

Framing legitimation: an interview with Brian Ferneyhough

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After commencing research on a provisional seminar topic, 'Legitimising expression: Brian Ferneyhough's Fourth String Quartet', and then finding that the materials lead into a variety of areas which each, in one way or another, skirted around the basic concerns with which I began, I decided to contact the composer and suggest an interview by correspondence, so as to clarify the limits of the domain to which I was trying to gain access. He accepted, and after the first few rounds of questions I found the potential scope of the exercise pointing to avenues which I had not even considered as areas of potential focus in my initial research. I realised that we had initiated some kind of language game. The signifiers which were flying about were not even assumed to be denotations of specifically concrete images of reality for the sake of convenience, but rather were accepted as the most convenient means of articulating certain processes of interpretative cognition. While the conceptual ground we were both talking around involved a specific group of figures (namely Schönberg, Adorno and his Frankfurt School colleagues, the major players in contemporary French and German social theory, and eventually Varèse, amongst others), the baggage which we independently brought to what I perceived to be the issue in question (i.e. legitimation) prevented the possibility of agreeing on a particular way of formulating that very same issue, let alone setting about interrogating it.

The interview takes as its point of departure Ferneyhough's Fourth String Quartet (1990), and derives from the experience of hearing this work introduced by the composer and subsequently performed at the Darmstadt summer school in 1992. I was fortunate to be present at a seminar in the following year during which he again spoke about the various issues with which he was engaging. The conversation was conducted by fax between 2 and 13 March, 1995, in six rounds of three questions each. Ferneyhough's responses usually arrived from San Diego within the space of two hours, dated one day prior to that on which I sent the questions.



You've spoken previously on some of the approaches that you've taken to the question of analogous relationships between music and language in your Fourth String Quartet.¹ To what extent does the choice to set a text from Jackson Mac Low's Words and Ends from Ez reflect the way that these questions are amplified in the work?

It was much more a matter of avoiding overly direct parallels than selecting texts through which such relationships would be directly audible. I spent a long time looking for textual materials which, while in some sense dealing with the issues I was interested in, would not impose their poetic structures or conventions of discourse on my compositional decision-making processes. What I had come up with some time before commencing work on the quartet was a group of poems by A.R. Ammons, an author with whose concerns I had felt a certain sympathy for a number of years - one of those poems, *Terrain*, in fact became the initial point of departure for the piece of the same name a couple of years later. Put broadly, Ammons posits a form of dual vision as being fundamental to our understanding of ourselves and our place in the world, in that a keen, almost transcendently microscopic observation of nature fuels intellectual speculation so intense that it paradoxically assumes almost physically tactile qualities fully equal to those characterising the natural states, events and processes to which he is bearing witness. Clearly, the resultant organic generation and interweaving of what, on the face of it, might be seen as mutually incompatible discursive modalities offers an attractive model for the groundings of a specifically musical aesthetic position. So it seemed to me, anyway. The insurmountable problem I confronted - the one which ultimately caused me to turn elsewhere - was related, not to Ammons' powerful articulation of complex strategies of perception and apprehension, but to the linguistic conventions encountered in the poetic stuff itself: put baldly, I was in a position neither to affirm nor adopt Ammons' employment of relatively standard grammar and sentence-structure. Since there is no direct parallel, in music, to a vehicle which, as with language, might be argued to precede and give form

to immanent meaning (the rhetorical structures of music seeking to persuade us, it seems to me, of the substance out of which they themselves arise and within which they are anchored), my goal of re-examining and evaluating the continuing validity of those very same gestural and processual rhetorical devices in terms of my own current compositional practice would be seriously compromised. As a result of those reflections, I looked around for a text which would fulfil two important pre-conditions: (1) it should, where possible, not impose its own structure or mode of generation on my own and (2) it would - ideally - itself reflect the sort of second-level distancing procedure which I envisaged employing in this quartet. The Mac Low texts admirably come up to scratch on both counts in that their "mesostic" technique of material manipulation represents a fully autonomous, generalisable mechanism, and they take as their starting point an already fully-formed (if notably protean) poetic substrate - Pound's *Cantos* - which is itself something of a super-palimpsest. Just as every work of music is, to some degree, the erasure and rewriting of any number of earlier compositions, so I imagine my quartet's different movements focussing on and re-articulating complementary aspects of the brittle speech-music metaphor which has for so long been the dominant and relatively unquestioned paradigm for the transmission of musical meaning. Just as the Mac Low text continuously foregrounds the uneasy provisionality of the substance/process marriage of convenience, each of the four movements of the Fourth Quartet seeks to draw out and highlight a particular aspect of what I believe to have become the extremely fragile nature of the *Sprachähnlichkeit*² doctrine of affective gesture so prevalent before the First World War and, in some diluted form, still frequently assumed today. It would, incidentally, probably be worth examining how Schönberg's own understanding of "musical prose" (as encountered in the article "Brahms the Progressive"³) which, far from emphasising the dissolution of regular periods and standardised harmonic formulae which usually sets the word "prose" off against "poetry," can be taken as propounding a quasi-objectifying concept of linguistic usage, i.e. that that which has been clearly said needs to be said only once. Interesting parallels to the Viennese Positivists and Wittgenstein there!

To a certain degree you've recomposed Mac Low's recomposition of Ezra Pound in the actual process of setting it. Is there a threshold beyond which such repeated processual renderings of given material fail to coherently express the presence of the process itself?

Probably, if we are talking of a single, monolithic process such as that encountered in the mesostic operations Mac Low employs. Once one has grasped the technique, there is little more to be said about it, thus allowing the local incongruities and wrenching changes of perspective on both the semantic and material planes of language unhindered rein. My own approach to the specific task of text-setting was dual: on the one hand, I allowed myself on the basis of materials my own generative processes put at my disposal, to re-insert local "colourings" of individual words, part-words or concatenations of both in such a way as to suggest new (and no doubt theoretically illicit) units of affective meaning; on the other, I observed particular consistencies of the text (such as the capitalisation of certain letters as a result of the mesostic "filtering") in the articulations via which the voice isolates and sonically realises the vowels or consonants thus defined. Thus I, also, pay obeisance to the irreducible material carnality of the linguistic vehicle!

The point I wanted to make here is that the further operations to which I subjected the already fine-ground grain of Mac Low's poem do not attempt to take the same or closely-related milling processes one step further, but rather to re-introduce a certain number of subversive counter-ploys to re-striate the discourse from another angle.

Mac Low has said that certain structural givens in his recomposition of Pound were "a 'projection' of Pound's punctuation and versification."⁴ Is there any correlation with the way in which you have reconsidered the structural-discursive element in Schönberg's Second String Quartet?

When one examines the way in which Schönberg rather consistently undermines and negates the strict metric and rhyming organisation of the underlying poems, thereby transfiguring them into something more than their original rather stiffly repressed symbolism permitted, one is inevitably struck by the degree to which expressive tensions are, in consequence, amplified in a sort of fluidly dialectical dance. There is probably something similar at work in my deliberate "re-enhancement" of the Mac Low materials, although I wouldn't personally put too much

emphasis on precise correspondences. The point about the Schönberg piece is that it is situated directly on the fault line separating important aspects of the "poetic" and the "prosaic," as well as poignantly addressing the (still relevant) issue of the (re-)constitution of the individual subject as social construct. So, whilst I have certainly taken a reconsideration of the Schönberg piece as a central given and continual stimulus for the writing of my Fourth Quartet, that reconsideration was not particularly based on the context-specific interaction of text and music, but rather on larger considerations of how, at the present juncture, music can aspire to be "persuasive" on both formal and figurally rhetorical planes - something that entailed, as it happened, a similar dually bipartite subdivision of four movements. There is no direct reference to Schönberg in my piece: at the same time it is clear that his Second Quartet was an important catalyst in articulating my own concerns, in that, in a similar manner to that in which Schönberg succeeded in giving voice to the explosive confrontation of "classical" norms of discourse and *Sprachähnlichkeit's* intensely monadic particularity, my own work directs its attention to what I conceive of as a similar intersection of processual, fundamentally linear modes of meaning and the prevalently non-linear import of local gestural invention.

In much turn of the century German music, adherence to the notion of Sprachähnlichkeit as a legitimate carrier of the formal discourse involved no inconsiderable amount of communicative intentionality (i.e. this is how it is). I would guess that your engagement with this principle would differ somewhat in that, perhaps through historical necessity, a degree of acquired scepticism in regard to the viability of inherited grammars has crept in to the broader context.

Not so much a scepticism of *grammars*, since scepticism on that front has been pretty rampant at least since the late '40s, and the person- or work-specific reconstruction of grammars has, until quite recently, been taken as a necessary presupposition for practically *any* compositional activity. What I was aiming at was more a reconsideration of the "communicative" aspect of the *Sprachähnlichkeit* doctrine as refracted through process. My scepticism was thus directed primarily at the entire issue of mimesis as communicational encoding of aesthetic experience. In Schönberg's day, unfolding form as such was not seen as a primary expressive quantum; even in the case of programme music, the relationship of narrative to expression was more often encapsulated in the particularities of local gesture/texture formations than formal dynamics. "Form," at that time, seems to me to have been conceived predominantly in historical terms, that is, in a dialogical relationship with generic structural precedent (the *Erste Kammer-symphonie* is a case in point; even late Webern is to be understood largely in these terms): if there was a "drama" in that encounter it was perceived in the first instance as a rain of gesturally affective "fallout." This changed, of course, when local invention came to dominate and define form, as in *Erwartung*, or some of the *Fünf Orchesterstücke*. My own concern was to see if the gradual unfolding of processual perspective might serve as at least an equal carrier of "expression" at a time when gesturally-derived rhetorical ploys have been seriously debilitated or discredited. Is, in other words, directed change "material" in the same sense that this or that specific event might be supposed to be?

One of the more overt "local colourings" in your piece is, just prior to its conclusion, the setting of the word "Paradiso" to a slightly modified B-A-C-H motive. Such momentary historically-referential instances are generally considered part of the strategic repertoire of postmodern forms of cultural criticism in art works, which, however, by and large pay little regard to their function in an unfolding continuum. Is the fact that, to a certain degree, you have consciously composed-in tensions between the localised affective (even iconic) moment and the ways in which the discourse proceeds enough to distinguish it from the postmodern tendency toward contextual game play?

Might not the onus be on the so-called postmodern sensibility to substantiate any case for the creatively dysfunctional nature of reference? The crucial distinction between certain streams of Modernist practice and the postmodern promiscuity of signifiers resides, not in the fact of iconic interplay as such, but the uses to which it is put. But to answer your question: yes, on the whole, I do think that it's enough, given that (as I said earlier) the processual frame within which these referential windows open is especially stringently defined and maintained in that final solo voice section in which "Paradiso" occurs. The fact that the voice is continually cross-cutting between three distinct

and individually characterised strata serves to underline the tensions which well up between the multiple processual strands and the threadbare whisps of appellative, residually "humanistic" expression which are entrapped on their interstitial hooks. Without wishing to carve up that and similar moments with crudely fashioned interpretational implements, it is clear that there is a certain implication of wistful nostalgia and, even (in the indication "*come una voca bianca*"), innocence floating about behind the sheet lightning-like interplay of residual part-personalities forming the surface. At the same time it is, I think, sufficiently apparent what these momentary twists of rhetorical focus *mean* against, or in spite of, the prevailing assumption of valid large-scale prioritising of structural, rather than momentarily affective, criteria of signification - something that clearly sets off a late Modernist aesthetic stance from "contextual game play."

A number of commentators have suggested that the line from Stefan George, "Ich fühle luft von anderem planeten,"⁵ as set by Schönberg in the final movement of his Second Quartet, actually embodies the experience of the composer, and encapsulates the moment in the evolution of the tonal system, at that particular historical juncture. Were you consciously trying to engage with any such historical transcendentalism in your piece?

In my view of art, one can't help *but* reflect or embody such moments of individual-within-the-general: that's what an artist *does*. I take your point, though, that the Second Quartet is largely *about* the issue of transcendence rather than (merely) authentically *expressing* it. Interestingly enough, it seems that the last two movements were composed in reverse order, so that the passage you mention is somewhat compromised by having been composed *before* the *schwebende Tonalität*⁶ yearnings of the third movement. Also, the chorale-like setting of that line strikes me as one of the most obviously tonally-referential passages in the entire finale! In a sense, the obviously autobiographical context of the "*O du lieber Augustin, alles ist hin!*"⁷ quotation in the scherzo is arguably at least as strikingly transcendent by virtue of its grossly inappropriate earthy pathos giving voice to the immanent collapse of an entirely culturally monolithic code of experience.

Certainly it was the case that I saw my own composition as being situated at the locus of reflection on historical transition and while, with Heraclitus, I would concur that one can't step in the same river twice, I do feel that there are significant parallels between now and then, in terms of the sort of catastrophic upheavals undermining previously dominant modes of perception. At the same time, one cannot realistically feel too optimistic about future developments regarding the increasingly repressive packaging of ourselves to ourselves as represented by communicational capital. Probably the most one can aspire to is keeping the painful issue of individual intention (and the re-invention of the individual) versus the increasingly prevalent desanguinated rituals of symbolic exchange alive by the punctual demonstration of its continuing productively problematic possibility. Every successful work - every piece that "gets away with it" as it were - is thus a local revivifying antidote to the prevailing tendency toward non-binding trivia. To this extent, Schönberg's vision of the future articulated in the Second Quartet, while certainly ambiguous, remains basically optimistic, while ours, of necessity, resembles more the attitude of inhabitants of Sherwood Forest, living by their wits . . . Possibly a not unhealthy attitude after a lengthy period of over-eating at the corporate New Music trough.

If we were to accept that the mass desensitisation project is unique to the culture industry in the late twentieth century, doesn't this make the high Modernist obsession with the reconstitution of the subject, as it has evolved from a particular domain of pre-war concerns, seem a little too anachronistic to effectively combat the implementation of consumer consciousness as we currently understand it?

It *does* seem depressingly unlikely, doesn't it, at least until we consider the meagre list of possible alternatives, including craven capitulation in the name of some suicidally masochistic submission fetish fuelled by misplaced bad conscience. Surely, though, no-one is suggesting the reinstallation of the sort of monolithic sense of *subject-in-possession-of-itself* ruling the pre-Freudian roost? Certainly my own sense of "subject" is more labile, fluid, transitory and provisional than that which I presume to have been current in pre-war Viennese artistic circles; the rule of instrumental reason has been well and truly broken - which is not to assert that *no* form of defensibly reasonable action is possible in principle. Much of the vocabulary in play in discussions such as this is, in any case, open to

multiple, often confusing interpretations; just for a moment assuming that an authentically socially grounded subject is no longer realisable - that doesn't *per se* rule out a more alienated form of subjectivity which nevertheless succeeds in avoiding the hangman's drop of sclerotically monadic encystment via recognising and enfolding the painful self-awareness of historically mediated systemic inconsistencies. Unfortunately, the hoary old "genius" mask is no longer available to shield the contemporary artist from the more problematic consequences of the moment, since not "natural," spontaneous action, but the deeply considered tactical deployment of remaining resources is called for. Duchamp's chess game continues. (I'm aware that some of what I just said is uncomfortably redolent of old-hat militaristic avant-garde rhetoric which, in the circumstances, is truly anachronistic - it's just sometimes I, too, like to let off steam!)

In the final analysis, too, it comes down to basic caveman gut feeling. If I have to succeed by failing, that's preferable, I reckon, to failing by succeeding.

In regard to the final movement of the Second Quartet, Adorno suggested that Schönberg "never surpassed the genius and freedom of this work."⁸ It seems that a constellation of external conditions forced the composer into the kind of situation where the only possible way out was the wilful dissolution of the prevailing, historically-received, but perhaps no longer tenable approach to the string quartet tradition. Were you summoning the possibility of a similar kind of individuated autonomy by intentionally placing your work on a conceptual precipice?

That's an extremely difficult question to answer for two reasons - firstly, because I wouldn't necessarily formulate the issue the way you have; secondly, because I simply don't have a definite answer. If I have understood you at all correctly, I must respond in the conditional affirmative, in the sense that my predication of tenuous parallels between "then" and "now" is clearly open to attack on many fronts, and I had to rely on the work somehow accreting an identity of its own in and through its immanent provisional transcension of these same irreconcilabilities. I personally have nothing against contradictions - it's the present-day eradication of the ground from which contradictory instances may arise which I find deeply troubling. But, as always, something *real* has to be at stake.

One thing that is particularly striking about the Second Quartet when, in the space between the third and fourth movements, it "comes out the other side," is that there is really no overwhelming sense of the residual presence of that which has gone before (both in terms of the three preceding movements, and in terms of the string quartet tradition). In contrast, my experience of listening to the final movement of your quartet seems to suggest links with that of Walter Benjamin's personal angel: propelled back-first into the future with eyes transfixed on the accruing debris of the past.

It's perhaps a little like T.S. Eliot's dictum about how, when you leave a familiar location in order to re-enter it, after a long journey, from the other side, it is really a different place. The absolute *otherness* of the finale of the Schönberg Second can never be reclaimed, as we can no longer locate our own internal reduplications of self in some ideal external, u-topian repository of the Spirit. At the same time, though, I certainly don't see myself as being obsessed with sonically venerating past glories, since I was never very close to the eighteenth and nineteenth century tradition which Schönberg claimed for his own. Unlike composers such as Lachenmann, my concern is not with interrogating the materials of bygone eras as "negative instantiations" of now-voided *Geist*, but rather with the pitting of momentary awareness of temporal dimensionality (as some sort of unpredictably amplifying and distorting echo chamber of our inner lives) against the obstinately (and perhaps embarrassingly) hortatory sigils of creative will.

Your relationship with the string quartet stretches back almost thirty years. Do you sense that there has been a certain continuity of creative focus in the works for the medium which preceded your Fourth Quartet that brought you to approach certain situations in the way that you did?

Not at the time, certainly. Looking back with the advantage of hindsight, though, it's obvious that each work crystallised a very specific moment in my own development. Remembering as best I may my state of mind at the time, the Sonatas for String Quartet [1967], in particular, appear, from today's perspective, as both more and less than I

consciously set out to accomplish. Less, because I envisaged my fundamental goal as a (now embarrassingly overweening) sublation of the limitations of the Weberian microform without sacrificing its concomitant expressive concentration; more, because the result came to almost perfectly reflect the pivotal moment when certain sorts of total serial technique lapsed, being opposed, expressively enhanced or discursively amplified by successive waves of meta-commentary - "meta," because the original series of (somewhat lengthier) movements on which the Sonatas was ultimately based was dismembered, cannibalised, and the fragments redistributed in a well and truly "deconstructivist," polydirectional discourse. As a result, the language of that piece still strikes me today as having captured, all unbeknowns, a larger truth in its attempts at responding to a particular set of extremely autobiographical creative pressures.

The Third Quartet [1987] was a similar case in point, in that an initial five-movement cumulative form was, in the event, compacted into two, violently contrasting movements. So great seemed the violence of the rupture that I was, for a long time, extremely hesitant to accept its rightness: only long after the event could I appreciate the fidelity of this choice to the starkly unresolved, but nevertheless intermeshed, dichotomies playing themselves out there. Although I often set out to compose linguistically homogeneous, sovereignly balanced statements, the lengthy work process usually manages to insert various types and magnitudes of ultimately unresolved (and probably unresolvable) agonistic conflict. This is something that I have come to accept as natural, even welcome, as a sign that things are as they should be, and that the project's initial, irreducible "idea" was sufficiently capacious to accommodate such an influx of destabilising imponderables.

Seen in that light, the Fourth Quartet's addition of voice is but one more - possibly more consciously formulated - step in the same direction, both in terms of the ultimately unresolvable issue of gesture versus process, and the clearly tension-filled collapse of discursive, linear narrative (first movement) and pre-compositional integrity (second movement).

The problem of voice and instruments inhabiting the same musical space seems to be an on-going one in your work, and one which you have set about negotiating in quite different ways from one piece to the next. Is this because, on a broad scale, the nature of the problem itself has been constantly redefined, or have you found that your personal perspective on the problem shifts once a tentative resolution has been posited?

Well, one hopes not to eternally cover precisely the same ground like a bore at a party! Your alternatives don't seem mutually exclusive, actually: what happens each time, is that I employ the voice/instrument problem to hone down other contemporaneously weighty issues, like that of developing a basically new array of compositional tools and formal concepts in the *Etudes Transcendentales* of [1982-85]. The participation of the voice enabled me to address more than one of the group of interrelated issues at once and to render more explicit particular hierarchical categories of both horizontal/successive and vertical/simultaneous interaction - that is, how and why things succeed each other, and what types of local cause/effect convention pertain. In that work, the vocal and instrumental layers were, more often than not, representative of distinct but complementary levels of operation, which both enriched the potential array of standpoints from which the material might be observed and allowed for a degree of transparency which I don't think could have been achieved otherwise. Of course, the Fourth Quartet interposes a further major issue, which is that of the interaction or interference between text source, text operations and ruling musical vectors.

Your field of concerns seems to have modified itself fairly regularly in terms of the nature of the actual texts which you have chosen to work with over the years. Does this in some way reflect a changing relationship to the crisis in language which so much contemporary theory has been engaging with?

Do you mean the language (and ideology) of the theorising itself or of the poetic utterance as such?

I'm trying to get some sense of how (if at all) theoretical issues have actually influenced the choice to work with one text, as it addresses specific problems in our understanding of language through working around these same problems, over another, as you have come to understand this over time. That is to say, were there external (theoretical) conditions which led you to work with medieval-alchemical German (amongst other things, of course) in Transit

(1972-75), *lyrical-imagist poetry in the Etudes Transcendentales*, *fractured renderings of Artaud in Time and Motion Study II* (1973-76), *Mac Low's reconstituted Pound in your Fourth Quartet*, and ultimately to compose your own texts for *On Stellar Magnitudes* (1994), and does the diversity of these texts and the ways that you have chosen to deal with them compositionally have some corollary in the constantly changing direction of concern, as regards language, in contemporary theory?

The original impulses guiding the choice of text in each case were pretty diverse. In *Transit* the texts were not selected with a view to any specific, innate poetic qualities, but because I found them to represent passably well certain modes of mentally processing cognition - that is to say, particular historically-conditioned models of how culturally-induced interpretation conditions inner and outer individual experience. In that sense, the texts had a generalised exemplificatory (rather than a specific poetic) function. The fact that they were taken from several language sources was a usefully stimulating secondary consideration, of course, but I couldn't assert today that the particularities of verbal usage themselves were at the forefront of my attention when composing. It was the cumulative picture that I found interesting. The Artaud fragments (taken from his very early poetry) were integrated as a direct result of parallel readings I had been undertaking of his Theatre of Cruelty texts - an approach which, at the time, I found particularly compelling in connection with my central concern, in the mid-'70s, of weaving webs of metaphoric import around each work as a means of ensuring both directness - almost rawness - of expression and limited forms of social embedding. The idea of the work context as a form of resonating body (in that case literal in nature due to the all-enfolding analog electronic environment) has remained with me, but I find it no longer necessary to make the connection extra-musically specific.

All of which is not to say that I have not concerned myself with the continuing saga of literary critique. My long-term interest in the extremer forms of contemporary literature was assured by the lengthy period I spent with experimental German literature during the decade 1970-80. That, and a later focus on similar French developments, particularly with reference to the *Tel Quel* and *Oulipo* groups, encouraged my readings in and around the group of writers most immediately involved in contemporary cultural critique, such as Deleuze and Lyotard, the former of whom was quite influential on my thinking during the early '80s. What I most appreciated, I think, was the exotic feel of those strange border zones mapped out by the tenuous and fluctuating confluence of philosophy, literary criticism and visual/verbal/sonic art forms.

Since moving to the United States I have become much more actively involved with the writing of poetic texts, and I imagine that some of the creative energies which previously were harnessed to text-music issues have found outlets there. It was, as I said earlier in connection with the Mac Low discussion, something of a problem to come up with modes of verbal expression that both bore directly on my own concerns with respect to subject matter and linguistically immanent characteristics. That was definitely the main reason for the choice of a number of my own poems in *On Stellar Magnitudes*, although, given the difficulties I encountered in bringing the two worlds into alignment, I doubt if I would ever attempt something similar again!

I would be hard put to formulate a definitive pronouncement on the degree of interrelatedness evinced by all these individual projects: the nearest I could come, I surmise, would be to underline how central concerns pertaining to the place assignable to the subjective consciousness in more or less objectivising, structured - "grammatical" - frames of reference. I'm sorry if that sounds inexcusably universal, but I am reasonably confident that an examination of any of my vocal works of the last twenty years will render the matter more concrete.

I'm interested in the way that you must have had to conceptualise across the gaps between perceptually distinct categories (musical object, processual transformation, linguistic means, etc.) in the actual act of composing your Fourth Quartet. Did you proceed with some kind of synaesthetically-legitimised reconciliation of formal elements?

That's generally what I have done in the past. This time I had a series of separate movements to work with, which permitted a lot more local focus of concern and a corresponding diminishment in the number of devices for affecting long-term slippages (the term is Robert Smithson's) between otherwise distinct articulatory areas. What one ends up with is, in some respects, a sort of ruin, in which things and states find themselves in relationships which, because of the nature of the torque forces applied to them, often appear to be "bindingly fortuitous." For a long time

I collected newspaper photos of catastrophically redesigned structures, like random piles of chairs, or the internal latticework of wooden rooves laid bare and contorted by the intervention of powerful natural forces. There is a form of jubilant pathos attached to such images which has much, I am convinced, to do with the way individual minds and constraining articulatory fields of information come to make sense of each other.

How did you choose to negotiate the obvious divide between the two movements with voice and the two without?

By means of very specific laterally differential correspondences. The two purely instrumental movements deal almost didactically with consequences arising from extremely linear, quasi-developmental formal procedures, pushed to exhaustion (first movement) and the fully-linear permutation of isolated figural entities (third movement). The relation is one of opposition. The two vocal movements, on the other hand, deal primarily with how the voice is or is not integrated into the instrumental materials; in particular, one soon understands that, whatever the temporally fractured and discontinuous nature of the formal unfolding in the second movement, the voice is almost completely dependent on the instruments for whatever it is assigned to perform. One might almost say that it is imprisoned in the dense latticework erected by the latter. The final movement, in contrast, is again diametrically opposed to this approach, in that the voice and the quartet are scarcely heard together at all, the overlap between the quartet's initial, highly automatised polyphony and the soprano's triple weave of gesturally highlighted and glossed structures being a matter of half a dozen measures. The implicit irony of four wildly flowing lines melding into a single, luminously pulsing block succeeded by a single performer attempting to hold together the debris of three (rhythmically) sometimes mutually incompatible lines of activity will, I hope, not be lost on the attentive listener.

The model is predicated on two distinct levels of binary opposition. What would be lost if you had set about resolving the dialectic?

Luckily, a work of art is not like a linear equation; it cannot be resolved without remainder, any more than the variables contained therein may be relied upon to remain in even approximately the same place vis-à-vis the perceiving consciousness's proper concerns. Adorno was surely correct in pointing out (I believe apropos Beethoven, but I may be wrong) that individual pieces actually change with the times, implying that there will always be "empty markers" dispersed through a work's fabric, sensitive to re-modulation by the onward flow of external (historical/cultural) circumstance. If that be indeed so, then it follows that any attempt to freeze the always-provisional balance of opposing forces would most likely end up as a cartoon-strip version of its original self - an auto-digest, as it were. That might, on reflection, be one reason why I am so concerned with states bordering on, even spilling over into, chaos since, starting from the identical point of departure as many times as may be, one is immediately cast upon a sea of turbulence where no two futures ever coincide. Nothing is resolved - except, perhaps, by starting over again.

The ensemble which you chose to work with in Terrain (1992) (apart, of course, from the solo violin) is identical to that employed in Varèse's Octandre. Was there any sense in which, after negotiating Schönberg, you were entering into dialogue with another side of early twentieth century Modernism?

Actually, for me, these two composers exist in some eternal equidistance from my own, as I hope, still developing concerns, in that I first encountered them at almost exactly the same moment. What Schönberg seems, mostly, to achieve by recourse to a wide perspective of historical trajectories and key instances, Varèse seems to arrive at via some super-radical leapfrog manoeuvre, after which the dialectic you spoke of earlier actually ceases to exist - at least as far as *Octandre* is concerned, if not so much for more problematic works like *Ameriques*. Of course there are any number of historical "relics" in *Octandre* - it's just that, somehow, they are embedded there, like bees in amber, and not actively intervening in the same way that elements of stylistic or formal inheritances are constantly in conflict in Schönberg - one thinks of the Wind Quintet, but also a number of the late works come to mind. As soon as I said that, though, I realised that many of the local context-determined structures in *Octandre* positively demand some active "traditional" input as far as their mutual formal interpretation is concerned: what's different, I think, is that the familiar signposting expected of such functional juxtapositions is constantly subverted by the absolute

originality and uniqueness of the things we are listening to. In that sense, Schönberg retained a much closer rapport with received rhetorical/structural hermeneutics.

What I find extremely powerful and oftentimes puzzling in Varèse is the extent to which continuing *newness* is neither a function of proximity with respect to date of composition, nor merely a quantitative appreciation of the extent of innovation or uniqueness with respect to sonic materials: rather, it strikes me as ultimately traceable to something *relational* - that is, to something immanent to the way things are finally *put together*, are *cumulative* (and thus intensely layered) in their ambiguity. To me, this is one of the clearest indications of the best products of the Modernist project, even though it is clearly not restricted to works of that period. It provides one, in any event, with a welcome shot of optimism not restricted to, or necessarily identical with, the obvious robustness of "heroic" diction everywhere in evidence in this particular work.

In some ways, of course, it is true that I frequently find myself torn between the twin poles of historical accretion of meaning and the unmediated positing of the latter in the form of autochthonous originality. That is where I find myself, and it is this drama that my own works most probably seek to play out.

For Modernist endeavour to continue, should the linguistic and historical vectors from which it is sprung be re-affirmed or re-assessed?

Some are actually arguing that this is what is actually taking place, in that postmodern deconstruction of the "grand narratives" is, essentially, a further turn of the Modernist screw applied to Modernism's own finger. I don't accept this at face value *in toto*, however, since that ethical, critical focus so characteristic of much Modernist work has largely been jettisoned in a vainly totalitising gesture of emancipation. Things *have* to move beyond that stage if reason and emotion are to re-engage in a newly-focussed, anti-amnesiac examination of what we, through our own culture, are - perhaps irrevocably - doing to ourselves. It should be noted that there *have* been some moves towards revalidating a more socially rooted form of reasoned discourse, as in the writings of Wellmer or Habermas, but they seem to be having trouble in fulfilling the communication industry's norm of sexiness. In any case, works of art cannot aspire, in any of themselves, to change a great deal: at best they can stand as witnesses evoking Benjamin's tantalising, humanisingly utopian vision of alterity as a special form of communication. It is not a matter of this or that style, idiom or political ideology coming to assume sole responsibility for these modest aspirations: it is far more the condition of *being engaged*, no matter what the seeming obstacles in view. If this is not taken as *the* central prerequisite, then any rethinking and re-application of Modernism's formidable array of tools will end up as just one more "lifestyle statement" for the attic. To avoid that, it must change and evolve, accepting as it does the necessity of its own subversion from within.



Notes

¹ Brian Ferneyhough, 'String Quartet no.4: An expanded transcript of remarks made during the Aesthetics colloquium led by Ulrich Mosch and Gianmario Borrio, Darmstadt, July 1992', *Brian Ferneyhough: Collected Writings*, Richard Toop and James Boros eds. (London: Gordon & Breach, forthcoming).

² literally, 'speech resemblance'.

³ Arnold Schönberg, 'Brahms the Progressive' (1947), trans. Leo Black in *Style and Idea*, Leonard Stein, ed. (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), pp.398-441.

⁴ Jackson Mac Low, Afterword, *Words and Ends from Ez* (Bolinis, CA: Avenue B, 1989), p.89.

⁵ 'I feel the air of another planet'; Stefan George, 'Entrückung', *Werke* (München: Helmut Küpper, 1958), p.293.

⁶ literally, 'floating tonality'.

⁷ 'Alas, dear Augustin, all is lost'.

⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, 'Vers une musique informelle', trans. Rodney Livingstone, *Quasi una Fantasia* (London: Verso, 1992), p.318.

4

EL PAÑO.

65

(MURCIA.)

Allegretto.

CANTO.

PIANO.

Al pa - ño fi - no en la tien - da

5 *meu*

u - na ma - ña le ca - yo por

me - nus pre - cio se ven - de.

Por me - nos pre - cio se

86.5 *meu*

Example 1: José Inzenga, *Ecos de España*, 'El paño moruno', pp. 65 and 66, with autograph annotations by Manuel de Falla.