Discontinuous Dialogues: Chris Dench in Conversation with Bruce Petherick

Chris Dench

Over the last couple of years, Bruce Petherick and I have engaged in a conversation that, although intermittent, has had a stream-of-consciousness quality about it. Bruce's questioning streak makes me re-examine many of my own preconceptions, and prompts me to clarity. It was he, for instance, who recently led me to the insight that the roots of my music from 1968 onwards lay not only in the Skriabin/Takahashi axis I had hitherto acknowledged, but also, and just as much, in my early discovery of two utterly different musics: those of Robert Graettinger's orchestral works for Stan Kenton, *City of Glass* and *This Modern World*, and Jean-Claude Eloy, whose *Faisceaux-Diffractions* and *Kamakala* were among my most powerful musical experiences. My 'difficult' large ensemble pieces like *Afterimages* and *Énoncé* make perfect sense (...at least to me, who wrote them) when viewed as the collision of ragged, atonal, orchestral jazz with Eloy's uniquely static sound-world (I don't know if Eloy had heard Giacinto Scelsi, but about 1970 he changed from a composerly Boulezian to a voice *sui generis*, hugely underrated today).

What follows is a sample, taken in August 1998, of what happens when Bruce nudges me into self-questioning, laid out on the page to catch the discontinuous character of our dialogues.

BP: One of the most striking changes in the score for ik(s)land[s], compared to your older scores, is the reduced use of irrational rhythms. Is this a change in your compositional outlook—a shift in emphasis—or is it more concerned with performance issues?

CD: Back in '95, Gunther Schuller declined to conduct a piece of mine because it was 'unperformable.' His point seemed to be that my notational innovations could not be done as they literally appeared; he was treating notation as having nil elasticity. Now, not even a Darmstadt serialist would suggest that a completely mechanical rendition of rhythms as notated is desirable; the results would be inhuman. All notation assumes a degree of rubato, of performance praxis. Authenticity in performance involves taking into account the epoch-specific idiosyncracies of notational decoding as best we understand them, which is of course itself forever changing. Short of a time-machine, 'authenticity' will always be in the nature of a 'best guess,' and more commonly a kind of fashionable spin.

The term 'authenticity' here worries me. It always has the flavour of the existence of an *Urtext*, which I find problematic. What do *you* mean by authentic? The point you make regarding epoch-specificities is also interesting. Can there be Baroque, or nineteenth-century French, performances of your works; Vladimir Horowitz and Glenn Gould come to mind here.

The Arrow of Time, like it or not, is unidirectional—at least, in the macroworld—and I imagine musical events, like the writing of new pieces, as leaving a kind of shadow of themselves which falls into the future. *Authenticity* comprises, in a

compositional sense, the holograph manuscript(s) of the score and the accumulation of praxis (both gains and losses) that constellate around that holograph...and of course, the wider discourse in which it is embedded. I find that I view this life-line in rather the same light as I view the perceptual unfolding of a piece in concert, as a process of pattern-recognition, and each individual listener's temperament will incline them to a slightly different realisation in memory of the musical currents, by no means all of them mandated by the composer. Indeed, what composer wants to feel that the only thing that their music can do is the thing they programmed it to do? We don't want autistic children.

Are we talking about an authentic praxis of composition or authentic performance? Before a discourse can exist, there must be the conceptual framework of an idea where the statements occur. Does this not mean that all ideas of authenticity in performance must occur bidirectionally in time?

By which you mean heuristically, I presume; interpretation which is parametrised by examination of past (experienced) behaviours. There have been examples since the turn of the century of a composer envisioning and writing works for which no performing praxis exists; Iannis Xenakis' piano works *Herma* and *Evryali, Eonta, Synaphaï* and *Erikhthon* are examples of pieces where performers were initially at a total loss as to how to get around the pianistic requirements. Indeed, a debate arose between Peter Hill, who offered a 'performance version' of *Herma* with many of the poly-octave skips resolved into more 'pianistic' shapes—the suggestion being that the composer was being less than realistic in his demands—and Stephen Pruslin and Yuji Takahashi, both of whom asserted that they had played the work many times without needing to resort to such bowdlerisms.[1] The essential point, nonetheless, was that Pruslin and Takahashi (himself a composer of fiendishly difficult piano works) had seen a musical benefit in inventing new performance methodologies to realise the score, unlike Hill who had viewed such methodologies as pianistically inappropriate. Less charitably, one could argue that Hill regarded Xenakis as compositionally incompetent, and set out to 'correct his errors,' whereas Pruslin and Takahashi took the more insightful view that Xenakis, not being a fool, must have had something *new* in mind. *Evryali* is far harder than *Herma*, and requires a radically new approach to performance; the piece is unrealisable as written (too many notes), and the performer's task includes making decisions as to what elements are omissible without loss to the music's character. Even so, I have heard many performances of both works (Australian pianist Stephanie McCallum has recorded *Herma* on her *Notations* CD),[2] and such pianist-composers as Michael Finnissy, Takahashi, and Geoffrey Douglas Madge have written works that eclipse them for difficulty. But to answer your question, in my view there have been musics that are unprecedented in their originality, and in the sense that you suggest, unidirectional, which require an entirely new armoury of performance skills. I include Skriabin's, and Scelsi's late works, with those of Xenakis, Salavatore Sciarrino and Finnissy, in this category.

[1] See Peter Hill, 'Xenakis and the Performer,' *Tempo* 112 (Mar. 1975): 17–22, Yuji Takahashi, Letter to the Editor, *Tempo* 115 (Dec. 1975): 53–54 and Stephen Pruslin, Letter to the Editor, *Tempo* 115 (Dec. 1975): 54 .
[2] Stephanie McCallum, *Notations*, Tall Poppies, TP037.

The same can be said, of course, for earlier composers. I'm thinking especially of Berlioz and his writing for orchestra, which used techniques that were known to Berlioz and his friends, but were not used by many players outside Paris. We seem to have come full circle in regard to advances in instrumental techniques. In the pre-nineteenth century, technique was mainly composer driven, while during the nineteenth century, I think the situation was reversed.

Coming back to your earlier question, I would argue that a 'Baroque' performance of my music is not defined, as that performance tradition did not originate in the temporal shadow of my work; physics has a nice word for it: anything that falls outside that shadow is 'elsewhen.' Conversely, insofar as one can discuss style without coming to blows, the performance tradition in the shadow of which my music came into being provides an insight into authenticity for my work, and the grand accumulation of praxes, valid and invalid (themselves variables under fashion), provides a choice of approaches. My harpsichord piece **le Passacaglie** (unperformed as yet in Australia) suggests in both its title and material that a knowledge of the source-works, the *Cento Partite sopra Passacagli* of Frescobaldi, and the Passacaille from the C Major Suite of Louis Couperin,[3] will be of use in deciphering the musical logics of the work. But, I am contemplating muddying the waters here, by either doing, or causing to be done, a *transcription* of my original harpsichord work for solo piano, mimicking the Bach/Busoni temporal vector in the domain of what Stephen Hawking calls 'imaginary time,' from a point creatively orthogonal to the seventeenth to another similar point respective to the nineteenth century: a twentieth-century gloss on the seventeenth century treated in the manner of a nineteenth-century gloss on the eighteenth. In such a freakish construct I am actually toying with notions of temporal precedence in a way that actively maps long periods of unfolded past time into a much smaller (folded?) present duration...David Bohm has called these *explicate* and *implicate* approaches to time. My piccolo piece **dé/ployé**[4] refers to both these concepts in its title, incidentally.

It is quite important to me that these rather abstruse *recherch*ings with *temps perdu* echo much more immediate methodologies that I adopt in my compositional morphogeneses. One of the most difficult aspects of the notational system that I until recently adopted to express the internal time relations of my music was the notion of tilt[5]ed simultaneity. It has often been observed that the notational 'complexity' of my work renders exact metric decisions as to the placement of attacks (*onsets* is more accurate, as these may be events within an unbroken sound-envelope) within a segment not just impossible but even irrelevant. This means that, by analogy with relativity, sound events separated by the personae of players lack a common *simultaneous present*, they cannot be reconciled to any single clock. Individual players, locked in their own

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[3] This piece has two different structural orders suggested, one given by the notated score, the other by a series of numbers inserted into the score. This ambiguity may have been of the composer's doing, Couperin offering an alternative running-order, or a scribe may have disagreed with the composer as to the most successful structural route through the variations. It is even possible that the numbers indicate order of composition, or some arcane subtext. I've never seen an explanation offered.
[4] London: United Music Publishers, 1987.
[5] **Tilt**, for piano. London: United Music Publishers, 1985.

psychological space, with their own time-sense, make their musical lines conform to an *internal* imperative. My job as a composer is to provide the music with sufficient objective content—Brian Ferneyhough once referred to my music as 'a flow of non-objects,' and although his intention was kindly, I took heed of the implicit warning—to enable the players to both personalise their response to what is before them and yet obtain a sense of the commonalities across all the musical lines... this is intended to be best achieved by simply listening to each other. The outcome is, as I say, a kind of staggered present, a non-orthogonal musical wave-front.

Nonetheless, what Schuller was implying was that notation does have a kind of objectivity written in. It was curious that at the time no-one leapt to my defense on deconstructive grounds, that to attack a text on grounds of its not being some other text was hardly meaningful.

'...there is nothing outside the text,' to quote Derrida, although a deconstructive reading of this incident tells more about the gap between Schuller and your work, than about your work's relationship to contemporary performance practice.

I always offer a careful explanation of the notation in my prefaces, where I clearly underscore the purpose of my notation, and I quote: 'this music inhabits a world dominated by interpretative rubato.' I go on to explain that the music obviously cannot be performed literally and that it relies, like *Herma*, on the performer's imaginative realisation; it is the performer's role to identify other meanings in what is written and to use them to make sense of the music. Although it is true of any music that the performer's insight is a major factor in rendering performance *musical*, I am taking this investment a step further: I am requiring of the performer that they contribute to the music's *intelligibility*. My notation is largely an attempt to define emphases, so that notes are hierarchialised by duration, not in a literal ratio-like way (1:2:3:4) but in a relative-weight fashion, from least emphasis in a phrase, to most emphasis. This makes my rhythmic phraseology a kind of approximation to the subtleties of spoken language. However, my music has been attacked so incessantly and stupidly over the rhythmic notation, and the microtonality that accompanies it, that I have decided to change the notational surface. After all, these two features are relatively trivial elements of the final compositional skin that I generate over the bones and viscera of the systemic and expressive substructure.

Do you feel you are giving in here to the orthodoxy, or is it pragmatism? It is a question that I have asked myself about some of my own compositions, although in my case it is the role of improvisation that I worry about. Also, your works, irrational rhythm and all, have been played throughout the world.

In my thinking there is a spectrum from crudest to subtlest in all musical domains. For a music to be coherent its parameters must all sit at more or less the same point on their respective spectra. I am profoundly uneasy with music where one parameter is far more developed (i.e. further to the subtle on the spectrum) than the remainder; for instance Ben Johnston's microtonally ultra-finessed works, which use a far cruder time organisation. In order to retain equivalence between my parametric spectra, I pulled back both pitch-thought

and rhythmic formulation the same degree towards the crude, or, at least, away from the subtle. I don't think anyone would characterise even my newer music as 'simple.' I have also pulled back the other parameters comparably, but in practice this is barely discernible: pulling back dynamic, architectural, textural, global spectra has the paradoxical result of privileging local detail, making the music seem subtler, although there is a general increase in granularity…of which I am extremely aware while crafting the sounds. This occurs because players, having less density of information to somehow process, find that it is possible to perform more of what is there (rather than a practicable sample), making events more chiselled.

I love the global/crude–local/subtle dichotomy in your work. It is a fine example of collapsing binary opposition i.e. any definition of what is local is subsumed in the global, and yet the global can not exist without the local. Also, at any one temporal point, ones mind can, indeed must, exist simultaneously in both a 'global/crude' or 'local/subtle' focus. This is, of course, not true of most musicians or other composers.

Gregory Bateson refers to 'logical hierarchies;' the failure to comprehend such tiering is the commonest form of category error. Any musical object in my work has several tentacles of reference, of function, both in an immediate local fashion, and a whole plethora of more global ways. My work is always nested to a fairly deep degree (my clarinet solo **ruins within**, as I'm always pointing out, has fully fourteen levels of embeddedness), which means that one can construe the local/global by reference to the neighbouring levels of nesting as 'local' and more distant levels as 'global.' This is a startlingly fractal way of thinking about composition, I suddenly notice, in that it is privileging scale-independence. That this results in a kind of inverted logic where a massive structure may be local with reference to its fellows, but global relative to some micro-event buried deep within a sound-event linked to by a nexus of embeddeds, is an essential part of my perception of time, and time-organisation: the material is the same, whichever end of the telescope you look through. Only the degree of resolution, the granularity, is altered.

    In effect, in the heat of my compositional kitchen, I see time as being meta-stacked, like acceleration, a recursive (rate of change) of (rate of change) of (rate of change) of… To compose using a simple metre-line is for me treason against the deepest nature of this most mysterious of all perceptions, and my music exists as a perpetual reproach to such banality. That it attracts antagonism in our pulse-saturated environment is hardly surprising, but I remain puzzled by the massive complicity by musicians themselves in this temporal impoverishment. Charles Ives would have sympathised.

Although the text of the vocal part of ik(s)land[s] is from a poem by berni m janssen, the first words that the mezzo sings are from another poem. I have always argued that your music's boundaries are always slipping due to references to other works. Is this other poem a reference to something that you have written before, or to be written?

I think that it is less a retrospective leaching of material from existing works than a kind of knock-on; secondary ideas that emerge during one work, and are often not used integratedly, nag at me until I develop a new piece to give these ideas full expression.

Or rescore the musical idea for other ensembles? I am thinking of some of your works that originally were scored for one ensemble, and that you subsequently rewrote for another, not by making an arrangement or transcription, but by creating a new work from the same musical time-space.

This is a constant evolutionary subtext to my work, which is why the somewhat tangled creative chronology can be deceptive; the unfolding of an idea in my pieces, from tentative inception to maximal exploitation to obselescence, is a better indicator of the sequence of composition than the 'completion dates,' which have to do with deadlines and delayed revisions.

The opening of ik(s)land[s], although for three instruments, has up to five strands of musical information. In a lot of your compositions, you often maximise the multi-voice capabilities of your instruments, even those composed for single-line instruments.

In specifically solo works I seek to realise intrinsic potential for polyphony. But more often than not I have been toying with ideas for large orchestra yet am in fact required to write a sextet. I detest having to shelve concepts, and would ideally write exclusively for orchestra—which, considering my experience in that regard would seem pretty quixotic—for the rest of my life, but if a fascinating prospective sonority has occurred to me I'll try to realise it with whatever forces are at my disposal, and hope that when I get a chance to do another orchestral piece, I'll remember the fully fledged version of which the extant one is usually only a faint glimmer. The opening of ik(s)land[s] is a case in point; the music is much better suited to a string orchestra, but I tried to make it work for string duo. In consequence the players were *very* stretched. I'm trying to develop a sketching system whereby I can record such ideas in abbreviated form. Unfortunately, a lot of these ideas are only really notatable in full; abbreviations serve only to tantalise, not remind. So I might as well do them at the time of imagining, or abandon them to the past tense.

Endnote: I noticed that, in the recent CD reissue of the two Robert Graettinger works for Stan Kenton, *City of Glass* and *This Modern World*, the liner notes were written by Gunther Schuller. It is testimony to the rich complexity of musical thought that two such polarised musical visions as Schuller's and mine can be nourished by the one source.