solutions went straight into the computer at IRCAM! Almost the only 'valid' handwritten sketches were ones drafted in the final stages of work on the Trio, where a despairing Ferneyhough, also faced by a pressing deadline, had to try to complete the piece without access to the Patchwork software, partly in Tokyo, partly in Royaumont. Some of these sketches were attempts at manual reconstruction of computer-generated materials.

For a while, I toyed with the idea of writing an article on the strategies underlying the work's composition process, rather than analysing it *per se*. But this too involved a measure of self-deception. On the one hand, I had handwritten sketches which were mainly invalid. On the other hand, I had computer printouts which were largely valid, but were outputs without inputs, and from which the inputs could not be readily inferred, except in the broadest terms. Eventually, the only honest course was to admit defeat, and to authorise IRCAM to go ahead without my chapter.

The reason I relate this sorry tale is that it raises some important musicological issues, not just for the future but for the present. The Patchwork program is, without doubt, an excellent and very flexible compositional tool, and I imagine that an increasing number of significant composers may find themselves drawn to it, or to similar programs. To the degree that this happens, it will make investigations and reconstructions of the creative process difficult or impossible, unless composers consciously retain all intermediate stages of their work (using something like the Flashback software), or have conscientiously scholarly assistants who will document each stage of their work at first hand. From a musicological point of view, there is something horribly ironic about the computer's 'Save' command; as often as not, its subtext is 'delete without trace.'