Exchanging Notes

Composer Questions

TEACHER GUIDANCE

There are 2 main ways to use this pack, (1) to teach the process of composing and help solve particular problems in developing a composition, (2) to give students a general understanding of how composers work and what composing is about.

1 TEACHING THE PROCESS OF COMPOSING AND SOLVING PARTICULAR PROBLEMS

- Work with individual students - help them look through the questions to see which one is most relevant to their problem of the moment, and reflect on the answers one or more of the composers gave. NB the student may need help to gain a full understanding of the text - discuss the language and thinking processes with them.

- Work with the whole class, either by leading a whole-class activity in which you as teacher model the composing process, or by setting up a group activity. Stop at key moments to refer to the list of questions; look at the answers some of the composers gave. You could use Literacy Strategy techniques, e.g. give each student a different answer card, they work in pairs and later in groups to compare and analyse what each composer has said.

2 GENERAL UNDERSTANDING OF HOW COMPOSERS WORK

(This could be good preparation for future work with a composer on a workshop or residency.)

- Ask the class to make a list of the questions they would ask a composer. Compare it with the questions used in the pack, and discuss similarities and differences.

- Take a detailed look at the composers' answers to one of the questions. You can use Literacy Strategy techniques such as underlining, think-pair-share, group discussion, snowballing, note-taking, making tables or diagrams. Some of the answers might trigger research activities, e.g. terms such as 'cell', references to Stravinsky, following up the examples of extra-musical inspiration - useful homework assignments.

- The class will now be ready to get to grips with the extended case study (Param Vir). This is a big read! But very rewarding. They can use the list of questions to guide them, e.g. share the questions around the class, ask each student to find out what answer Param gives to their question, then report to the rest of the class. This would be a good homework activity - research may be needed into terms such as Karma etc.

- Students are now ready to interview a real live composer for themselves!

Exchanging Notes

Composer Questions

THE QUESTIONS

1. Where do your ideas come from? And, are there particular sources that reoccur?
2. Do your ideas normally start as musical ideas, or as extra-musical ideas?
3. What form do the musical ideas take?
4. What form do your extra-musical ideas take? And, why were you attracted to them?
5. How do your extra-musical ideas become musical ideas?
6. Do your extra-musical ideas determine/generate structure? How do they do this?
7. Do you compose at the piano or not? Why do you work this way?
8. What techniques do you use to develop musical ideas/material?
9. How do you make decisions about which ideas to keep and which to discard?
10. Many composers talk about setting themselves challenges which they work through in a piece. Do you identify with this?
11. Is there a set way you approach the process of composing?
12. What is your working practice?
13. What do you do when you are stuck?
14. What is the best piece of advice a composition teacher has ever given you?

Birmingham Contemporary Music Group

Colin Matthews

Composer Questions

1 Where do your ideas come from? And, are there particular sources that reoccur?

I'm not sure if I know where ideas come from. Purely musical ideas do not often come to me unless I'm sitting waiting for them (i.e. composing!), although something that does recur is that a live concert may spark off an idea out of the blue: that's not to say that I hear something and copy it, in fact it can cause an opposite reaction - what results probably wouldn't give anyone the least idea of what had started it.

2 Do your ideas normally start as musical ideas, or as extra-musical ideas?

Non-musical ideas precede the actual composition; once I'm composing the ideas are almost invariably musical ones - even if they are abstract (i.e. architecture/shapes, rather than notes). I often think of a piece in terms of colours, although that's a personal thing that may not make sense to anyone else.

3 What form do your musical ideas take?

The process of beginning a piece usually follows the same pattern: I tend to amass material, both melodic and harmonic, which may be quite amorphous, and then organise it and look at it analytically. Usually I will build charts derived from this material - note rows (rarely 12-note rows) and chord charts - most often 4, 5 or 6-note chords - which I subsequently use selectively. It may happen that a lot of background material of this kind is accumulated, but in the event I use very little of it. However it's always a useful process. Sometimes - not often enough - ideas come out of the blue with no piece attached.

4 What form do your extra-musical ideas take? And, why were you attracted to them?

I'm not sure if this counts as an 'extra-musical' element - setting texts is, of course, an altogether different process, since the text will have a direct influence on the music, on the structure, determining melodic elements etc. But the two are inextricably intertwined, since the music hardly exists without the text. (I have, however, added texts to pre-existing music, which is not a procedure I would recommend!)

5 How do the extra-musical become musical ideas?

Some time in the late 1980s I was commissioned by the LSO to write a piece for Rostropovich to conduct, in a series devoted to the music of Britten which was planned for 1993. It was not intended to be a tribute to Britten, and when I discussed it with Rostropovich we agreed that it might take the form of a Concerto for Orchestra, something of an orchestral showpiece. I made some initial sketches, but didn't find it easy to get the work started. In 1991 I visited my grandfather's grave on the Somme - he was killed in 1918 - and saw for the first time the Thiepval Memorial, Lutyen's huge untriumphal arch commemorating those soldiers whose bodies were never recovered from the Somme battlefields. Although the musical reaction to this was not immediate, it began to determine the character and shape of the piece, and I gave it the title Memorial'. This wasn't at all the piece I'd expected to write initially; and because I am wary of attaching labels to pieces - ' it's about the First World War', which ultimately it isn't, since once the musical ideas took shape, they moved away from anything so emotive - I didn't intend to reveal the source. But in an incautious interview before the first performance I mentioned the Thiepval connection; and inevitably the piece is now stuck with it. However Rostropovich, who knew nothing of the background, decided that it was a memorial piece for Britten, which goes to show that extra-musical ideas count for little in the end . . .

6 Do your extra-musical ideas determine/generate structure? How do they do this?

In this case of the piece I wrote for Rostropovich, yes, the piece is a kind of arch, although in shape, not ABCBA but more like ABCAD, and in fact the first A section was not the first part to be written - the structure remained rather fluid during the composition process. But this is not an easy question to answer: I find generally that whatever may have influenced a piece, it takes on its own musical logic and leaves everything else behind. I might mention two pieces that have titles which might sound as though they are influenced by extra-musical concepts, but whose musical argument is much more important.

Colin Matthews

Composer Questions

For 'Hidden Variables', written for BCMG in 1989, I wrote a tongue-in-cheek programme note relating it to theories of particle physics; but the work itself pursues a purely musical path in which pastiche minimalist ideas are confronted and destroyed in the course of the piece. 'Broken Symmetry' (1992) also takes its title from particle physics; here there is an abstract musical concept where the music - a sequence of scherzos and trios - reaches a central point, as if hitting a mirror, and then runs backwards. But the symmetry is broken because the sequence doesn't follow a straightforwardbackwards path, and the music is systematically distorted and foreshortened. This concept may be more extra-musical than musical : I certainly conceived the piece initially in terms of its shape, but the musical path it took wasn't quite what I'd expected.

7 Do you compose at the piano or not? Why do you work this way?

For the most part, yes, more so than I used to; I've never been able to write piano music away from the piano. I'm not a natural musician and don't consider myself to have a particularly good ear (I've always thought that what I do have is a certain imaginative ability, which might have been applied to other art forms - I did think of taking up painting before I left school). Consequently the piano is a pretty indispensable aid, and I don't feel comfortable composing without one to hand. But it can get in the way: the ideal is straight from mind to paper.

8 What techniques do you use to develop musical ideas/material?

This really needs a 1000 word essay, at least! I work quite systematically, although recently I've tried to be more intuitive; but I always try to make a point of ignoring whatever specific processes I may have used in the previous piece, so that composing always has an element of starting again: I don't like repeating myself. The composing process is rather a mysterious one, and I prefer to keep it that way.

9 How do you make decisions about which ideas to keep and which to discard?

I think that that's what composing is really about: the ability to be self-critical. I'm critical enough about existing pieces, let alone those which have, in whole or part, been discarded. Also I try to retain a sense of freedom while composing which means that, however pre-determined the piece may have been, I'm prepared to change it, perhaps radically, at any stage. It can be a revelation to find that a piece has been going in quite the wrong direction and needs wholesale restructuring, even if it's difficult to make the decision to reject a lot of hard work.

10 Many composers talk about setting themselves challenges which they work through in a piece. Do you identify with this?

Again, this is the essence of composing. I'm very wary of finding easy answers to composing, although it's a very good feeling when the problems become solved and everything suddenly seems to go smoothly.

11 Is there a set way you approach the process of composing?

The answer is no, most pieces demand a new approach. I'm not sure what I can answer otherwise here unless I launch into theories of language and aesthetics, which I'm reluctant to do without considerably more space!

Colin Matthews

Composer Questions

12 What is your working practice?

In the first place I nearly always tend to be working on more than one piece at the same time, so that if I get stuck on one I can turn to another, and quite often there's a certain amount of cross-fertilisation. I need stretches of at least several days at a ime to feel comfortable - the odd snatched day is not often useful. In purely practical terms, my composing day usually doesn't begin until the afternoon (which doesn't mean that I may not have tried to get started in the morning) and the best time for composing often between 5 and 8 pm. I work with pencil (2B only) and paper (usually 22-stave A3 landscape for sketching) for the initial drafts, transferring to computer (Acorn Sibelius, not PC, since it's closer to 'real' working methods) for the later stages (always the fair copy; sometimes 2nd drafts). If a work is going well I can work at any time; which is of course also the If a work is going well I can work at any time; which is of course also the case for fair copies. (As an aside, I was initially extremely wary of working on computer, and although I've been using it for nearly10 years I feel very strongly that it's essential to be master of what it does, rather than blindly accepting what it offers. I worry that there's a new generation that will have relatively little experience of writing notes down on paper: I don't think that the relationship of the computer to music is the same as words to word-processor.)

13 What do you do when you are stuck?

Stop. Preferably sleep on it.

14 What is the best piece of advice a composition teacher has ever given you?

To be prepared to discard ruthlessly what might have seemed good when it first went on paper.

Composer Biography

My parents were not particularly musical, although there are a few musicians to be found amongst my distant relations, and my school was spectacularly unmusical - an attempt to start an orchestra found only about 5 participants. So I don't really know how I became a composer, especially as, although I become very wrapped up in music from the age of about 14, for most of my school years I thought I might go to an art college rather than a university. And in the event I studied classics, not music, although I spent most of my time in the music department, and was subsequently offered the opportunity to study for an MA in composition - my first musical qualification since Grade 1 piano! Before that, though, I had got involved with the reconstruction of Mahler's unfinished Tenth Symphony, from which I learned more than from anything else. I suppose that there is a lot of Mahler in my own music, but at a distance, and I feel much more part of a European tradition than an 'English' composer. I'm not very good at talking about my own music, but one thing I can say is that my relationship with three major ensembles over the past 15 or so years, the London Symphony Orchestra, the Hallé Orchestra, and BCMG, has been hugely important: knowing who you are writing for makes such a difference, and the musicians' enthusiastic response makes me think that I may, after all, have chosen the right career.

Exchanging
Notes

John Woolrich

Composer Questions

1 Where do your ideas come from? And, are there particular sources that reoccur?

Anywhere and everywhere. I definitely need outside stimulation to start the process: it's like the grit that the pearl forms around in an oyster. The beauty of being an artist is that you are on duty all the time: you don't go to the office. So, as an intelligent, sensitive, curious human being, everything you see, or read, or feel, or hear changes you. You should look at everything, even mistakes...

'An accident is perhaps the only thing that really inspires us'. (Stravinsky)

Also it's worth remembering that most music comes from other music: the Italian composer Luciano Berio said, 'there is no tabula rasa, especially in music'.

Listening, copying, stealing, borrowing, absorbing other people's music is natural to the creative process. Everything is a found object.

'A good composer doesn't imitate, he steals.' (Stravinsky)

2 Do your ideas normally start as musical ideas, or as extra-musical ideas?

It's about half and half. When I was younger, I used to start with a big idea (the whole shape, or drama of a piece) and work down to the details. So my oboe concerto started off with one big idea about the discrepancy between one oboe and a huge symphony orchestra in a big hall. Melodic, structural, rhythmic, timbral and poetic ideas flowed from that initial thought. Now I'm more experienced and confident about making large-scale structures (that won't fall down in the middle) I tend to work from small to big. I usually, as it happens, start with pitches and then find rhythms. But an orchestral colour or atmosphere might equally be a starting point.

3 What form do your musical ideas take?

Anything and everything affects you. You can't separate the things you want to influence you from everything else. You may be looking hard at medieval techniques, but you've still, perhaps, seen an awful lot of junk TV and pop music and so on.

Sometimes you might react against something that comes your way. The Polish composer Lutoslawski said that one of his major pieces came to him while he was listening to a piece by John Cage (which he wasn't enjoying). I take it that to be an interesting artist you have to be an interesting human being. Or an interested one. Throughout my life, I've lurched from one enthusiasm to another. At the moment, I'm obsessed with gardening (and reading about it). I haven't a clue how this changes me as a composer, but it's all part of the process.

4 What form do your extra-musical ideas take? And, why were you attracted to them?

Like many composers, I'm attracted to codes and ciphers. (Bach, Messiaen, Ravel and Schumann, for instance, translated words into music). Grove's Dictionary has an excellent entry on codes and cryptography written by Eric Sams. He quotes three musical 'alphabets' by Honegger, Ravel and Michael Haydn.

5 How do the extra-musical become musical ideas?

When you've got something down on the page you look at it, and see what it sparks in your imagination. You never know when inspiration will strike. It might be that you have a brilliant idea at the outset and everything flows from that. On the other hand (and this is true for me) other composers have to make some material somehow (and it can be virtually anything) and then the inspiration comes from seeing what can be done with it. The Irish poet W.B.Yeats said you can make a poem with anything, it depends what you do with it. And Picasso said 'An idea is a beginning point and no more. If you contemplate it becomes something else.'

John Woolrich

Composer Questions

7 Do you compose at the piano or not? Why do you work this way?

Half at the piano, half away from it. Partly to check things, partly because doodling around on a keyboard can inspire you...

'fingers are great inspirers' (Stravinsky)

'The composer improvises aimlessly the way an animal grubs about' (Stravinsky)

...and partly because there's a danger of the act of composing getting too far away from the practical business of making sounds. I can spend days hammering out chords or scraps of melody over and over again. I like the idea of getting inside the sound, not to mention familiarising myself with, or learning, my own material. You don't want composing to be like making a pot without getting mud on your hands.

8 What techniques do you use to develop musical ideas/material?

I've taught myself a number of traditional techniques for taking an idea and making it bigger or longer. All are very familiar and traditional. Some are very old - isorhythm, hocket, canon, organum - and some are newer: Stravinsky invented some simple and beautiful ways of proliferating notes, which virtually all my colleagues have borrowed or adapted.

'The more art is controlled, limited, worked over, the more it is free.' (Stravinsky)

'Certain critics have done me the honour to see poetry in what I do, but I paint by my method with no other thought in mind'. (Seurat)

9 How do you make decisions about which ideas to keep and which to discard?

It's an important exercise to keep remembering what the most important single thing about your piece is. It's a fast piece, it's a slow one, It's a singing piece, a dark one, a high-energy rhythmic piece etc... And then making your piece the darkest, or slowest, or fastest, or most energetic one you can.

The painter Francis Bacon said 'Art is a question of going too far.'

Keep checking that you don't unnecessarily stray from this fundamental point. If your piece is fast, why have a slow section? The answer may be that a bit of contrast could intensify the big idea. But if not, throw it away.

The French film-maker Robert Bresson said 'One does not create by adding, but by taking away...'.

And he also said, 'Empty the pond to get the fish.'

10 Many composers talk about setting themselves challenges which they work through in a piece. Do you identify with this?

Challenge is good. It helps stop your music getting stuck in a rut: if you are a master of piano miniatures, write an opera. Certainly, there can be problems in composing, and certainly you find ways of solving them. But the way composers use the metaphor of composing as 'problem-solving' always sounded a bit grim to me.

The Dutch composer Louis Andriessen sees the matter differently: 'I want to pose problems, not solve them.'

John Woolrich

Composer Questions

11 Is there a set way you approach the process of composing?

Yes, but it's only habit, my habit at that. If you asked a room full of composers how they approach the process of composing you'd probably get as many different answers as there were composers. As listeners, we don't mind what a composer does as long as the resulting music is wonderful.

12 What is your working practice?

I don't have set ways. Because I've written a lot of music I know how much and what I have to do to produce, say, a twenty-minute orchestral piece within a year. But what I do within any particular day doesn't bother me at all. Some days it's better to read the paper, or make endless cups of coffee and not to work. You have to follow your nose. Other times I've spent a week without much sleep, working most of the time. My pieces tend to start slowly, tentatively - I have to feel my way into them. But when they get going they generate their own momentum.

13 What do you do when you are stuck?

I go away and do something else and don't think about it; and then, usually, when I come back I know exactly what to do. I also find it valuable sometimes to think about my music away from the paper - on a train for instance. It's a useful exercise to try to go through a piece in my head and see how far I can get. That also helps get the whole shape of the piece in perspective. If things get out of control it's good to simplify, get back to basics, to ask myself simple questions - what do I most want to do in this bit? To what extent am I fulfilling that ambition? How could I do it better?

14 What is the best piece of advice a composition teacher has ever given you?

I'm largely self-taught, but if I'd been taught by the French novelist Stendhal it could have been: 'To be clear at all costs'.

Composer Biography

Many, many years ago I wrote one of the first pieces that BCMG ever commissioned, it was called 'Lending Wings'. Since then they have asked me to write two more pieces, 'Bitter Fruit', an enormous, evening-long, music-theatre piece for actors and musicians and 'Cutting a Caper' for a mixed group of BCMG and young players.

At the moment I'm discussing the idea of yet another piece for a couple of year's time. Because I've enjoyed working with BCMG so much I was pleased to be asked to take on the role as their Artistic Associate, which means giving advice. I do quite a bit of planning of concerts, above all at the Aldeburgh Festival which I programme with another composer, Thomas Adès.

I want my music to be clear and clean in its sound, but ambiguous in its message. I've written every kind of music from big orchestral pieces for the Proms and opera, to tiny chamber works and songs.

I pick up inspiration from everything and everywhere: I'm an eclectic music lover, I read voraciously, love cinema, and go to art galleries whenever I can.

Exchanging
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Peter Wiegold

Composer Questions

1 Where do your ideas come from? And, are there particular sources that reoccur?

My ideas equally come from sound and poetic starting points. Also from commissions! Ideas that others provide can open new doors. There are themes I seem to keep returning to - to do with real and other. Brief glimpses - farewells (death) - the intangible - melting clocks - nonsense, the surreal - impermanence - joy and spiritual ecstasy - spiritual devotion - the south (Spain, Middle East.....)

3 What form do your musical ideas take?

A quality of sound, a kind of resonance, a kind of movement (vibration).

4 What form do your extra-musical ideas take? And, why were you attracted to them?

More poetic and spiritual ideas than more objective or structural or sculptural ideas.

5 How do the extra-musical become musical ideas?

Melting clocks is obvious - intangibility through unresolved harmonies (they feel both here and elsewhere) ambivalence through symmetric scales. eg whole tone or octatonic (tone-semitone-tone semitone etc.), joy through lifted, heightened rhythms.

6 Do your extra-musical ideas determine/generate structure? How do they do this?

I am a great believer in the idea that the large mirrors the small. They grow from the same DNA. So the whole structure might be an expanded mirror/reflection of a short moment. I also believe, keep thinking the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

7 Do you compose at the piano or not? Why do you work this way?

Yes. I can feel the material. If I compose only in my head, it can easily be more contrived, less natural.

8 What techniques do you use to develop musical ideas/material?

My favourite metaphor at the moment is re-potting! All material results from an original plant but it is continually re-grown in other environments, transplanted, discovers new branches, new shapes, new sizes, new environments. In other words all aterial is developed organically. I look for patterns/features/ characteristics - say two significant intervals, or a rhythmic gesture - and then spin these out in all sorts of other ways. I invent systems out of actual discovered, felt material rather than in any more objective way.

9 How do you make decisions about which ideas to keep and which to discard?

I try to listen and distance myself. I listen through first thing in the morning, as if it's somebody else's music. Look for simplicity and organic unity - sadly many good ideas have to go just because they get in the way of others, are overbearing or dominate too much and create confusion. Keep it simple. Less is more.

10 Many composers talk about setting themselves challenges which they work through in a piece. Do you identify with this?

Once I have started gathering material I look out for things that stand out as key ideas, I try to look for organic processes, then be rigorous about following through every possible implication of an idea. For example, if I particularly feel the interval of a 5th and a semitone together are significant in the unfolding music then I plot lots more of them.

Peter Wiegold

Composer Questions

11 Is there a set way you approach the process of composing?

Often by improvising, recording this then listening carefully for things that seem to carry the essence of the feeling I want. Then carefully extracting this and working the same material over again.

12 What is your working practice?

Usually mornings. I always stop for 'The World at One' on Radio 4. The only set point in my day.

13 What do you do when you are stuck?

Know that somehow I have to let go. Try and rediscover that things look different from a distance. The most valuable thing I ever learnt, and it took a long time, was the ability to say no to material and let it go.

14 What is the best piece of advice a composition teacher has ever given you?

Start each day as if you've never composed before.

Composer Biography

I did not take up formal music lessons until the upper 6th. Before that, I only had piano lessons so was largely self-taught, and played as much in rock bands and jazz bands as classical ensembles. I went to University and got a B.Mus., M.Mus. and Ph.D. so studied classical music thoroughly, and then went on to begin a career as composer and conductor. My early 'band' influences were always there and after a while I began to be interested in seeing how other kinds of music worked. I studied Indian music (playing with Ravi Shankar's chief pupil), Javanese Gamelan music (in Java) and also worked with Greek and African musicians. I've worked in theatre, cabaret, and also much in education, introducing children and students to practical and creative music-making, including a lot of improvisation, and crossing many styles. Now I work again as a 'classical' conductor and composer but am able to bring these other influences, and my ability to work with improvisation, into my work. I've worked with BCMG in several ways, but especially introducing the players to improvisation and being part of a 'creative ensemble' which culminated in our 'Invisible Cities' concert, September 2004. My inspirations are wide - but they are usually 'poetic', from poetry or from nature, rather than abstract. I've always been religiously influenced and recently have been influenced by Sufi and Buddhist texts.

Exchanging
Notes

Philip Cashian

Composer Questions

1 Where do your ideas come from? And, are there particular sources that reoccur?

This is a difficult question. They tend to start as non-musical ideas that give me an overall feel for the piece. Recent examples are a chapter from a book that describes a raucous festival in Spain, a poem about night by Kathleen Raine and the Apollo 11 space mission. I like to get an overview of the whole piece - almost seeing it from a distance and then getting closer up to it as I get more specific ideas. In other words from the vague to the specific. I don't have a sketch book or keep musical fragments. What doesn't get used in a piece goes in the bin. There are sources that recur probably because I write each piece in pretty much the same way. A lot of ideas tend to be visual. Musical ideas early on are always chords which get pushed around until something new comes from them like a short melodic idea or a rhythm.

2 Do your ideas normally start as musical ideas, or as extra-musical ideas?

I do have vague musical ideas, usually from listening to other people's music. For example, I want to write a slow 6 -10 minute orchestral piece because of several pieces of this kind I've heard. Although I don't want to copy them, The 'genre' of such a piece interests me.

4 What form do your extra-musical ideas take? And, why were you attracted to them?

What attracts me to starting from non-musical ideas is that something like a text or visual image can give you a focus for a piece of music that you can return to. It's a good way of being able to put your finger on what it is you are trying to do in a piece without being technical. This is particularly useful if you get bogged down with detail or get stuck. I'm also attracted to non-musical ideas as I just find them exciting. It can be a way of collaborating without actually having to! They are a good way of erecting scaffolding before you've written any actual music so giving yourself a frame within which to start writing. And beginning is always the most difficult bit. Having said this I am starting to write more without non-musical ideas behind the music as I'm finding that different pieces are starting to do the same things in different ways (like generating fast music or similar structures) which I'm interested in pursuing.

5 How do the extra-musical become musical ideas?

The first movement of the 'Three Pieces' is based on a chapter from 'Joseph', a novel by Julian Rathbone which describes a raucous Easter Festival in Burgos, Spain in the early 19th century. The chapter moves quickly from one scene/image to another. The music does the same, 15 or so short sections are placed back to back with no transitions or links. The music doesn't literally copy the narrative of the chapter but hopefully captures something of the chaos and festivity of it.

6 Do your extra-musical ideas determine/generate structure? How do they do this?

Sometimes the music can start to suggest it's own shape/structure which always feels more natural to me.

7 Do you compose at the piano or not? Why do you work this way?

I don't have a good ear and need the piano to hear chords and check things. I think it would be a good idea to write away from the piano more and am trying to do it. I'm also trying to use Sibelius more as a tool for composing rather than just typesetting.

8 What techniques do you use to develop musical ideas/material?

Polyrhythmic planning, heterophony, repetition, number patterns, pitch and chordal rotation (as in late Stravinsky), transposition. Anything I can think of!!

9 How do you make decisions about which ideas to keep and which to discard?

Time is a good natural selection process that does it for you. It sometimes feels better to get rid of something than create something and can be quite liberating.

Philip Cashian

Composer Questions

10 Many Composers talk about setting themselves challenges which they work thraught in a piece. Do you identify with this?

Absolutely not! I don't believe in making anything more difficult than it need be and certainly not setting myself challenges.

11 Is there a set way you approach the process of composing?

No. If I did have a set way of writing, I'd get bored of doing it.

12 What is your working practice?

I only work when I know I have at least 2 hours free, When I'm actually composing I tend to work for no longer than 30/45 minutes at a time without stopping for a few minutes. I can only really work in my study at home.

13 What do you do when you are stuck?

Stop and get depressed. Going out is helpful. Just setting foot out of the front door can help sometimes.

14 What is the best piece of advice a composition teacher has ever given you?

Olly Knussen - "If you get stuck trying to write something try and do the complete opposite".

Composer Biography

I was born in Manchester in 1963 and read music at Cardiff University and then went on to study with the composer/conductor Oliver Knussen at the Guildhall. I attended the Tanglewood Summer School in the US in 1990 where I studied with the American composer Lukas Foss. I now live in London and teach composition at the Royal Academy of Music and Royal Holloway College. Most of my output is chamber and orchestral concert music, written to commission from numerous ensembles, orchestras and organisations such as the BBC. I have had performances and radio broadcasts all over the world and in 2003/4 my piano piece, 'Landscape', was included in the Associated Board's Grade 8 Syllabus and performed in over 30 countries. I am particularly interested in Twentieth Century classical music, i.e. Stravinsky, Tippett and Sibelius, as well as more recent composers such as Ligeti, Berio, Zappa and Nancarrow. I am also interested in rock music and worked with Radiohead in 2004. Recent pieces include 'Io', for the BBC National Orchestra of Wales inspired by Jupiter's moon of the same name and 'Caprichos' for clarinet, piano, violin and cello which was inspired by the engravings of Goya. I am currently composer in residence at the Centre for Young Musicians in London and have recently completed a piece for 300 children based on the Apollo 11 space mission.

Tansy Davies

Composer Questions

1 Where do your ideas come from? And, are there particular sources that reoccur?

Ideas can come from anywhere. Sometimes just listening to music can make you want to write some music because you get ideas from what you've heard and you start to think of ways of doing things differently. Sometimes an idea can come from a sound - an extended technique that you'd like to explore and push to its limits.

2 Do your ideas normally start as musical ideas, or as extra-musical ideas?

Extra-musical ideas can be helpful, they can give you instant structure. I often look to nature and science for inspiration because there are so many patterns and systems to be found which can be transformed into music. Using found patterns in this way helps to inform atonal music with a logic which can underpin everything from harmony and rhythm to large scale structure.

4 What form do your extra-musical ideas take? And, why were you attracted to them?

A musical idea could start with an imagined sound or texture, a sequence of pitches, a rhythmic bell, in fact it could be anything connected to sound.

5 How do the extra-musical become musical ideas?

An extra-musical idea could take the form of a shape - a spiral for example. I'm attracted to abstract shapes and natural systems because those things are very closely related to music - music is abstract and music uses systems (like repetition, even temperament, the harmonic series etc.)

6 Do your extra-musical ideas determine/generate structure? How do they do this?

You could make a pitch spiral by analysing the contours of a spiral (I think there are two basic types - one that unravels evenly and one that widens as it goes round) and transferring them into a line of pitches. The start of the line might emerge as being very chromatic and the intervals could widen as the musical spiral unravels.

The extra-musical ideas that I have mentioned are all related to structure at some level. I have already described how a harmonic language can be formed out of these ideas. On a larger scale certain pitches can be identified as being more important than others, it could be that they don't crop up very often in the spiral of pitches so they need special treatment!

These 'special' notes could be assigned to a role of 'signifiers'; whenever they are heard something changes or a passage is repeated - as in ritualistic structure. Many of Birtwistle's early works use ideas like this; good examples of pieces to listen to would be 'Verses for Ensemble' or 'Ritual Fragment'.

7 Do you compose at the piano or not? Why do you work this way?

I don't do much composing at the piano. I tend to move between working out systems at my desk and putting ideas together on the computer. The first stage (at the desk) is like making the substance or material which I can work with - like a potter who has to make his/her own clay before they can begin. The second stage is the actual composing part - it's about identifying the nature of the materials I've made and forming roles for them. At this point I identify or make relationships between different materials so that a context emerges and the musical ideas become part of a deeper and more intuitive process.
I work with the computer because it's there. If it wasn't there I'd work in another way. I don't think it matters how you do it.

Tansy Davies

Composer Questions

8 What techniques do you use to develop musical ideas/material?

I use quite basic techniques for developing material, such as taking a line and altering it by augmenting or diminishing its intervals. I also apply this sort of technique to rhythm. I invent rules, games and impose restrictions on material as I go along and they often only apply to a few bars so I tend to forget them. The rules normally come out of the material itself, so they are hard to reproduce.

9 How do you make decisions about which ideas to keep and which to discard?

Decisions about what to keep and what to disregard are the most important ones. It's all down to intuition and it's to do with working out what it actually is that you're trying say.

10 Many composers talk about setting themselves challenges which they work through in a piece. Do you identify with this?

I have a low boredom threshold so I have to keep myself on my toes. I never repeat anything I've done before and I'm driven by a desire to explore new ways of doing things so that I'm constantly challenged.

11 Is there a set way you approach the process of composing?

For me composing is like tuning in to a higher level of consciousness and a deeper level of thinking. It can be a very calming thing to do as I have to block out the rest of the world in order to open the creative channel.

12 What is your working practice?

My ideal day is to work from about 8am to 2pm and then go out to the gym! However composers often have to go out and do other things to earn money- so not every day works out like this.

13 What do you do when you are stuck?

When I'm stuck I go and lie down for half an hour during which time a solution usually comes. If not then I go to the gym to get rid of the tension and stress that's caused by worrying about it.

14 What is the best piece of advice a composition teacher has ever given you?

George Benjamin said "Just because you can't see all the leaves on a tree at once, doesn't mean you can leave them out".

Simon Bainbridge said "Make something happen every ten seconds".

John Woolrich said "You don't have to be forceful to make an impact".

Simon Holt said "You've got to let rip".

Tansy Davies

Composer Biography

My music has lots of sides to it and never stays in one place for very long, its always looking for different routes to take. Sometimes its very rhythmical and physical- this side of my music comes from my love of dancing so you'll often hear dance-like passages weaving in and out. It can also be weird, monstrous, ghostly, delicate and funny.

I like to make patterns in music so I look for patterns around me for inspiration. Nature is full of patterns, for example, in the way a plant decides which direction a new shoot should take or how gravity works. I also find visual art very inspiring-Islamic art in particular- which is also made up of patterns and is highly decorative. Other music is also inspiring, I particularly like things that are raw and a bit wild like Sicilian folk music or the Greek composer Xenakis.

All of my interests feed into composing, a few of these include playing the horn, interior design, gardening, and swimming in the open air.

My work with the BCMG has been quite varied - I've been involved in a few education projects in schools, I've written a piece for professionals and young players to play together. They also performed a piece of mine called 'Inside Out 2' at last year's Aldeburgh Festival.

Case Study

PARAM VIR

Dye the mind in colour

I. HAVE A FABULOUS IDEA! THEN ZOOM IN!

Ideas for music arise from the world in which we live, from our lives. It is important to start with a really good idea. Maybe, hopefully, a stunning idea! The initial impulse can be a story, a work of visual art, a political happening, perhaps just a feeling about someone, or something, special or unusual, or it could be a pure sound captured in a fleeting sonic imprint. That first impulse must have the potential to generate deep feeling, or the work will be lacking in energy. Many unsuccessful works started their lives as dull ideas. Are we awake as composers, responding consciously to life around us? Is there a necessity to compose this piece of music? Why do we want to write it? Does it truly move us, excite us? If we are bored by it, we can be sure our audience will be, too. So we must ensure a good idea, something that is compelling and extraordinary.

I would like to share a personal experience. When I was 16, in my last year of high school in Delhi, I heard about the Czechoslovak revolution against Soviet repression. The Czechs hoped for political freedom from Russian control and the typical Russian response was to suppress this brutally and send in tanks to crush them. I was hugely upset by this as a teenager, and even more dismayed that the then Indian Prime Minister refused to side with the Czechs in the United Nations debate. I wrote a critical article for the newspaper (published the very next day!), and soon an idea for a new opera sprouted in my mind, an opera in which this sort of resistance to authoritarian rule would form an important theme. That opera has yet to be written, but the experience of the Czech revolution has remained vibrant and will certainly form the backdrop for my next large-scale work of music-theatre. I have been thinking about it's sound world for many years now. When I write it, I hope it will be as compelling and urgent as when I first experienced the news of the Czechoslovakian revolution in 1968.

With my work 'The Theatre of Magical Beings', written for Birmingham Contemporary Music Group, the source of inspiration was mythological, rather than political. I wanted to connect with four imaginary non-human creatures, from different world traditions, and to visualise what sound impulses arose from encountering these creatures (Garuda, Uroborus, Elephant and The Simurgh) in an inner space, a theatrical space within my own mind. I wanted the creatures to talk to me through their sound, through sonic phenomena in a highly dramatic personal encounter. Thus arose the aural images for the work.

Both of these two examples contain extra-musical sources of inspiration. That is usually how it works for me. But sometimes one can get an image directly: wake up one morning and hear a viola da gamba playing in one's inner ear, loud, insistent, clear. Then one just goes to one's studio and takes aural dictation, puts it down on paper! I wrote my gamba piece 'Tender Light' in this way.

What form do the musical ideas take? Usually I start with a bird's eye view of the piece. But I know from experience that once the picture has developed sufficient form and shape, one must zoom in, get inside the picture, for amazing new sound objects that present themselves - not always apparent in a large overall view.

Case Study

PARAM VIR

There is an interesting stage when one must leave the stratospheric bird's eye view and get down to the detail, to the surface of the music itself. This is scary, exciting and produces many surprises. This introduces the domain of technique where specific methods and procedures are utilized to make ideas (internal notions) become embodied (hence externalized).

Ideas come from the world we live in, and from the quality of our contact with it. Music arises from meeting life, and is an expression of that meeting point. Is the music immediate and emotive? Is it remote and cerebral? Does it contain brilliant line and colour or is it drab, featureless and grey? Does it have vibrant physical energy? Or is it, alas, rather boring? Is there enchantment? Sometimes we forget what music is for! Music isn't there to satisfy the music theory pundits who undertake mind-boggling analysis... Music is there to enchant and delight. That's quite simple! It must reveal! The basis of Indian classical music is the Raga - and Raga means 'that which dyes the mind in colour'. What a marvellous notion! If music cannot do that, then all that technique and cleverness amount to little. But if the music can truly contain a vibrant, extraordinary sound-image, if it can 'dye the mind in colour', then good technique is a trusted ally.

Ex. 1 A page from the Elephant Energy Template

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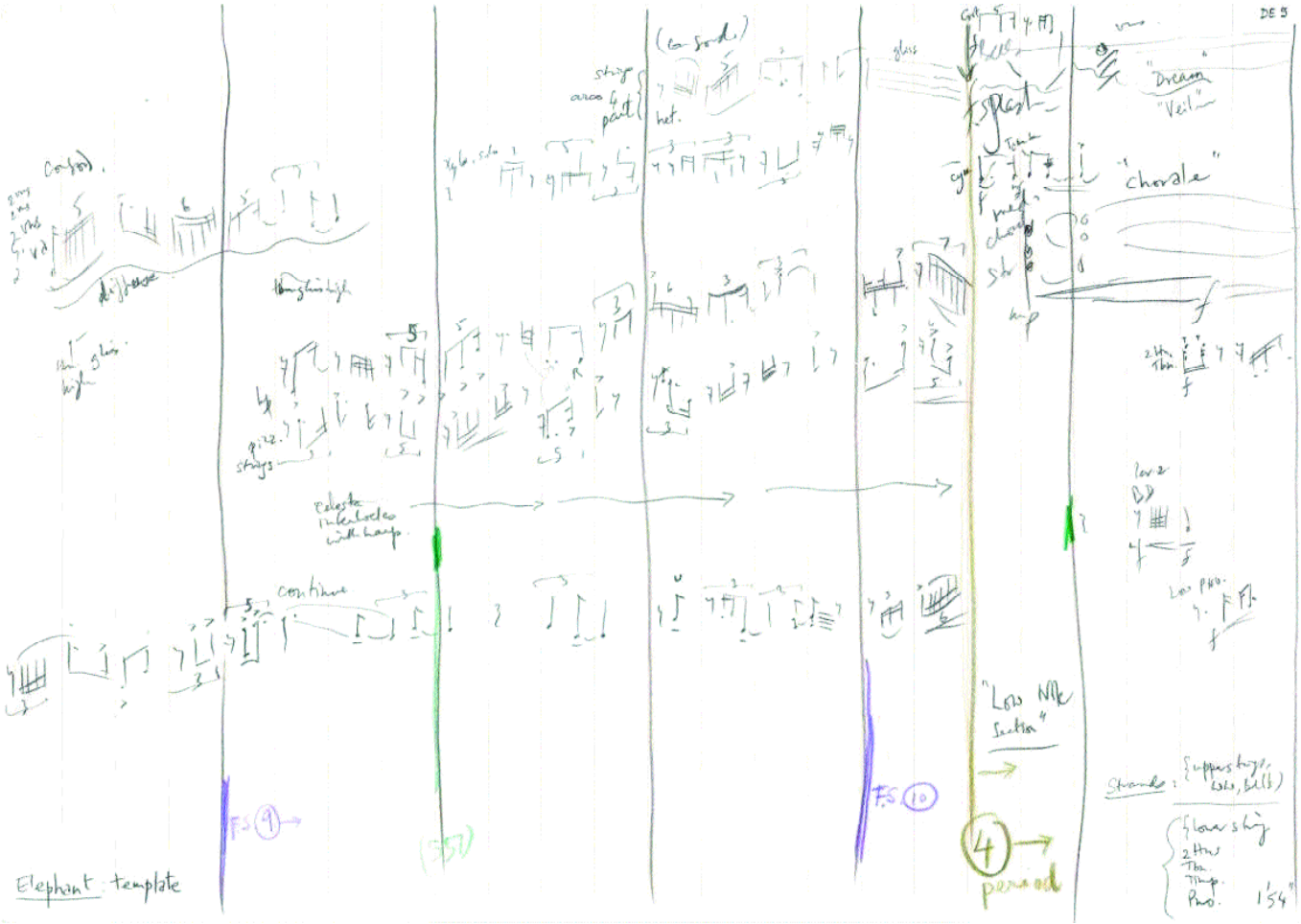
Once sounds begin to enter the aural landscape of the imagination, I tend to not only hear them but also 'see' them as some kind of abstract sculpture, a sculpture of sound. It may be fleeting brief shapes, or larger ones, more formed. These are jotted down very quickly in a kind of graphic shorthand, occasionally with scraps of rhythmic notation embedded within. I call this the 'energy template' (see Ex. 1), where the entire soundscape of the music is drawn out in a flow-sheet of images. In a sense, the work is now born, even if no notes have been put down on manuscript paper. This is now the stage where technique emerges.

The energy-template leads to great security in the overall design, pacing and shape of the work. This leads necessarily to the next stage - a 'rhythmic template' (see Ex. 2), where I zoom into the large-scale picture and create detailed rhythmic definition, including strands of counterpoint and texture paced out rhythmically in exact bar-lengths. I now know roughly what the final score will look like, how many bars and at what speeds, and with what level of textural activity in each part of the work.

Ex. 2 A page from the Elephant Rhythmic Template



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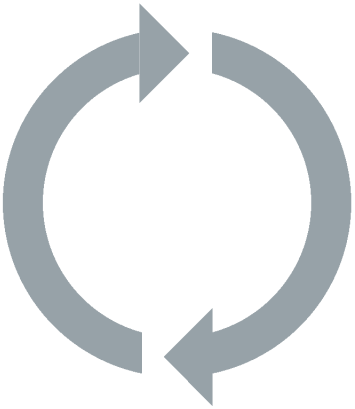
The third stage is to work at the piano and find the notes, pitches, harmonies that embody the piece, flesh out that template in real pitches. This is the pitch-zoom-in! In the fourth and final stage I put this all together and produce a detailed full-score that marries the rhythmic and textural template with the pitches and harmonies. Finer details are placed at this stage - we have left the stratosphere. We are now at ground level, and all the nitty-gritty of articulation, dynamics and phrasing absorb our attention. The work has become manifest!

There are many mysteries in the creative process. One may well ask: how do the extra-musical ideas with which one started become musical ideas? There isn't any formula. I believe one attunes to the basic energy for the idea emotionally, and then by some magical process of transformation that becomes something musical. This is a miracle, a gift of our unconscious mind, that realm where thoughts and feelings are translated into artistic images. All one can do is prepare oneself to be open to receive this gift: to sit in the empty space, empty even of expectation. The best musical ideas come naturally, rather than being something one had to slave over. Sometimes they may well carry an additional gift - a technical or structural idea, embedded within it, that could help to achieve the required focus.

Structure is integral to the music, not something separate from it. How does it arise? How does it relate to the extra-musical ideas behind a piece of music? It's part of the same mystery of transformation of energy. When I was thinking of Uroborus, the 2nd movement of 'The Theatre of Magical Beings', at the outset I only had a visual and intellectual image of a serpent that eats its own tail (see Ex. 3), signifying renewal, wholeness and infinity. As I considered this shape, I saw the circle forming as two semi-circles, one going down and one going up (see Ex. 4).

Ex. 3 A drawing of the Uroborus

Ex. 4



This then led me to visualise a magical empty space, in which the main temporal scaffolding would be a polyrhythm of 6 against seven, 6 rising string glissandi every 76 seconds against 7 descending string glissandi every 66 seconds. They would not coincide and would help produce a space that was constantly reaching into itself, stretching the fabric outwards to maintain the emptiness within, where other meditations could take place.

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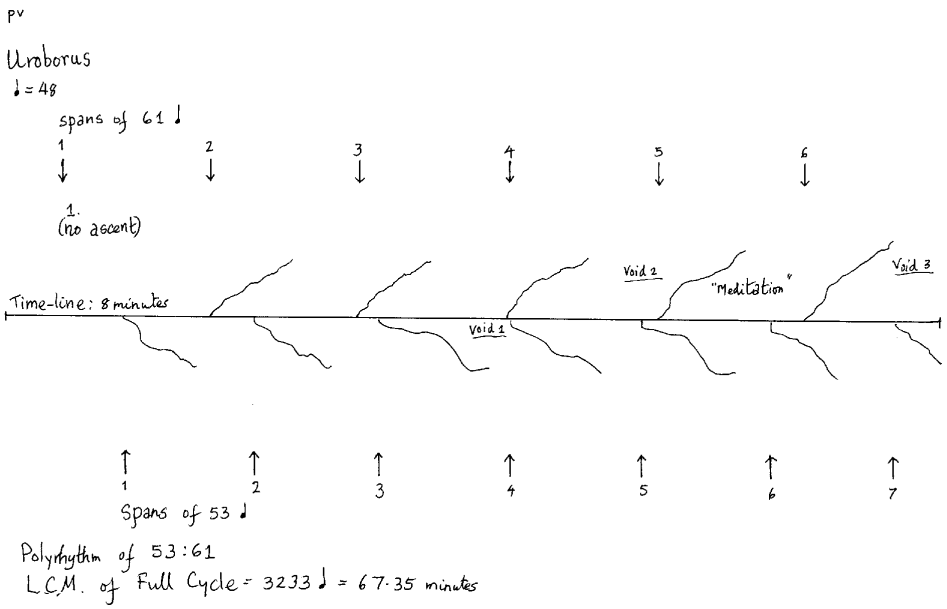
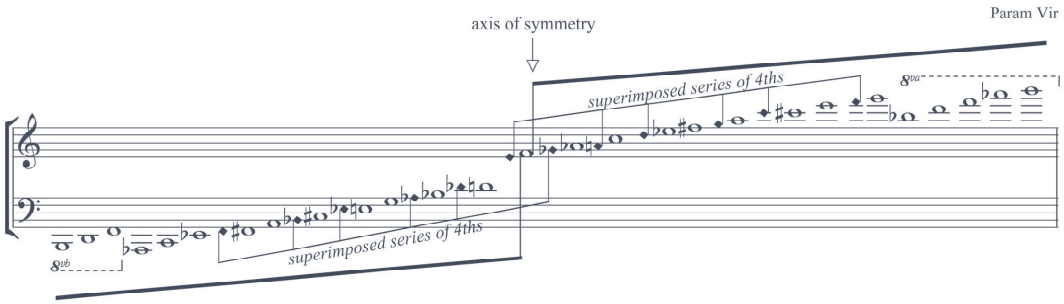
Ex. 5



This was the most stratospheric bird's eye view of the movement (see Ex.5). As I got closer to it, many details began to appear, ideas for the meditations within this empty space. I then created a pitch structure, analogous to the rhythmic space - and this was in the form of a 39-note harmonic field, completely symmetrical from low to high notes around a central axis.

Ex. 6 Harmonic Field for 'Uroborus'



N.B. The basic 27-note field made up of major and minor 3rds (semibreves) is enriched by the superimposition of two interlocked 6-note series of perfect 4ths (diamond shaped notes in order to produce an enriched harmonic field. All notes of UROBOROUS are taken from these 39 foxed note positions. The entire field is completely symmetrical around the central axis of F.

All the notes of the work lie only on this pitch field, thus it served as a pitch-regulatory engine for the melodic and harmonic content. The harmonic field allowed different harmonies, embedded within it as possibilities, to be drawn out and emphasised at different points in the composition. Against this pitch scaffolding the constant glissandi created a sense of infinite cavernous space - my very intention. When people heard this work in concert they sometimes commented that the glissandi sounded like slithering serpents, though this illustrative intent had never been there in my head!

Case Study

PARAM VIR

II. VIBRANT EMPTY SPACE

I like to invent a work away from the piano, sitting either at my desk or in my easy chair. Or sometimes by the sea. A peaceful garden will do! I want an empty space. It's good to meditate, to become quiet, to get away from the constant buzz and noise of daily life. That's when an idea pops in! And further ideas! A sequence of them! Then the piece begins to begin to have a life. That empty space... That's where I think about the shape of the work, what sort of sounds it will contain, what sort of ideas will go into it, what will inspire it, and how the work will develop from the basic ideas. At this stage I really don't want the piano sonority to influence my mind, or confuse my ear (unless it is a work for solo piano). I want a 'blank slate' (tabula rasa) on which to visualise the music, to have limitless possibilities, not to be restricted by how my fingers wander on the keys of the instrument, creatures of long habit (sometimes rather bad habits!) and learnt repertoire. A composer's mind should be capable of roaming freely over sonic landscape.

For the same reason, it bears pointing out that I rarely compose music at the computer. As with the piano, I don't want my mind limited by music software (don't believe all that hype about notation software, you don't need it to create wonderful music) and the dimensions of a 19-inch computer screen. I want a much larger canvas! And to hear instrumental sounds as they are imagined, with the memory and knowledge of acoustic instruments, rather than synthetic and degraded approximations of them. I would adopt the tabula rasa approach even for electronic music - imagine the basic ideas away from the computer initially, before I mess about with them. Whilst there will always be exceptions to this - these are basic rules of thumb and work for me.

Once one has defined the basic sound world that one is creating, once one is satisfied that there is a strong overall shape, one can then test everything at the piano in terms of pitch. Pitch and harmonic formations are very primary to the way we appreciate and listen to music (don't we all love good melodies?). We must therefore be at great pains to make the best pitch choices. Every melody, harmony and counterpoint should have been heard, and tested aurally. However the whole nature of this enterprise assumes a unique quality, as these pitch choices are now serving a larger design that has been thought through away from the piano. This is what makes a composer so much more than a mere tune-spinner! A composer is the architect or the sculptor of sound.

III. TECHNIQUE AND JUDGEMENT

Here is a simple test for the validity of an idea. I ask myself - does it have ENERGY? Music is pure energy in sound. I prefer to feel this energy, to sense it in my whole body. Then it is an embodied idea, not just one that sits on paper or in my head. If I cannot feel the idea, then it is not ready yet to be manifest, indeed may be spurious goods, or just plain dull. When there is real energy, we will know! We will never get bored or run aground. There are exciting things one learns as one goes through with an interesting and engaging idea. If one doesn't have the technique to realise the music, one finds what one needs very quickly. Many composers were self-taught - they learnt what they needed to learn in the saddle.

But technique can certainly be taught, and a good teacher can empower a student to explore many different ways of organising sound. There are diverse procedures that can be used to achieve specific sonic results, whether in the realm of melody, harmony or rhythm. I learnt different things from different teachers. The most important thing

to learn in this regard is when to use what technical procedure and to understand how it affects the sound of the music. Every technique, in a way, is a kind of controlled regulation of musical space. What does each such control achieve and how does that serve the music? (For example, the 12-tone row is a way of regulating pitch to produce certain types of motivic/thematic or cellular connections.) These are important questions, for the inappropriate application of an abstract technical procedure will not serve our sonic idea. This is part of the adventure of discovering how the structure can illuminate the surface and emotional intent of a work at a profound level. The rhythmic technique I used in Uroborus was consciously chosen to produce a very different kind of time-flow, a kind of energised stasis that manifested itself for the first time in my work and opened new directions for the future.

Some composers like to set themselves 'challenges', to solve a problem in a piece of music they are writing. That sometimes works well, but I generally prefer not to make music-creation into a problem-solving venture! I think creation is about discovery, rather than about problem solving. It's a difference in emphasis.

IV. GOOD KARMA

Regular work, every day, to a set schedule, works miracles and accumulates merit! Musical ideas then begin to flow on tap, as the mind gets accustomed to regular concentration at set hours in a familiar space. The composing studio gets a charge of energy.

I used to get stuck, ages ago. When I look back at that time, I see that those were occasions when my initial idea was not strong enough, or unclear, or perhaps I didn't have enough emotional commitment to it. If the blockage was major, then I would have needed to go right back to the first ideas, and perhaps re-start with something more clearly defined. And I certainly did so, on more than one occasion. This is an issue most composers face at one time or another: when creativity runs dry, when a work stops dead in its tracks. The key can often be found in rethinking the formal aspect of the work, thinking through its overall direction afresh. The plan may be crying out for new ideas. If the plan is secure, and one is still stuck, the best remedy is to drop the composing of that section, and do something else. This can unblock the mind, and produce a new insight within hours, maybe within minutes. The solution often lies outside the problem, and comes from another vantage point. We all know this puzzle, which I often use with students:

Ex. 7 Join the following 9 points with just 4 straight and connected lines, without passing through any point more than once. (For the solution, see the end of this essay.)

Case Study

PARAM VIR

Another way to ventilate the mind (and lungs!) is to go for a walk. If you don't have the countryside or seafront handy, walk around the neighbourhood on quieter roads.

As composers, what should we aim for? I would suggest the goal is boundless creative energy, the ability to create music out of anything that engages oneself! A large store of ideas, multiple projects queuing up on back burners! One should be able to pluck musical ideas out of thin air, effortlessly. Through being true to oneself, it is possible, in time, to achieve this degree of creative stamina and enjoyment thereof.

And so, I would say that the best advice anyone can ever give to others is to be true to themselves. For a composer this must translate into being true to one's inner ear, to listen to the sounds in one's inner ear. The ear will always guide us right, and part of the training to be a composer is to learn to do just that, and refine what one hears in one's inner ear. Music doesn't come from 'rules' - rather rules are abstracted from the actual practice of composers. Music arises from sounds within. By trusting our ears rather than some intellectual notion of how music should be made, we trust a natural process. That has the potential for wisdom far deeper than what can be determined through a purely mental process. Now isn't that good karma?

[Solution to Ex. 7 puzzle: As can be seen, the answer lies outside the contained geometrical space of the 9 points, and the 4 straight lines have to be extended beyond the points to achieve the required result.]