

FOLIO OF COMPOSITIONS

Christopher Leedham

PhD

Department of Music

University of York

July 2012

Abstract

This Folio of Compositions represents over three years of practice-led research into harnessing a personal melodic impulse and finding different ways to utilise fragmentary musical ideas in the creation of large-scale musical structures.

The eight pieces presented here were composed between October 2008 and June 2012 and chart a developmental process of investigation, deconstruction and assimilation in the creation of an individual musical voice. They are the result of my exploration of a variety of compositional techniques – some seek to explore only one thing, whilst others are more diverse in their approach – but throughout they are unified by the primacy of melodies (of various kinds) in their construction.

Contents

Abstract	2
List of compositions	4
Contents of the accompanying CDs and DVD	5
Acknowledgements	7
Commentary on the compositions	
1. Starting points, influences, and concerns	8
2. Layering melodies, synthesising harmonies	14
3. Dormant melodies	25
4. Structure: narrativity and background melodies	35
5. Conclusions	42
References	43

List of compositions

Title	Instrumentation	Period of composition	Duration
String Quartet	Two violins, viola, and 'cello	Oct 2008–Dec 2010	18'
Strange Voices	SATB choir (minimum six per part)	Jan–Jun 2009	8' 30"
Sundry Notes of Music	Baritone and piano	Dec 2009	4'
Pavane	Soprano, viola, and piano	Apr 2010	7' 30"
Missa solemnis	Oboe and percussion	Jan–May 2010	6'
Antiphons	Soprano, baritone, choir, harp, chamber organ, and percussion	Jan–May 2011	27'
Endgame	Chamber ensemble (14 players)	Aug 2011–Jan 2012	12'
Afterglow	Orchestra	Feb–Apr 2012	6' 30"

Contents of the accompanying CDs and DVD

I have been fortunate to have many of the pieces I have composed during the course of my research performed in concerts and workshops. The two audio CDs contain recordings of all the pieces presented here, with the exception of *Sundry Notes of Music* and the third part of the String Quartet. The video DVD contains live performances of *Antiphons* and *Endgame*.

The scores of the pieces have been revised since these recordings were made, so may differ slightly from the recorded versions.

Audio CD 1

- String Quartet (excerpts)**
 - 1 Part 1
 - 2 Part 2
 - 3 Part 4Performed by the *Kreutzer Quartet*
Edited workshop and live recordings
3 March 2011 at the Sir Jack Lyons Concert Hall, York
- 4 **Strange Voices**
Performed by *The 24*, conducted by Graham Bier
Live recording
22 June 2010 at the Sir Jack Lyons Concert Hall, York
- 5 **Pavane**
Performed by *The Vertigo Project*
Live recording
5 June 2010 at St Saviourgate Church, York
- 6 **Missa solennis**
Performed by Desmond Clarke (oboe), Karl Kramer
and Martin Scheuregger (percussion)
Edited live recording
10 December 2010 at the Sir Jack Lyons Concert Hall, York
- 7 **Endgame**
Performed by the *Chimera Ensemble*, conducted by Jonathan Brigg
Live recording
22 June 2012 at the Sir Jack Lyons Concert Hall, York

- 8 **Afterglow**
Performed by the *University of York Symphony Orchestra*,
conducted by John Stringer
Rehearsal recording
15 May 2012 at the Sir Jack Lyons Concert Hall, York

Audio CD 2

Antiphons

- 1 Eres lumbre de mi lumbre
- 2 Awake!
- 3 Come fill the cup!
- 4 Happy the man that findeth wisdom
- 5 The moving finger writes
- 6 So leave the wise to wrangle
- 7 When wisdom entereth into thine heart
- 8 Oh come with Old Khayyam
- 9 Then to this earthen bowl I did adjourn
- 10 Olvido de lo criado

Performed by *The 24*
Jessica Conway – soprano
Simon Harper – baritone
Georgina Wells – harp
Samuel Thompson – organ
Karl Kramer, Martin Scheuregger – percussion
Graham Bier – conductor
Edited live recording
29 June 2011 at the Sir Jack Lyons Concert Hall, York

Video DVD 1

This video DVD contains the complete unedited premiere performances of *Antiphons* and *Endgame*. Details of performers, performance dates and venues are the same as on the audio CDs above.

Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful to my supervisor, Professor Roger Marsh, for his advice and support throughout, for encouraging me to write the kind of music I want, for always seeing the wood for the trees, and, on occasion, for acting both as personal counsellor as well as musical mentor.

I wish to thank the Department of Music for the various bursaries and awards I have received, and for providing such a welcoming, supportive, and creative environment in which to work.

I would like to thank all those musicians who have performed and recorded my pieces – I am truly honoured when people feel that something I have created is worthy of their time and effort. Various people in particular have provided advice, criticism that only friends can give, and above all good company: Jon Brigg, Des Clarke, Ben Gait, Mark Hutchinson, Martin Scheuregger, Rachel Wilkinson *et al.*

Thanks too go to Kath Spencer for believing in my music and for her financial assistance.

Finally, I cannot express my gratitude to my parents and brother for their unerring support and encouragement throughout my life. Sadly, my mum wasn't able to see me complete this portfolio, but without her none of this would have been possible, and it's to her memory that I dedicate these pieces.

1. Starting points, influences, and concerns

1.1. Introduction

By way of introduction I will discuss some of the musical ideas and influences that acted as the starting point for the work in this portfolio, and outline in general terms how I began to develop my compositional voice and processes throughout the course of this PhD.

1.2 Starting points

Some composers start with a form, a shape or a texture, but for me, the starting point has always been melody. A phrase, a fragment, or sometimes just an interval, almost always acts as the impetus and core idea for a piece and, although this is sometimes out of necessity affected by extra-musical factors – most often words – as I will discuss in chapter 3, the root remains musical.

I have often felt that this statement of intent puts me at odds with recent – or more truthfully, not-so-recent – trends within contemporary classical music. Whether this feeling is justified is open to debate, but this belief lies behind one of my main goals in undertaking this thesis: to find a way of integrating my 'traditional' instincts of melodic construction within a contemporary idiom.

The obvious question that arises from this is: how do you turn a melodic idea into a satisfactory piece? I'm not going to pretend that I have a definitive answer to this – if nothing else, the question of what makes any work of art 'satisfactory' is, if not totally unanswerable, then considerably beyond the scope of this commentary. However, learning how to harness an initial idea and turn it into something which can, at least, be put forward for consideration as a 'satisfactory piece' has been at the heart of my development as an artist over the course of this portfolio. This commentary will outline the methods I have developed to harness my melodic inspiration and the ways in which these techniques have shaped the resultant compositions.

1.3 Planning vs plotting: narrativity

Drawing is like taking a line for a walk.
– Paul Klee

To paraphrase Paul Klee's commonly-quoted aphorism, for me, composing is like taking a melody for a walk. Perhaps this admission flies in the face of the assumed nature of the compositional process: the very word 'composition' implies the putting together of things in an ordered way. In art or photography we use 'composition' to mean layout; a well-composed picture or building has pleasing proportions, balance, and structure. The rules of 'good' composition in the visual arts have been defined over generations: photographers tend to abide by the 'rule of thirds', whilst classical architecture relies on the 'natural' beauty of golden ratios.

Should we – indeed, can we – apply these concepts to musical composition? There is surely a marked difference between perception of the visual and of the auditory. The pleasing proportional balance of a great building or well-composed photograph can be appreciated in a single moment; the entity can be viewed, literally, at a glance, allowing the structure to be immediately perceived and evaluated. However, the very nature of the musical experience is different – it is inextricably bound up with our perception of time. Indeed, the required physical method of transmission – changing pressure on the eardrum caused by the movement of air molecules – is inherently unidirectional. Perhaps it is for this very reason that people have often sought ways of explaining music through form, proportion and structure, which rely more on the analysis of a concrete artifact such as a score. As Robert Adlington points out¹, Carl Dahlhaus is probably representing the most extreme manifestation of this when he says that, “any analysis that ignores temporal proportions will remain abstract”.² However, the extent to which an audience is aware of the long-term pacing, particularly in contemporary music, is a hard thing to judge. Adlington himself represents a more recent trend in musical analysis – particularly of contemporary music – in moving away from clock time as the primary indicator of temporal perception.

Duration and proportion dominate existing studies of post-tonal temporality [...] Yet the significance of duration in musical experience is questionable.³

¹ Adlington, *Temporality in Post-Tonal Music*, 7.

² Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, 363.

³ Adlington, *Temporality in Post-Tonal Music*, 33.

It is my experience and belief, both as a listener and a composer, that musical perception is more directly parallel with theories of narrativity than of proportion and structure. There must be a narrative trajectory to a piece: a sense of ‘going’ somewhere.

With this in mind, I find that pre-planning plays little part in my compositional process. There are certain factors that will often be known in advance: instrumental or vocal forces available and approximate duration perhaps. However, my primary concern is coming up with the material – the seed if you like – which has the potential to form the initial idea for a piece. To an extent, I take a very organic approach to composition. My music will usually grow from only a few seeds of material. However, I would shy away from defining my process as organicism, in the sense of the word used by Schenker or Reti. To follow the strict metaphor of composition as organic growth might suggest that I believe a piece is predetermined by its primary material – its DNA. As Ruth Solie puts it:

Not only does the organism display exemplary unity and coherence, but it is, to use an anachronistic term, genetically coded. That is, barring catastrophe its final state is inevitable from the moment its first cells are formed. [...] An organism, that is, grows, and it grows in a teleological or goal-oriented manner.⁴

This goes against my experience as a composer and seems to deny the fact that organisms develop within an environment. I think more of pieces of material as characters: they certainly possess some innate qualities, which must be respected, but they also possess the capacity to evolve, grow, interact with others, and mutate. This sense of going on a journey is a central part of both my compositional process and, I hope, the audience’s experience in listening to my pieces. Thus, trying to adhere to strict plans can prove fruitless; even those plans that one does make often end up being changed by circumstance.

Harrison Birtwistle’s description of his approach to beginning a piece closely mirrors my own.

I don’t have any plans. I don’t do any pre-composition at all. I start writing and when I have a context, when there’s something on the page and I can see the first building block, then I can see what I can do with it. And sometimes I rub it out – I cross the beginning out – so you don’t know where the music’s been generated from.⁵

⁴ Solie, *The Living Work: Organicism and Musical Analysis*, 152.

⁵ quoted in Ford, *Composer to Composer*, 55.

The key to my own work is finding the right starting point: the kernel of an idea that I feel I can turn into something. What this might be is not always immediately apparent and very often only becomes clear after a lot of manipulation. The important thing is finding an idea that I feel to be extensible: either through development or as a building block. Perhaps sculpture provides a helpful analogy: the basic material must be flexible enough to be transformed, but have enough ‘substance’ to retain some of its innate qualities. It is through this property of the material that I feel I can explore and manipulate a narrative thread in order to create a piece. When I’ve found such an idea, I can see my own “first building block”.

1.4 Some thoughts on the process: inspiration, deconstruction, simplification, and (re)complication

In the following chapters I will make some specific observations about the compositional process and exact methods used for each piece. Each new piece presents its own problems, requiring their own solutions. Nonetheless, I have recognised a four-step process that seems to codify, at least in part, the vast array of major and minor decisions that form my compositional process.

Step 1: Inspiration

This is the most ephemeral part of the process. As I have said previously, it is almost always a melodic idea that comes first. If it is a piece with text, there is often a phrase that jumps out at me as a musical shape. If there is no text, it may be just a collection of intervals or a melodic contour that form the starting point.

Step 2: Deconstruction

Once my initial inspiration is complete (and quite a large amount of work on it may have already been undertaken), I try to deconstruct what I have come up with in order to make the idea more extensible. This is where I hope to find the plasticity of the idea (the concept of pliability is one that I will frequently allude to). An idea that comes fully formed can sometimes resist any attempts to work with it – even a small alteration can instantly destroy the whole thing. It may be so perfect that the only thing that can be done is to repeat it (as a songwriter might), or to leave it as a magical aphorism (as Kurtág might). If I am attempting to write an extended piece, more basic building blocks need to be found. I suppose it would be like trying to design a building with dodecahedral bricks – they might be beautiful in themselves, but cuboid bricks afford greater flexibility.

Step 3: Simplification

This is really the result of the deconstruction process, but the more stripped down the material becomes, the easier I find it to work with. It may now be simply a few intervals, a melodic contour or a process, but hopefully it still retains something of the initial inspiration, though now in its most embryonic form.

Step 4: (Re)complication

Once I feel the material has been stripped down as far as possible I can then begin the reconstruction process. This process is as intuitive as the initial inspiration – I haven't broken down the material to fit in with a pre-determined plan. Rather, by finding the smallest building blocks I am more likely to end up with a coherent whole when I come to write the piece in full. I reiterate that I would resist the implication that the completed piece is somehow completely predetermined by the material. There is obviously a close relationship, and I will comment in relation to specific pieces as to how I feel the material has influenced the overall form. However, as I mentioned earlier, I rarely make strict formal plans for a piece, and decisions that occur over the many months of composing can result in only one of many possible finished pieces. Once again, Birtwistle sums up my feelings quite well:

At one time I tried to do this thing of planning pieces beforehand, but then what happens when you come to the crossroads and you're supposed to go this way, but that way looks a bit nicer? What do you do? [...] It's like making methods of composition outside a piece. [...] I've found there are certain combinations of notes that I like, and I could never find them by other means. And so improvising them [...] and then *subjecting them to analysis to find out if there's any logic to them and finding ways of making them proliferate* is much more interesting.⁶ [my emphasis]

⁶ quoted in Ford, *Composer to Composer*, 56.

1.5 The scope of this commentary

It has been my privilege during the course of my research to engage with many other composers, and to listen to their thoughts on the way they compose and the music that they have produced. Almost without exception their writings or presentations provided merely a glimpse into the minutiae of decisions and processes that result in a finished piece. Even the most technical of explanations, calling on intricate diagrams of pitch series, harmonic rules, proportionality, and tables of golden sections, always seem to offer up more questions than answers. More often than not, it seems the really important things about pieces – expression, mood, shape – are the things that composers are the most vague about.

At the beginning of this chapter I declared myself to be an unashamedly melodic composer. With this in mind, the following chapters address some of the different ways in which melody has formed the pieces in this portfolio, and how my approaches to using melodic material within pieces has developed. In passing, I will comment on some other important influences that have come to bear on the works: the circumstances of composition where relevant; the precedents that they build on, both in my own compositions and in the work of others; and some of the technical methods that I used in their composition. I do not, categorically, explain every note – even if I could provide such an explanation it would rather defeat the object of presenting a score. I hope, instead, to provide a route into the world of the music and the thinking behind it.

2. Layering melodies, synthesising harmonies

2.1 Back to the bare essentials: generating and processing material in the String Quartet

I set myself such problems as: what can I do with a single note?
With its octave? With an interval? With two intervals?⁷

– György Ligeti

The String Quartet is the earliest composition presented here and was written to be workshopped and eventually performed by the *Kreutzer Quartet*. At the time I had been studying the music of György Ligeti in depth. I became fascinated by the simplicity of process he employs, but conversely the complexity of result he achieves, in pieces such as *Musica ricercata* and, much later in his life, the piano *Études*. Perhaps I was drawn to these compositions because Ligeti strikes me as a fundamentally 'melodic' composer too; he always seems to be guided by a melodic sensibility, and even his densest micro-polyphonic scores seem to be the result of layering many tiny melodic fragments. Of the piano *Études*, two in particular engaged my interest: *Fanfares* from book 1 and *Fem* from book 2. Both these pieces are based around relatively simple processes: *Fanfares* is built around a repeating ostinato on which triads are constructed using a repeating rhythmic scheme, whilst *Fem* employs two parallel rhythmic patterns (*talea*) of 18 and 16 quaver durations that therefore coincide every 144 quavers.⁸

Just as Ligeti seems to have used short piano pieces as something of a compositional palate cleanser – a controllable form in which to explore fledgling ideas – so I have often turned to the string quartet as a useful medium in which to experiment with new material or processes. My previous two string quartets – juvenile works written in 1999 and 2002 respectively – have both acted as 'breakthrough' pieces, so it seemed the obvious form in which to begin to explore some ideas.

My engagement with Ligeti's simple processes inspired me to start stripping back my own compositional thinking to the barest of material. As I worked on this quartet I was particularly intrigued by the notion of creating material based entirely on consonant intervals, which could be layered both vertically and horizontally to create a more complex synthetic sound-world. The process I settled upon was to set up a sequence of perfect fifths and major thirds chained together.

⁷ quoted Steinitz, *György Ligeti: Music of the Imagination*, 54.

⁸ For an in-depth analysis of these two pieces see Steinitz, *György Ligeti: Music of the Imagination*, 288-292 and 300-302 respectively.

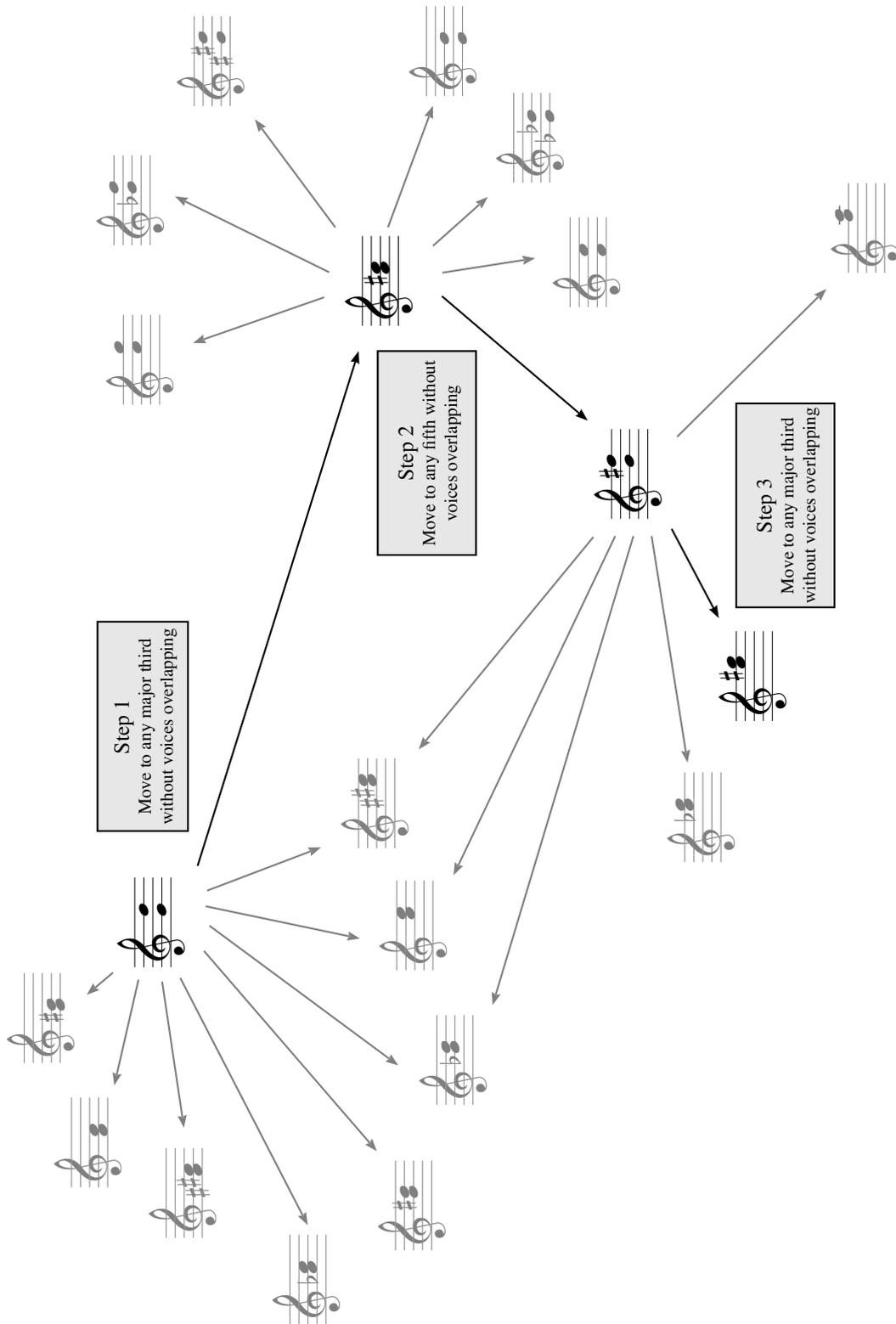


Fig. 1: Process for material generation in the String Quartet first movement

Each move from a fifth to a third affords nine options (I did not want voices to overlap), whilst each move from a third back to a fifth affords four options. I came to realise that there were many possibilities for constructing a large piece of material by simply alternating between these two intervals, both in a regular way and – more interestingly to me – in an irregular way. By following these rules for just a few iterations, a very large number of possibilities are available from this simple process. **Figure 1** shows how just three steps of this system might work.

It is axiomatic to say that the resulting material is, at any given moment, consonant: how could it be otherwise based on the perfect fifths and major thirds I defined? However, because of the process I set up, the material can quickly pass through all the notes of the chromatic scale (see **Figure 2**). The creation of vertically consonant material that when experienced horizontally creates a more extended harmonic world became one of the main concerns of my research.



Fig. 2: 'Chromatically-saturated' example created using String Quartet process

Having started with this notion of combining pairs of intervals, the obvious extension was to further pair this material. In the back of my mind there was a sense of trying to extend the process that many composers have used, in which complementary modes are combined to cover the full chromatic gamut. Bartók uses this idea in the first of the *Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm*, whilst Ligeti's *Désordre* (the first of the piano *Études*) uses all the black notes of the piano in the right hand and all the white notes in the left. However, my material was already chromatically complete, so I was relying on the melodic shape, as well as register and timbre, to provide the distinction between the two layers. I always had in my mind that this material would be rhythmically constructed from groups of two and three quavers, so by using a rhythmic canon at a single quaver in a hocket-type arrangement, I knew that there would be only a few moments when all four instruments coincided. These moments of 'collision' between the parallel layers defined the points at which I would have to work most carefully at controlling the level of dissonance.

Although I found myself happy with the concept, I realised I was getting lost in the massive number of possibilities and I knew there was still too much that was *ad hoc* about the rhythmic structure. Having started with the need to strip down pitch material to basics, I realised I needed to take the same approach to rhythmic

construction. Thus, the second phase of the compositional process, as I alluded to in chapter 1, was to strip down the freely-composed rhythmic scheme of the initial sketches to the much stricter rhythmic ostinato shown in **Figure 3**.



Fig. 3: Simplified rhythmic talea for part one of the String Quartet

The viola and ‘cello repeat this pattern throughout the first part of the piece – beginning at bar 3, bar 4 fourth crotchet etc. – every seven crotchet beats. However, although I am in favour of developing processes, I like to ensure there remains some flexibility. Thus, I gave myself the option of adding either one or two extra crotchets to the rhythmic pattern (marked in brackets in **Figure 3**). Thus, in the violins there are two added crotchets (G# and F#, meaning the *talea* begins again on bar 3, fourth quaver) and the next time only one added crotchet (the pattern begins again at bar 5 fourth quaver). I also allowed myself to further defeat any possibility of rigidity by using phrasing, bowing, melodic shape etc., to circumvent the obvious repetition of the rhythmic ostinato. Furthermore, I decided that when the material was repeated (at bar 21), the lower two voices should be repeated exactly transposed down a tone, and the upper voices slightly altered to move up a semi-tone - e.g. it starts on B-F#, C#-E#, but then moves to D-A rather than C#-G#.

I had now developed a useful paragraph of music from some very simple starting points. The obvious next step was to introduce a third pair of voices in to the texture. This is one of the primary techniques I have found increasingly useful in extending my material: development by 'accretion'. By building up layers, the complexity – and also the harmonic tension – can increase, whilst still affording an audible link with primary material. I came up with a plan to introduce a ‘phantom’ pair of voices into the quartet. I worked by creating a full extra line of material that runs in parallel with the two initial pairs, which I could then allow to poke through the existing texture using dynamics and tone colour. Thus, all the *sforzando* sections with repeated semiquavers are just such interjections from this new pair of voices. **Figure 4** shows a few bars of how the second violin and viola jump between the three pairs of 'fifth and thirds' material.

Fig. 4: 'Ghosting' a third pair of voices in String Quartet (bar 23)

The idea of dividing the quartet into pairs was key to my initial conception of how the first part of the quartet would work, and so in the middle section I played with how the group could be divided. Initially the two violins and viola/cello are paired, along with the 'ghosted' pair of the second violin and viola. From bar 51 the first violin and viola are paired, as are the second violin and 'cello. The material is again derived from the same 'crawling fifths and thirds' idea, but with the movements limited as much as possible to semitone steps. This is developed in the same way as the opening material through layering (bars 76–86).

The third part of the quartet (bars 147–296) is a further exploration of how snippets of simple material can be woven into a more complex whole. The most important material in this section is a pitch 'row' that is first heard in full at bar 177 in canon between the two violins. It is itself a 'layering' of a shorter fragment, transposed up and down a minor 3rd (marked *x* in **Figure 5**).

Fig. 5: Part 3 main pitch material (bars 177–179)

This row of pitches becomes extremely important in the construction of the rest of this section. I created paragraphs of material by combining versions of this material with variations on itself: much of the semiquaver movement that defines this part is derived in this way. For example, it is very often layered in canon at, for example, the minor 7th or the minor 9th or combined with its inversion (see **Figure 6**).

Fig. 6: Layering with inversion (bars 228–232)

Furthermore, in the section beginning at bar 297, I fragment this material and again gradually reconstruct it. The shape of the triadic material from bar 165 is split up into small groups of two or three pitches, and used as a quasi-passacaglia, with an added major 7th throughout, whilst the main pitch row is used in the violins very high and split up into small irregular rhythmic groups – but punctuated by unison passages, again derived from bits of the earlier material – e.g. bars 317, 320, 327, 330, 337 and 343.

However, unlike in the first part, which is almost rigidly mono-thematic, this third part features several other short ideas that interact with the background 'layering' of the pitch row. These are: the opening melody, split between the two violinists; a pan-diatonic triad passage, decorated by harmonic glissandi (bar 165); and a melodic shape constructed from series of parallel major thirds (bar 184, violin 2). I have already identified the concept of narrativity as an important strand in my compositional thinking. In this third movement of the quartet I feel I begin treating my material more and more as 'characters'. They can sometimes contribute to the ongoing narrative, often run in parallel with other 'story-lines', sometimes set the narrative off on a tangent, sometimes circumvent or interject. This is a structuring technique I would revisit in more depth in *Endgame* – see chapter 4.1 (p.35).

2.2 Layers in *Strange Voices*

The technique of layering that I explored in the String Quartet also features in *Strange Voices* for twelve-part choir, composed shortly afterwards. I will write more about this piece and how I engaged with the text later, but I feel it is worth drawing parallels with the string quartet processes here.

Whilst working on a stylistic composition exercise as a Masters student, I remember being particularly struck by a short passage in Bartók's third 'Dance in Bulgarian Rhythm' from *Mikrokosmos* BB 105, Vol. 6 No. 150. In bars 58–73 the

modal material of the piece is pitted against itself in a strict canon at the minor 7th, resulting in an intriguing tension between the two.⁹ The passage is only a few bars long, but the thing that fascinated me most was the control of dissonance that Bartók achieves between the parts; there is clearly tension created between the two versions of the same material, but they still mesh together to form something that is greater than the sum of the parts.

Like the String Quartet, the pitch material in this piece is an experiment in using material in layers to create a gestalt sound world that, whilst noticeably triadic, is not limited to a single mode or pitch series. Building on the process I used in the quartet, I devised a sequence of dyads that I could combine with itself transposed down a tone. However, it would be so arranged as to avoid semitone 'clashes' being articulated simultaneously. In the completed piece this can be seen most readily in bars 25–27. I worked the material to ensure that the A and D in the altos are not sounded at the same time as A# and D# in the sopranos. In many ways these moments recall the false relations common in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century polyphony; they certainly result from a similar process of creating harmony by pursuing individual melodic lines.

One consistent qualification makes such false relations acceptable: the falsely related voices or parts are nevertheless melodically coherent in themselves. Clashes arise normally through the simultaneous pursuit of two distinct and conflicting melodic paths. False relations may thus be regarded as outstanding examples of the evolution of harmonic values from melodic sources.¹⁰

This basic premise – that harmony is subordinated to melodic coherence in individual parts – has become increasingly apparent during my work on this portfolio. Perhaps this is inevitable if I stand by my description of myself as a 'melodic' composer, unless of course I restrict myself to homophony alone. However, I find that most harmonic dissonance *can* for me work if it is clearly the result of the combination of recognisable and melodically interesting material. Moreover, whilst I have not quite reverted to writing individual parts separately from beginning to end – as we are led to believe the earliest polyphonists did – the sense of taking each 'character' along its individual path and seeing how and where interesting interactions can be made has become increasingly at the heart of my compositional process.

⁹ Bartók, *Mikrokosmos Vol. 6*, 51-52.

¹⁰ Dyson, 'False relations', in *Grove Music Online*, accessed 28 February 2012.

2.3 Linear melodic construction in *Missa solennis*

For a self-confessed ‘melodic’ composer, it may seem odd that I have never written a piece for a solo instrument. However, for a composer who is primarily a contrapuntalist, the single instrument presents insurmountable problems. After my work on layering in the String Quartet and *Strange Voices*, I decided that I should attempt a solo piece in order to force myself to search for alternative possibilities. Despite my intentions, *Missa solennis*, for oboe and percussion, did not turn out to be such a piece. My initial thinking was that the percussion part would feature entirely unpitched instruments; I was attempting to force myself to abandon contrapuntal thinking, and concentrate on gesture and colour. In retrospect, I don’t think I was fully successful, but in this piece I was trying to find a different strategy for constructing pieces from my melodic ideas.

The oboe and percussion duo is a well-established pairing: pieces such as Xenakis’s *Dmaathen* and Harrison Birtwistle’s *Pulse Sampler* undoubtedly form a backdrop to this work. However, alongside listening to these pieces, and whilst I was beginning work on *Missa solennis*, I also attended a performance and analysis of George Aperghis’s *Le corps à corps, pour un percussionniste et son zarb*¹¹ given by percussionist Damien Harron. Aperghis utilises a process of retrospective unfolding both in text spoken by the percussionist and the *zarb* material. As can be seen in **Figure 7**, the *zarb* pattern is developed by inserting a new cell of material at the beginning of each phrase until the material is heard in full the final time. This idea of unfolding construction is something that I felt could help me in developing my own melodic material within the confines of a single line.

¹¹ A *Zarb* (or *tombak*) is a medium-sized Iranian drum.

Fig. 7: Diagram showing unfolding percussion cells in *Le corps à corps*¹²

The main material of *Missa sollemnis* is quite similar to that of the first movement of the string quartet, but this time ‘linearised’. In the quartet I hoped to combine pairs of consonant intervals to synthesise a sound world that would lack single moments of dissonance, but instead create a complex sense of changing harmonic relationships. In *Missa sollemnis* there is a parallel process, but this time completely explored in the horizontal domain.

I have always been interested in Messiaen’s Modes of Limited Transposition. I was drawn to the sound of octotonic scales and harmony in a very early oboe and piano piece before I was even aware of what they were. As a further development of this, I have long been intrigued by the idea of devising modes that repeat over intervals other than the octave. For *Missa sollemnis* I created a pattern that repeats over a major 7th: a perfect 5th plus a major 3rd, with added major 2^{nds} (marked *x* in **Figure 8**). I was interested in ways in which I could apply some techniques of unfolding to this basic material.

¹² Aperghis, *Le corps à corps*, 1.



Fig. 8: Pitch pattern repeating at the major 7th

The piece begins with a prelude for tubular bells before the oboe enters with the main material. I used an upward ‘incantation’ as a recurring introductory gesture to a sequence of more freely-composed melodic fragments. But unlike the process in Aperghis’s piece, I wanted to unfold my material from the middle outwards. Hence the portions chosen for each oboe upward incantation start from the centre of the pattern (just B, E \flat , F, B \flat , D at bar 27) and gradually extend forwards and backwards, until the full sequence (with octave transpositions) is revealed at bar 37.

The melodic fragments that follow each of these upward gestures are unfolded in a similar manner; they start as just a single fall to D quarter flat, and gradually extend to several bars. The whole process of this opening section is a gradual breaking down of the initial synthetic pattern into more freely-composed material. This increased melodic freedom is mirrored in the gradual introduction of more complex rhythmic patterns, particularly in the section beginning from bar 42, which forms a middle section for a broadly ternary opening paragraph.

This idea of unfolding is also utilised in the antiphonal duet for tubular bells that sets the ritualistic tone for the piece. Each set of bells has a field of pitch (see **Figure 9**) that unfolds over four gradually extended phrases – four, five, six, and nine bars respectively.

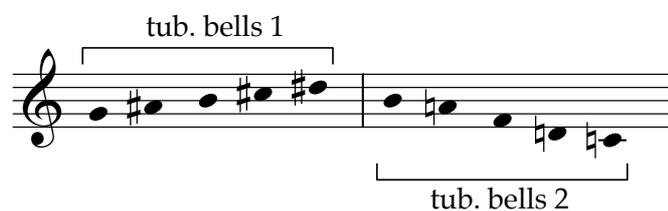
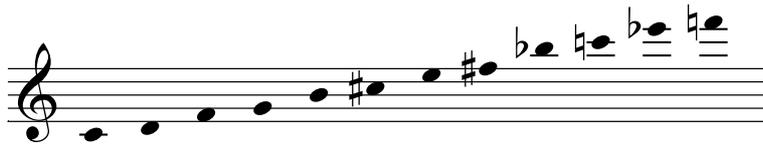


Fig. 9: Overlapping tubular bell pitches

In the final section (from bar 95) the vibraphone takes over the primary melodic role (and through use of the pedal makes explicit the harmonic language implied by this melodic figuration). **Figure 10** shows how the repeating pattern from the initial oboe material has been extended by adding an additional note (another major 2nd) to the pattern.



3. Dormant melodies

3.1 Text from music, music from text

Four of the pieces in this portfolio, spanning the entire course of my research, engage with a text or texts. I prefer to say ‘engage with’ rather than ‘set’ texts: to set words to music seems to imply that one is subservient to the other – that the conversation between the two is unidirectional. Maybe this would appear to be inevitable. All the authors whose work I have used in these pieces died long ago; it would seem that their part of the work is fixed, whereas my part is still fluid. However, this is the opposite of my experience. I choose to use a poem or prose extract because I feel I can have a *dialogue* with it. They have some hidden meaning in them that I feel I can release, just as they release some musical ideas within me. Wilhelm Müller, German poet and author of *Winterreise*, put it thus:

For indeed my songs lead but half a life, a paper existence of black-and-white, until music breathes life into them, or at least calls it forth and awakens it if it is already dormant in them.¹³

I find Müller’s comment particularly apposite because Schubert’s setting of *Winterreise* has always seemed to me the most perfect fusing of words and music: it seems impossible to imagine one without the other. It is a piece I never grow tired of and it embodies the unification of expression that I strive for when approaching a piece with text. However, critical reaction has often judged Müller as a distinctly ‘second-class’ poet. Heine’s or Goethe’s poetry stands on its own, with their musical versions as intriguing but ultimately adjunct additions to the ‘main’ artifact. Conversely, Müller – it is said – *needed* Schubert’s genius to elevate his work to greatness.

Of course, the truth of this is debatable; Susan Youens, for example, has sought to re-evaluate Müller’s work and revise his status as an inferior poet.¹⁴ However, as a composer, I can see some validity in the suggestion that Schubert’s piece is so superior precisely *because* Müller’s poetry allows for some ‘added value’. I wrote in chapter 1 about the requirement of musical material to have pliability and I feel the same holds true for words with music too. I have set a number of poems by Christina Rossetti both in this portfolio and previously and – without wishing to sound too much as though I’m delivering a veiled insult – although I find

¹³ quoted in Youens, *Retracing a Winter’s Journey*, 3.

¹⁴ see Youens, *Retracing a Winter’s Journey*.

inspiration in the mood, the expression and the ideas of her work, I don't feel the words themselves to be too rigid.

3.2 *Strange Voices*

I discussed the pitch material and layering techniques I employed in my choir piece *Strange Voices* in chapter 2.2. In this section I will comment on the approach I took to the text. This piece is a setting of the sonnet of the same name by Christina Rossetti.

Strange Voices

Strange voices sing among the planets which
Move on for ever; in the old sea's foam
There is a prophecy; in Heaven's blue dome
Great beacon fires are lighted; black as pitch
Is night, and yet star jewels make it rich;
And if the moon lights up her cloudy home
The darkness flees, and forth strange gleamings roam
Lighting up hill and vale and mound and ditch,
Earth is full of all questions that all ask;
And she alone of heavy silence full
Answereth not: what is it severeth
Us from the spirits that we would be with?
Or is it that our fleshly ear is dull,
And our own shadow hides light with a mask?

Christina Rossetti

The piece was originally conceived as a companion piece for *Remember*, also using words by Rossetti, which I composed in 2006. Both poems are in the traditional 14-line sonnet form: two groups of four lines and a single group of six. However, unlike *Remember*, which musically follows this structure, in *Strange Voices* I was interested in taking a more abstracted approach to the text. I wanted to break down the words into individual sounds, mainly as a way of reflecting the otherworld-ness alluded to in the text. In particular, I wanted to create the sense of the voices slowly appearing, with the text gradually coming in to focus. As the main pitch material is revealed through a process of unfolding (see chapter 2.2), so I also wanted to extend that sense to the sounds of the words themselves. For example, the basses at the opening deconstruct 'sing' into a move from *bouche*

ferméé 'm', to just the sibilance of the 'si' in sing, then back again through the semi-open 'n' consonant and finally to a closed-mouth 'm'. At bar 66 the sopranos and altos pull out the bright and guttural 'Glee!' sound from 'Gleamings'; again at bar 84 the sibilance of 'Sing' is used out of context to provide a bell-like sound.

Amongst these deconstructed sounds and the layering of pitch material, I felt it important to pick out some moments that would be set with complete clarity; if the meaning of the text was to be communicated, certain key phrases had to come across. For me, the line that conveys the greatest meaning in the poem is "what is it severeth us from the spirits that we would be with?". Thus, this line is set in the simplest way and with the most direct harmonic writing in the piece.

3.3 *Sundry Notes of Music*

Sundry Notes of Music was the result of a commission to write a piece for a recital of songs featuring words by William Shakespeare. In the context of my earlier comments about ensuring I can add value to words, the choice of text for this piece posed a significant problem: if there is one poet whose work seems to have already achieved a self-contained perfection it is surely Shakespeare. I therefore chose to set the first of the *Sonnets to Sundry Notes of Music* – a relatively insignificant footnote to the main body of Shakespeare's work. Indeed, the authorship of this poem is distinctly ambiguous. Although *Sundry Notes* appears in *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, only the second poem of the six in the set was clearly written by him. The fifth is almost universally attributed to Christopher Marlowe and the sixth to Richard Barnfield.¹⁵

Sonnets to Sundry Notes of Music

I

IT was a lording's daughter, the fairest one of three,
That liked of her master as well as well might be,
Till looking on an Englishman, the fair'st that eye could see,
Her fancy fell a-turning.

Long was the combat doubtful that love with love did fight,
To leave the master loveless, or kill the gallant knight:
To put in practise either, alas, it was a spite
Unto the silly damsel!

¹⁵ Adams, J. *A Life of William Shakespeare*, 333.

But one must be refused; more mickle was the pain
That nothing could be used to turn them both to gain,
For of the two the trusty knight was wounded with disdain:
Alas, she could not help it!

Thus art with arms contending was victor of the day,
Which by a gift of learning did bear the maid away:
Then, lullaby, the learned man hath got the lady gay;
For now my song is ended.

attrib. William Shakespeare

The poem is rather jocular in tone, and somewhat unsympathetically tells the story of the various travails of a fickle “damsel”. (If the poem is by Shakespeare it might lend credence to those who believe that he was distinctly sexist!) Therefore I wanted the piece to have a minstrel-like quality – this is essentially a simple cautionary tale – but with a distinctly tongue-in-cheek twist. This decision led to the use of primarily tonal material. However, I decided to undermine this by constantly trying to shift the tonal centre and suggesting modulations in the voice that are then unexpectedly reversed in the piano: e.g. at bar 15 the D# in the voice is immediately undermined by the D \natural in the piano left hand etc. A similar device is used in phrase construction: the basic 4/4 expectation is confounded by stretched (5/4) and contracted (3/4) bars.

This sense of absurdity is continued in the central section “But one must be refused” beginning at bar 92 – with what I hope is a rather melodramatic reading of the sense of peril in the text – and it is in keeping that the end of the song is as abrupt (and as silly) as the poem’s. Despite this, some of my pre-existing compositional concerns are still present here: the *moto perpetuo* piano passage is a variation on the first seven notes of the introduction, for example.

3.4 *Pavane*

Pavane was commissioned by the York Late Music Festival in 2010 for performance by *The Vertigo Project*, a London-based soprano, viola and piano trio. I turned once again to a poem by Christina Rossetti.

What would I give?

What would I give for a heart of flesh to warm me through,
Instead of this heart of stone ice-cold whatever I do!
Hard and cold and small, of all hearts the worst of all.

What would I give for words, if only words would come!
But now in its misery my spirit has fallen dumb.
O merry friends, go your own way, I have never a word to say.

What would I give for tears! Not smiles but scalding tears,
To wash the black mark clean, and to thaw the frost of years,
To wash the stain ingrain, and to make me clean again.

Christina Rossetti

The opening line instantly suggested a melodic shape to me (**Figure 11**) and, in particular, the “What would I give” motif – two ascending minor sixths and a descending semitone – very quickly became the kernel of the piece. I think this is what Müller meant by “awakens it [the melody] if it is already dormant”. This was the very first thing I wrote down, even before I had definitely decided to write the piece around this text.

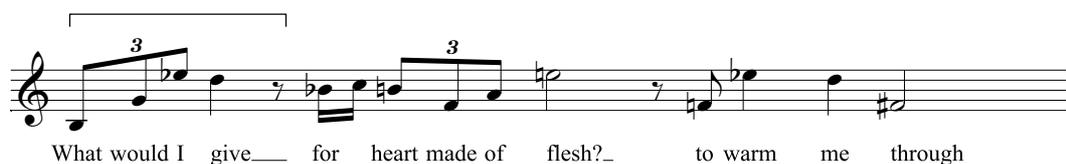


Fig. 11: *The Pavane* ‘dormant’ melody

This single ‘dormant’ melody creates the mood of the whole composition. I wanted to create a sense of the soprano being trapped, unable to break free from her “misery”. Thus, I used the motif to create a four bar *passacaglia*-like line (**Figure 12**) that recurs almost hypnotically throughout the piece in the viola. It is built on two repetitions of the “What would I give” motif (x) and a four note cadential figure (y).

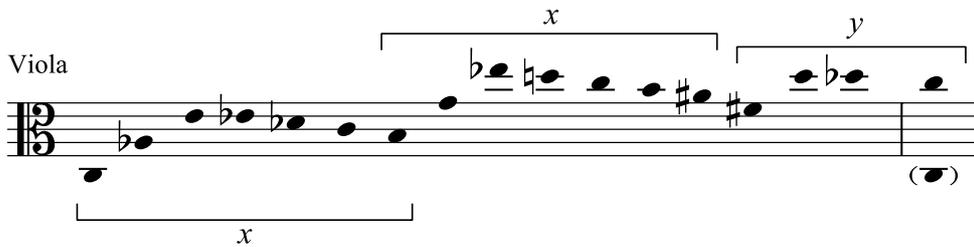


Fig. 12: Pavane *passacaglia*

The ascending minor sixths also define the harmonic world that the piece inhabits; a cycle beginning on C interlocks with the cycle beginning on B to form a chord (**Figure 13**) that dictates the sound-world. In this chord I feel there is both harmonic tension caused by semitonal dissonance and also a conflicting sense of stasis underlined by the symmetry of its component intervals; I hope this is a musical metaphor that both complements and extends the meaning of the text.



Fig. 13: two interlocking minor sixth cycles form the Pavane chord

As with my previous Rossetti pieces, I felt it was important to identify a line of text to act as a musical tipping point: a point of no return within the narrative trajectory of the piece. In this case I was drawn to the central line: “and now in my misery my spirit has fallen dumb”. This seemed to give me the context for the whole piece – of isolation and cool, muted expression.

Arguably, the poem has a very clear sense of direction building up towards the final stanza: *to wash the black mark clean [...] to make me clean again*. However, I wanted to emphasise the repetitious nature of the text, and the sense of inevitable circularity that seems to pervade it. Hence, set against the strophic nature of the poem, there is a broadly ternary musical structure, with the first line and the opening material repeated. I believe this casts a subtly different light on the meaning of the poem than a linear reading would. That is not to imply that it somehow goes against the grain – the text of the poem affords a range of semantic readings – but making musical choices that emphasise one of these possible interpretations seems crucial to the 'adding value' process for which I strive.

3.5 *Antiphons*

Antiphons was commissioned for the 2010 Lyons Celebration Award. It is a large-scale piece that involved me compiling and engaging with a wide range of textual sources. The terms of the award required that the piece should be inspired by, or related to, Leonard Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms*. I quickly decided I did not want to write a piece that took direct musical inspiration from the Bernstein, but instead sought to interact with it in a more oblique way.

Bernstein's composition is scored for soloists, choir and large orchestra. Practical considerations precluded me from writing for these forces. However, Bernstein also arranged a lesser-known version of the *Chichester Psalms* replacing the orchestra with organ, harp and percussion. The timbral possibilities of this ensemble were very interesting to me, and by scoring my piece for this instrumentation I feel I was able to maintain a connection with the Bernstein piece, whilst holding true to my intention to create a dialogue with it.

The texts for Bernstein's composition are all taken from the Book of Psalms. Each of the three movements feature two psalms, either in full or in part – six psalms in total.¹⁶ Bernstein's choice to juxtapose different texts – albeit all from the same biblical source – interested me; this was an aspect of the piece that I wanted to explore. The following explains the thought process behind my selection and organisation of the texts.

I must first insert the caveat that I made no attempt to be exhaustive in theological and philosophical terms. However, it is my impression that the psalms form something of a 'guide to life': a prismatic set of principles through which one's decisions and experiences can be channeled. This seems to be backed up by the wider relevance they continue to hold, even for non-religious people. Bernstein's choices seem to revolve around matters of nationhood and fellowship; this seems to be a reflection of his wider political views:

We must believe strongly, more strongly than before, in one another – in our ability to grow and change, in our power to communicate and love, in our mutual dignity, in our democratic method. [...] We must believe in people.¹⁷

¹⁶ Bernstein uses Psalms 100 and 108, 2 and 23, and 131 and 133 in the three movements of *Chichester Psalms*.

¹⁷ Bernstein, *Findings*, 139.

I wanted to write a piece that mirrored something of this ‘guide to life’ aspect of the psalms, but instead concentrated more on the experience of the individual.

For some time before receiving this commission I had been interested in setting extracts from the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* – here used in the famous translation by Edward Fitzgerald. The ambiguity of the spirituality or religiosity of this text seemed to fit naturally with the dialogue I wanted my piece to have with the Bernstein. A full exploration of the religious beliefs of Khayyam is beyond the scope of this commentary, but suffice to say that the issue is distinctly ambiguous. However, in my reading, the *Rubaiyat* is essentially secular in tone, even though expressed through spiritual imagery.

John of the Cross (1542-1591) was a Spanish mystic of the Carmelite order. I found his writings formed an interesting juxtaposition with those of Omar Khayyam. Whereas I read Khayyam’s texts as essentially profane (in the literal sense of the word, ie *not sacred*) yet expressed in religious terms, so the writings of John of the Cross are sacred in subject, yet seem to be expressed through more personal, secular metaphors.

Finally, I felt a third ‘voice’ was needed. I wanted to include some psalm-like texts, but was consciously trying to avoid including any psalms, thinking this important to maintain the sense of dialogue with, rather than duplication of, the *Chichester Psalms*. Instead, I selected two short extracts from Proverbs.

Figure 14 shows the final symmetrical structure. Two John of the Cross texts form the outer pillars of the piece, with the two Proverbs settings as interludes between *Rubaiyat* extracts. The end of the fifth movement forms the peak of the dramatic arc of the piece – both dynamically (*fortississimo possibile*) and textually (“Nor all thy tears wash out a word of it”).

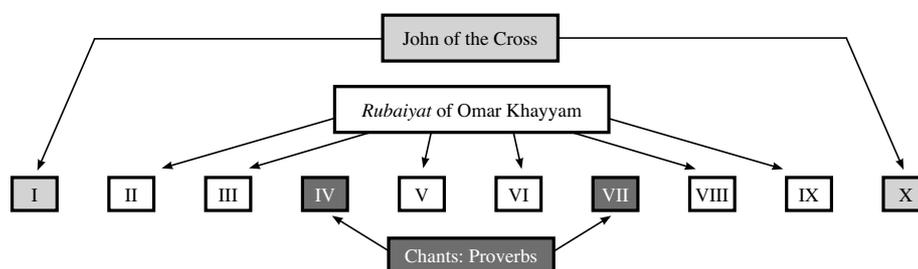


Fig. 14: Text structure of Antiphons

As an undergraduate student at Oxford I spent many evenings assisting the organist with registration changes and page-turning for the daily services. Evensong always included an Anglican chant for the two daily psalms, so the

sound of the choir reverberating from the chapel below sits strongly in my memory and is indelibly linked with the psalm texts.

I remember being particularly struck by how the simple homophonic texture of the chant, moving at a pace dictated by the words, formed moments of calm and contemplation. I had viewed *Antiphons* from the beginning as having a ritualistic undertone, and within the ‘service’ I wanted the fourth and seventh movements to have that same sense. The traditional psalm chants that I had experienced all conform to a three- plus four-bar pattern (see **Figure 15** for an example).

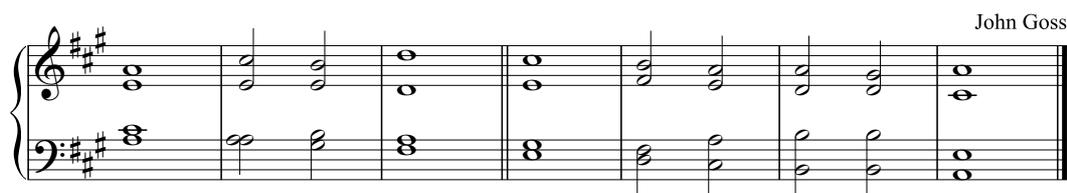


Fig. 15: Traditional Anglican chant

I wanted to recall the sound of these chants. However, I felt that to stick slavishly with the seven-bar pattern would be too constraining for me. My two chant movements (IV and VII) feature more fluid movement than is traditional and this presented some practical notation problems. A choir used to singing chants like this every day would have the music at the top of the page, with all the text underneath – simply marking in where the changes of chord happen. The primary thing they look at is the text, and this keeps the fluidity of phrasing. I therefore had to come up with a system that allowed this primacy of text, whilst allowing the musical freedom I needed.

Figure 16 shows an example of the notation I came up with. By using solid lines to indicate the continuation of the same pitch over many syllables, I have attempted to maintain the essence of the traditional Anglican chant notation, whilst still affording myself the possibility of a wider range of harmonic movement.

The image shows a musical score for four voices, arranged in two pairs. The top pair is labeled 'ALTO' and the bottom pair is labeled 'TENOR'. Each voice part consists of a single staff with a treble clef and a common time signature. The lyrics are: 'Hap - py the man that fin - deth wis - dom, and the man that get - teth un - der - stan - ding.' The notation is minimalist, using a single note per syllable with a long horizontal line underneath to indicate the pitch contour. The dynamics are marked 'pp' (pianissimo) at the beginning of each line. There are also some decorative lines above the notes, possibly indicating phrasing or breath marks.

Fig. 16: Example of chant notation used in Antiphons

4. Structure: narrativity and background melodies

4.1 Melodies as characters: overlap, interaction, mosaic and expansion in *Endgame*

In chronological terms, *Endgame* is the penultimate piece in the portfolio and it begins to draw together all the strands explored in the earlier compositions. The title alludes to the final stages of a chess game, when only a few pieces are left. This composition is about the interactions of just a few fragments of material and, although I do not intend a direct reference to the Beckett play of the same name, the fact that it also deals obsessively with the actions of just a few characters is probably not a coincidence. Furthermore, although my piece (unlike the Beckett) does not specifically set out to avoid any conclusion, it *is* circular in nature: the last two things we hear are only minimally modified versions of the first two.

The two main protagonists are introduced within the first few bars:

1. The flute melody from the beginning to bar 12. This acts throughout as a kind of *leitmotif* – appearing in various guises in the bassoon, the brass (in canon) and strings (in parallel major 6^{ths}).
2. The septuplet piano gesture in the fourth bar. Initially this has an accompanying role, but it recurs throughout and gains greatest significance in the final section (tubular bells at bar 267).

These two main characters are joined by the motif of a rising twelfth – often preceded or followed with a rise or fall of a semitone – which forms not only an important gesture signaling the beginning or ending of sections, but also the basis of much of the bar-to-bar harmonic movement.

The opening 42 bars unfold through overlapping melodies across the woodwind and string instruments. These entries are all derived from the shape of the opening flute melody, which gradually transforms into something that could be seen as a new piece of material. However, I think it is worth drawing attention to the parallel melodic contours (see **Figure 17**). I mentioned in chapter 1 that, for my ‘character-driven’ method of structuring pieces, the ability to manipulate and stretch material without it losing a sense of its singularity is very important. I find that, as long as the overall contour of a melodic line is maintained, material can be readily heard as related.

The image shows three staves of musical notation for a flute part. The first staff is labeled 'Fl. (bar 3)' and shows a sequence of notes in a 3/4 time signature. The second staff is labeled 'Fl. (bar 15)' and shows a more complex melodic line with a triplet of eighth notes. The third staff is labeled 'Fl. (bar 61)' and shows a continuation of the melodic material with another triplet. Arrows point from the notes in the first staff to the corresponding notes in the second and third staves, illustrating the development of the material through interval expansion.

Fig. 17: Development of flute material through interval expansion

Within this process of gradual expansion, I wanted to create the feeling of a single melodic line, even though the material is fragmentary, so there is always a sense of one instrument ‘handing over’ to the next. This fluidity of phrase structure is often enhanced by introducing a 3/8 bar into the relatively stable crotchet pulse to create a temporary sense of acceleration. In the moderate tempo I think this is felt as three quavers, rather than a single elongated beat, and so serves to elide two melodic lines: e.g. bars 36, 39, 42 etc. This could perhaps be viewed as parallel to the natural ebb and flow of a conversation – albeit one of gradually increasing intensity.

4.2 Cantus firmus

In chapter 2, I defined 'construction by accretion' as one of my primary compositional concerns, outlining how I have used the layering process to form pieces from small melodic fragments. Nonetheless, I have come to recognise that this means I have sometimes struggled to ensure there is a single narrative thread running across the changing interactions between layers. In earlier pieces I have tended to gradually introduce more layers of complexity until the material runs into a structural 'brickwall'. However, I have begun more consciously to use slower background melodic strands to control both phrase-to-phrase and, to an extent, section-to-section movement.

The first glimpse of this technique appears in the String Quartet. The material for the second part of the piece (bars 119–146) was composed in a single sitting. It featured in the process of composition much as it does in the piece; it is a moment of calm and of expressive intensity, eschewing the more frenetic surface movement that surrounds it. I was still working on the first part and knew that I wanted to

sow the seeds of this new (although obviously related) idea. The solution I came up with was to implant this as a 'background' melody – to provide short-term structure to the other material (see bars 51–69) and an aural clue to what was to come.

In *Endgame* I began to use this device more consciously as a technique for structuring longer spans of material. As I identified earlier, the opening section begins in a somewhat fragmented way, in much the same vein as other pieces. However, the gradual sense of coalescence is cemented at bar 43 with the introduction of a cantus firmus phrase in the bassoon. This is actually an augmented and extended variation on the flute motif from the opening. I am wary of committing fully to the term cantus firmus, because it might imply a greater degree of preplanning than I use; these background melodies are assembled in a similarly patchwork way to the foreground ones. However, with somewhat diffuse 'surface' material, I find that cantus firmus-like passages form a useful way of providing a background structure. I also explained earlier that, in short-term moment-to-moment construction, I tend to eschew harmonic planning, instead letting the parallel melodic paths dictate moments of the vertical coincidence. This use of cantus firmus-like writing is thus a logical extension of this ethos. By using melody as the backbone, I can provide a useful way to direct my pieces over longer spans, whilst still ensuring a sense of coherence, because the structure is derived from material itself, rather than imposed on it.

4.3 Structural melodies?

Has the use of background melodies started to permeate even deeper into the way I organise pieces structurally? I hinted before that I feel there is a possible connection between the larger structural 'nodes' and the short-term moment-to-moment material in *Missa solemnis* (see chapter 2.2). A similar coincidence occurs in *Endgame*. Perhaps on a subliminal level the melodic material influenced decisions I made on a more structural level.

Endgame is structured in four broad sections, articulated by two 'tonal' pillars (see **Figure 18**). The first (E at bar 190, approximately half way through the piece in duration) is relatively short-lived, whilst the second (B flat at bar 267, beginning the final section) is more fully established, being held as a pedal for some 26 bars. I have specifically avoided giving major or minor key designations to these: within my harmonic language I don't find those helpful. However, I think of these sections as 'tonal' rather than 'nodal' pillars because they form points of relaxation of harmonic tension. That they are a tritone apart is probably significant, although

not pre-planned. More interesting to me is the fact that the E falls a semitone to E flat for the third section of the piece (bar 227).

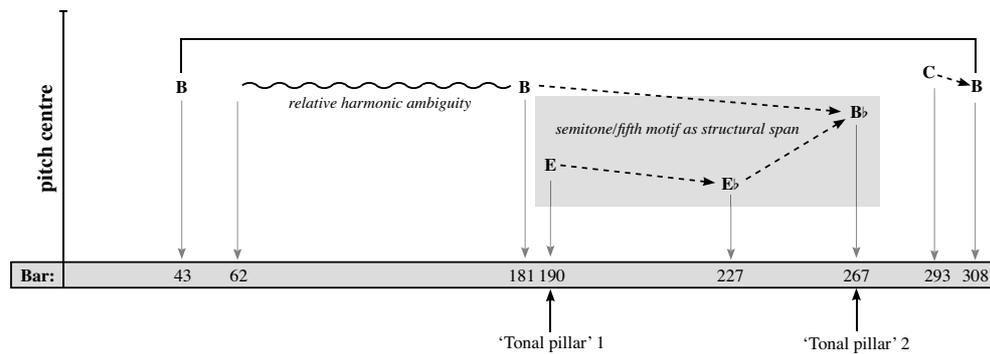


Fig. 18: Structural overview of Endgame

As I mentioned earlier, the rising twelfth (or fifth), with a semitone rise or fall, occurs throughout on the 'surface' level. This piece grew from sketches for a clarinet, piano and percussion piece, and this gesture was my initial starting point: the rising twelfth being hard-wired into the acoustics of the clarinet. It seems more than a coincidence that the significant nodal points of the piece also outline this gesture over a longer structural span.

The first section is certainly more harmonically ambiguous. However, I feel it as being based *around* B. The opening B, C#, D, Eb sonority and flute melody, as well as the placement of the piano gesture, are initial hints of this; and whilst the opening material does wander more than the latter parts, B is clearly established as the pitch centre at both the beginning and end of this initial section.

It can be seen that there are a lot of structural relationships that seem to parallel the surface motivic material of *Endgame*. I am aware of the accusation that this is simply coincidence, or that I am finding a pattern only because I am looking for it; musical analysis seems to afford the possibility of finding almost anything if one is determined to. However, I maintain that these relationships are important, not least because *some* of them were undertaken consciously. The fact that the final section strongly articulates Bb – a semitone fall from the opening – was something I was aware of at the time, and indeed I wrote the final 'epilogue' (bars 293–309) such that it would conclude with a similar fall from a C pedal to B.

4.4 *Afterglow*

Afterglow is the final composition in the portfolio. Unlike the earlier pieces, I did not begin this work with a specific compositional technique to explore. Instead I simply intended to draw on the previous research I had undertaken in an intuitive way to ascertain how the three years working on this portfolio had altered and developed my individual compositional voice.

Many of the techniques I have outlined in previous chapters are clearly evident in this piece as well. Like *Endgame* it deals obsessively with short fragments of material, with the string parts in the opening section outlining the same material over a longer, more structural span. The harmonic language is also derived from the layering of consonant material in much the same way as the String Quartet and *Missa solemnis*. To an extent this is simply reinforcing previously explored ground, although the solution to every compositional problem is clearly slightly different.

However, I feel this piece also signals a new point of departure. Although I have previously stated quite vehemently that I do not undertake any pre-compositional planning, in *Afterglow* I did have a specific shape in mind from the outset. Inspired by witnessing some glorious sunsets on the North Yorkshire Moors, I wanted to write a piece that reflected the simultaneous darkening and warming of the light that happens as the sun goes down. The transition from bright clear light of day into the more muted warmth of what photographers call the ‘golden hour’ before sunset, and finally into the ‘afterglow’ as the sky both darkens and turns a deep red or purple, is something I had witnessed many times in the months before beginning work on this piece. Somehow I wanted to mirror that process audibly in *Afterglow*; thus, the broad narrative arc was predefined before I began composing.

The composition is divided into four main sections, reflecting the natural phenomena I witnessed on one specific occasion. As such, the piece charts the transition from the brightest moment just before the end of the day, through a period of interplaying light beams in thin cloud, to a final recurrence of bright light (albeit warmer in colour) just before the sun sets, to the deep twilight of the ‘afterglow’. This equates to the structure shown in **Figure 19**, with the most active and intense moment right at the beginning, and the piece proceeding through a process of dissipating that energy.

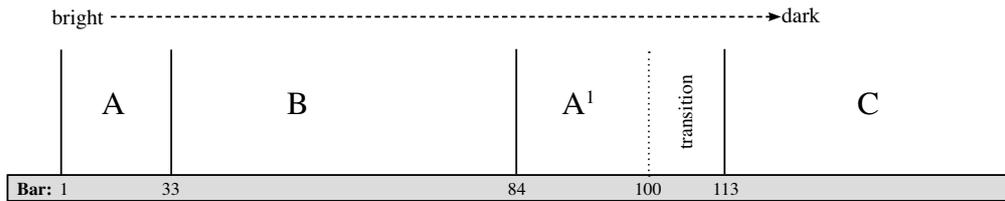


Fig. 19: Structure of Afterglow

The A and A¹ sections are both built using three layers of material running in parallel. The brass and lower woodwind provide a slowly evolving harmonic background of overlapping chords, each based loosely around shifting triads. By eliding each chord I sought to colour each harmony with the new one whilst also providing a sense of very gradual harmonic movement. The upper winds and piano have fast-moving, fragmented material in a high register, to provide a sense of bright, dancing light. In the middle, both in terms of register and speed of movement, the strings have the most overtly melodic material, unfolding the motif shown in **Figure 20**.

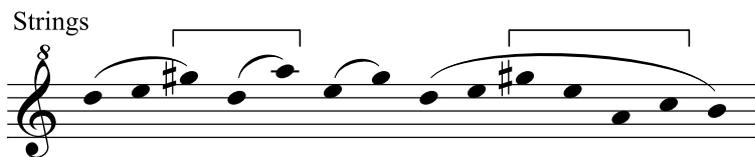


Fig. 20: String motif in Afterglow

The second section is more developmental and fractured. In it I explored various ways of reworking two fragments of the material, marked with brackets in **Figure 20**. At bar 33, the second violin part is an inversion of the three-note shape (see **Figure 21**), whilst the first violin part is derived from the same major 7th, major 3rd and minor 3rd intervals as the four-note figure identified in **Figure 20**. The use of these intervals and shapes is pervasive throughout this section.



Fig. 21: Example of the development of motifs in the B section of Afterglow

The third section is primarily a recapitulation, but establishes the previously heard opening material in a more stable harmonic environment over an E pedal. This serves to clearly articulate the first large harmonic shift in the piece which occurs at bar 100: an A major triad, coloured by a superimposed C major triad in the woodwinds. Up until this point the piece has been relatively static (in terms of harmonic centre) but in keeping with the predefined narrative of the piece, there is a quick transition passage (sunset itself) that moves to the coda at bar 113. This signals the arrival of a more chromatically-saturated harmonic world and a move to a nodal centre of E \flat .

I wanted to ensure this ‘twilight’ section included hints at the previously heard material – in the way bright lights can sometimes seem to linger in one’s vision – and so the section begins with the two sets of the opening three notes layered (see **Figure 21**), whilst in bars 132-138 there is a brief recurrence of the superimposed A major and C major triads from bar 100, and also a complete statement of the primarily melodic material (see **Figure 20**) in the strings in octaves.

b. 113

violin II

viola

cello/d.b.

Fig. 21: Layering of three-note motifs in final section of *Afterglow*

Afterglow demonstrates many of the same compositional concerns as I have shown in earlier pieces and, moreover, explores them on the largest scale – in terms of ensemble size. In that sense it can be viewed as a summarising piece, bringing together the strands I have been exploring over the course of writing this portfolio. However, whether or not the use of a predetermined, programmatic narrative marks the beginning of a different way of approaching structure is something I am keen to continue to explore. It may be simply because I was working with a much larger ensemble than, for example *Endgame*, that the more character-driven and exploratory method of writing I employed previously was not appropriate. However, I feel it is appropriate to conclude the portfolio with a Janus-like piece: taking much from developments in my earlier compositions whilst also signaling new research possibilities for the future.

5. Conclusions

When looking back through these compositions it is strange to think that the final note I wrote in *Afterglow* is separated from the earliest sketches for the String Quartet by over three years. It is clear that, despite the chronological gap, these pieces have much in common; they stem from similar basic musical and intellectual impulses. My fascination with building complexity from simple rules is still as important as ever, whilst my harmonic thinking is still fundamentally reliant on layering consonance to create extended sound-worlds.

However, I also feel that much has changed. These later pieces demonstrate an increased depth of thinking, wider musical influences, and yet also a greater clarity of compositional thought. In many ways the process of undertaking this portfolio has mirrored something of the compositional process I outlined in chapter 1: one of self-analysis, simplification and rebuilding, that has resulted in both a greater degree of complexity (in a piece like *Endgame*) and yet simultaneously a greater sense of singularity of purpose (in *Afterglow*).

I stated in the Abstract that this portfolio charted “a developmental process of investigation, deconstruction and assimilation in the creation of an individual musical voice.” To that end the conclusion is partly a personal one – I certainly feel more fully satisfied by the later works in this portfolio. However, I hope that the process of self-analysis and research that I have outlined throughout this commentary also means that the compositions themselves are more engaging, enjoyable and ultimately satisfying to the listener as well, and will form a strong foundation for further pieces to come.

References

- Adams, Joseph. *A Life of William Shakespeare*, Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1923. Facsimile accessed at <http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=sDbbQfU4KQ4C> (on 12 Jul 2012).
- Adlington, Robert. *Temporality in Post-Tonal Music*. PhD diss., University of Sussex, 1997.
- Aperghis, Georges. *Le corps à corps pour un percussionniste et son zarb*. Paris: Edition Salabert, 1982.
- Bartók, Bela, *Mikrokosmos Vol. 6 (New Definitive Edition)*. London: Boosey & Hawkes Ltd, 1987.
- Bernstein, Leonard. *Chichester Psalms*. London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1965.
- Bernstein, Leonard. *Findings*. London: MacDonald & Co. Ltd, 1982.
- Birtwistle, Harrison. *Pulse Sampler*. London: Universal Edition, 1981.
- Dahlhaus, Carl. *Nineteenth Century Music*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989.
- Dyson, George. 'False relations', in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed., ed. Stanley Sadie and John Tyrell. London: Macmillan, 2001. Accessed at *Grove Music Online*, ed. Laura Macy. <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article_citations/grove/music/09269> (on 28 February 2012).
- Ford, Andrew. *Composer to Composer: Conversations About Contemporary Music*. London: Quartet, 1993.
- Ligeti, Györgi. *Études pour piano – premier livre*. Mainz: Schott, 1986.
- Ligeti, Györgi. *Études pour piano – deuxième livre*. Mainz: Schott, 1998.
- Solie, Ruth. 'The Living Work: Organicism and Musical Analysis'. *19th-Century Music* 4/2 (1980), 147-156.
- Steinitz, Richard. *György Ligeti: Music of the Imagination*. London: Faber and Faber, 2003.
- Xenakis, Iannis. *Dmaathen*. Paris: Edition Salabert, 1976.
- Youens, Susan. *Retracing a Winter's Journey*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1991.