

FOUR PIECES OF MUSIC WITH CRITICAL COMMENTARY

A thesis submitted for the degree of Master of Philosophy

by

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Abstract

The commentaries contained in this volume supplement the four pieces of chamber music I composed in my research toward the Master of Philosophy degree. Those pieces, in chronological order of completion, are *It Plays You* for saxophone quartet, *I Am the Rose of Sharon* for six voices and string trio, *The Opposite of the World* for eleven instruments, and *Trying to get the feeling back that I had in 1972* for solo viola. The commentaries aim to establish the cultural suppositions on whose basis these pieces were conceived, the technical and aesthetic considerations that informed their composition, and the strategies by which they advance the author's critical project.

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Introduction

Included here are four critical commentaries to accompany the four pieces of music I composed in pursuit of the Master of Philosophy degree from Brunel University's School of Arts. These four pieces—*It Plays You*, *I Am the Rose of Sharon*, *The Opposite of the World*, and *Trying to get the feeling back that I had in 1972*—represent efforts on my part to solve three main compositional problems, one philosophical and two technical, that have confronted me. Although it would be disingenuous to claim that I have arrived at fully adequate answers to all three of these problems, it is fair to say that the extent to which they are interpenetrated and the nature of those interpenetrations have indeed begun to reveal themselves. This insight, I hope, shows its traces from one piece to the next.

The first and most fundamental problem has to do with the distinction between the *product* of music—by which I mean not only its commodity-character but the very sense of the word “music” that confers objecthood (its fixity in recorded media, for instance)—and the *experience* of music. For me, the appeal of writing music, as opposed to recording it or transmitting it through oral tradition, is in the granularity and fluidity of the performer's act of mediation and in the cultural custom of concert listening, aesthetic sense-making at its most heightened. The product of music is ubiquitous, but the experience of music is ephemeral, its availability beyond our control; when we purchase a concert ticket, we are only buying the opportunity to enter the mental space of music by way of a transaction that comes with no guarantees. The verb of music must be nominalised for it to be reliably accessible (let alone commodified or fashioned into propaganda). Moreover, nominalising music in this way empowers the listener—or, more to the point, the consumer—to dictate the terms on which he or she interacts with the experience of music. The random-access compact disc, the infinitely transportable .mp3, and even the crowdsourced remix project are but a few of the most recent vehicles by which the listener/consumer can neutralise the qualities of music—particularly its psychologically dissonant or non-affirmatory qualities—to which its creator, or in this case composer, might be most committed.

Nonetheless, like many American composers of my generation who share my formative pattern of cultural consumption—“suburban” composers,

so to speak—I find nominalised music, whose omnipresence is highly symptomatic of my native late capitalism, to be endlessly fascinating. Indulging in a fanciful analogy: the experience of music is like snow, a difficult-to-predict phenomenon whose periodic manifestation is both cause and effect in a complex and obscure atmospheric system; the product of music is like a snow globe that frames and crystallises a representation of the former phenomenon, imbuing it with affective content and subordinating it to a culturally conditioned argument. My problem, then, is how to thematise on the concert stage the music that one can buy online and store in one's mobile phone, as it were, in a way that takes full advantage of the potentials of written music and the concentration that listeners in the concert setting are willing, optimally, to devote—how, in other words, to make glass orbs full of water and plastic flutter to the ground like snowflakes.

Because such an aesthetic objective is likely to necessitate the abduction and interrogation of extant musical material or idioms, the distinction between *parody* and *pastiche* adumbrated by Fredric Jameson merits consideration here: I aspire, straight-faced, to pastiche—which Jameson argues is “amputated of the satiric impulse”—rather than parody, which sets its subject matter in a “healthy linguistic normality.”¹ The blankness of pastiche serves, I hope, to obscure the nature of my relationship with the material I have captured, rendering it impossible for the listener to confidently ascertain the ratio of critical zeal to genuine emotional affection.

Jameson's distinction is the locus of my second and third problems, which involve the practicalities of realising in music the guesses I have begun to hazard toward an answer to the first problem. These will be dealt with in greater detail as they arise in the individual commentaries; for now, they may be summarised as the difficulty of subverting familiar musical materials and the challenge of suggesting to the listener that he second-guess what he hears: cultivating, in other words, a suspicion in the listener that the music may be “too good to be true.”

1 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1991, p. 17.

It Plays You
for saxophone quartet

Two ideas informed the speculation that led to *It Plays You*: first, the somewhat mystical tradition of post-bop virtuosity in which the instrument may be said to be playing the performer rather than vice versa; second, the media furore that holds popular entertainment such as music, cinema, and video games responsible for the criminal behaviour of children. The confluence of these ideas lies in the uncertain freedom of ostensibly free play.

The piece opens with the sound that accompanies the HAL Laboratory, Inc. logo upon booting up the 1992 Super Famicom game *Arcana*.² This sound, itself a logo, attempts to shadow the body of the piece with doubt, intimating that all may not be as it seems. The first instrumental gesture, an out-of-tune replica of the logo's background string pad, is the jumping-off point for the development of other gestures that seem to signal a teleological progress. A distinction is gradually established between the budding branches of that progress—elaborate, melismatic counterpoint—and the trunk of the initial detuned chord, which detaches itself and by m. 55 has become a sonic phenomenon, a demonstration of the saxophones' tuning differences, rather than a musical element in the manner of the surrounding material. (This type of distinction, by the way, is one that I will attempt to adumbrate in all four of the pieces in my portfolio.)

A brief intermezzo follows the split, “musicalising” the inexpressive concreteness of the preceding quarter-tone clusters into a kind of aphoristic arch whose mannered construction is foreign to the piece's earlier soloistic polyphony. This recouping is immediately undercut, however, by a tectonic shift that divides the previously indivisible quartet into two duos, each with a full 24-tone gamut. The alto duo's material is at first no different from the tenor duo's, but by m. 91 the cultivation of its immanent “musical” energies has redefined it; what may at first have seemed to be a dialogue has been outed as a diorama instead, with the tenor duo providing a telegraphic backdrop for the continuously mutating alto duo.

Soon this diorama is subsumed into a diatribe, so to speak, when all four instruments are mustered to produce something that first gives the impression

² *Arcana*, Super Famicom software, Tokyo: Hal Laboratory, Inc.: 1992.

of a fanfare (m. 112); naturally, a fanfare it is not, and the extended chorale that follows—synthesised using a selection from the *Arcana* soundtrack and Red Allen's trumpet solo in the Fletcher Henderson Band's recording of Coleman Hawkins' "Queer Notions"³—merely represents the newest thing to guess about. It *sounds* like music, perhaps even more so than the various "musical" materials yet exposed, but lacking the markings of immanent gestural development it bears no morphological relationship to any previous material in the piece.

The passage to which it yields, however, is—but for a few puzzling digressions, as at m. 166, whose logo-like quality alludes to the opening sound bite—clearly "musical," incorporating and rapidly cycling through types of material from earlier in the piece. One such digression fractures this momentum, forestalling the climactic apotheosis of juxtaposition that we might be anticipating and clearing the field for the ostinato figure of the introductory logo, missing from the quartet's first pantomime thereof at the very beginning of the piece and now finally presented by the instrumentalists. It starts, becomes occasionally distended (as at m. 194) into a substance reminiscent of the now-distant intermezzo, downshifts at m. 207 to a concretising demonstration analogous to the quarter-tone flutter-tongue clusters of long ago—this time identifying the found ostinato rather than displaying the instruments' detuning—and abruptly stops. The "musical" energies of the piece, so often thwarted, are finally discharged through a flamboyant solo.

The notion of inevitability is at stake in *It Plays You*, although in that regard the piece's most obvious moral—that musical causality is a red herring, a convenient pulpit from which to manipulate one's listeners—is not especially profound. I would prefer that the mystery of the *Arcana* logo, the multiplicity of instrumental textures, and the unpredictability with which the ensemble invokes both internal and external references invite the listener to speculate about *why things happen* in the piece. If provisional and self-contradictory answers move him or her to reconsider inevitability and causality in contexts more general than concert music, so much the better.

3 Red Allen, perf., "Queer Notions," *Yeah Man!*, HEP Records, 1994.

I Am the Rose of Sharon
for six voices and string trio

I Am the Rose of Sharon is a setting of the titular text from the Biblical *Song of Songs*. Although I had been dimly familiar with the verse for some time, my interest in setting it to music was sparked by an encounter with William Billings's attempt, which dates roughly from the American Revolutionary War.⁴ I was struck by the text's ambiguities of voice, tone, and narration; the idea of emphasising and perhaps perverting some of these ambiguities appealed to me greatly.

Billings' setting, although musically eccentric by the standards of its day, makes (unsurprisingly) no effort to subvert the conventionally allegorical Christian reading of the text that celebrates the speaker's intimacy with the Almighty. Meanwhile, more recent settings from the Song of Solomon such as those in Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Momente*⁵ and James Dillon's *Come live with me*⁶ seem invested in recognising that the spiritual and the sensual are inseparable. In contrast to these settings, *I Am the Rose of Sharon* reveals a suspicion of spirituality *and* sensuality, mapping them onto one another and bringing to the fore their capacities as vectors of control in social hierarchies large and small.

To prepare my own version of the text, I consulted several translations, including the King James Version⁷ and the New Revised Standard Version,⁸ and made a number of relatively modest changes—verb tenses, synonyms, unobtrusive cuts—that, taken as a whole, bend the text to convey a vague menace of sexual violence. I also substituted in several marked words, such as *party* and *fence*, to hint at the superimposition of a contemporarily middle-class and suburban *mise-en-scène* upon the Bible's ancient timelessness, perhaps articulating in miniature the Bakhtinian distinction between *novel* and *epic*.⁹ Furthermore, to follow the effects of these modifications backwards and return to the *Song of Songs*' allegorical interpretation, the altered text imparts an abusive, possessive tint to the relationship putatively central to the original

4 William Billings, *I Am the Rose of Sharon*, ed. Rafael Ornes, Choral Public Domain Library, <[http://www.cpd.org/wiki/index.php/I am the Rose of Sharon \(William Billings\)](http://www.cpd.org/wiki/index.php/I_am_the_Rose_of_Saron_(William_Billings))>.

5 Karlheinz Stockhausen, *Momente*, Kürten: Stockhausen-Verlag, 1993.

6 James Dillon, *Come live with me*, New York: Edition Peters, 1982.

7 *Holy Bible, King James Version*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

8 *Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005.

9 Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982, p. 11.

text's "true" meaning between the believer and God or the Church.

For the bulk of the piece, the text is set in a straightforward manner to retain as much intelligibility as possible. The affectless character of the singing and the inversionally symmetrical harmonies whose upper and lower contours converge and diverge uniformly (a visual-sonic pun, so to speak, on an oscilloscope's image of a disembodied voice) convey the haziest semblance of expressivity without actually expressing much beyond the literal meaning of the text. The string trio then musicalises the voices' material in its interludes by interpreting the "found," or more accurately "generated," harmonies of the preceding measures. The trio continues to perform this aestheticising role until one interlude (m. 51) begins to leave the voices' orbit and arrives at material alien to them (m. 60). When the voices reenter, their mode of declamation undisturbed by the strings' departure, the trio soon rejoins them in a way that mimics their behaviour more closely than ever. The strings crackle around the singers' words when they are issued in the voice of the male (m. 85), now heightening and aestheticising the voices' material in a new and unprecedented way. This moment is meant also to invoke the convention of texted musical drama that recognises a correspondence between the singer and the outer world—the public face—and between purely instrumental material and the inner world. Having set the table for such an analogy, however, I wanted to raise the possibility of its reversal: Perhaps the voices betray a damaged, desensitised inner world, and the trio illustrates the brutality of the outer world; muddying the water of this metaphor is the incessant turbidity of musicalisation driven by the trio. The canon that ends the piece is the zenith of that musicalising tendency and the voices' capitulation to it.

This piece addresses a very real social ill, and I am aware that to deal with a topic as serious as domestic violence by problematising it through aestheticisation—even when that aestheticisation is itself problematised—is to tread on thin ice. Furthermore, the field of choral music (as it is practised in the anglophone world, at least) is especially hostile to music that is not socially affirmatory. Art, however, is the place to speak truth unflinchingly to power—to the power of an oppressive boyfriend no less than to the power of an oppressive regime.

The Opposite of the World
for eleven instruments

The Opposite of the World was written in anticipation of a workshop with the London Contemporary Orchestra. My initial intent was to write a piece comprising a number of telescopically shorter sections, each of which is somehow the “opposite” of its predecessor in a new and more abstract way than the predecessor was of its. By the end of the piece, it would be revealed that the concept of opposition can be made to mean almost anything—and that a passage of music and its opposite may, depending on the parameters and level of abstraction, sound almost exactly the same. This paradiialectical plot was to guide my compositional progress.

In practice, however, I found that the piece was growing away from my plan. The material I had chosen for my first section asserted its identity in such a way that I felt I would have had to dilute it in order for it to serve its designated formal purpose. Speculatively, I decided to keep working on that introductory material for a while and see what I could come up with before sanding it down to the appropriate structural shape. By the time I had written two or three minutes of music (toward what I was told ought to be a five- or six-minute piece *in toto*), I had arrived at a provisional alternative plan: a piece in two sections that evince a single rich, meaningful opposition. What more germane opposition to elucidate than between music and “music?”

The first half of the piece, then, is—like the string trio's interludes in *I Am the Rose of Sharon*—decidedly “musical.” It opens with a too-long drum roll to signpost the piece-like quality of the music and hopefully encourage second-guessing of the sort I mentioned in my introductory remarks. A number of gestural and textural motifs are introduced and rearranged; although this first half of the piece has a characteristic harmonic and timbral profile, within that identity its possibility-space is quite broad—it takes on a “branded” quality.

The fifth measure of the piece furnishes a good example of this bounded textural heterogeneity. The strings weave a carpet of counterpoint, composed with the aid of a combinatorial twenty-four-tone matrix based on the (0, 1.5, 2.5, 7) pitch class set. Their opening sonority includes the pitches D, E-flat, A half-sharp, and E half-sharp; like most of the piece's subgroups' harmonic simultaneities, it is an expression of the germinal tetrachord. Each sonority is

assigned to a “protomeasure” of three to seven eighth-notes (excepting the first bar, which begins with a smaller gestural quasi-unit three sixteenth-notes in length, and several ornamental and faux-rhetorical pseudogestures throughout, as at m. 22). Within these containers, voice leading to the following chord is determined on a principally intuitive basis—generating, in turn, the individual voices' phrasal rhythms. The meter is then adjusted to reinforce shared entries and points of structural articulation. This model applies until m. 24.

Meanwhile, the woodwinds' primary duty in the piece's first gambit is to parrot a three-note staccato figure emblematic of the piece's branding; this gesture saturates the beginning of the piece. Although it has a clear generative heritage in the trills and tremolo that often precede it, its first concertedly forceful appearance at the end of m. 6 should be sufficiently bald-faced to establish its logo-like quality. To top it off, the mark tree, a “dream sequence” signifier, chimes incessantly.

The piece proceeds kaleidoscopically rather than teleologically, and much of the material development that takes place would be better described as an anatomisation or examination of earlier figures in greater detail, as at m. 56. Soon after the gradual coalescing of historically referential material with which this examination is contrasted reaches its consummation at mm. 53-54, both of these threads begin to fray, and the first half of the piece is over.

A bowed cymbal on the skin of a Cuban *timbal* ushers in the second section—less painterly, less (in the general sense) composed, less musical. But of course it, too, is music, as the texturally occluded quotations beginning at m. 73 from the preceding section seek to demonstrate. Once these periodic vignettes reach the end of the first section, a new kind of octatonic and homophonic material appears at m. 105, occurring four times. This insertion of cryptic aphorism contributes to the piece's quality of “containing multitudes;” The introduction of new material just before the end of the piece points off-camera, so to speak, hinting that *anything* could be lurking in dark corners.

The riddle of that late-game interpolation is directly related to the piece's title, itself a kind of riddle. In the logic of the piece, the opposite of *the* world is *a* world; the opposite of the real is a multiverse of fictive, authorially created spaces which are of course contained, in brackets, within the real itself. The opposite of the first half of the piece is the entire piece.

Trying to get the feeling back that I had in 1972
for solo viola

I'm on the train from New Street to Euston and back to Harrow again
Trying to get the feeling back that I had in 1972
–Dexys Midnight Runners, “Until I Believe In My Soul” (Paterson/Rowland)

I was born in 1983, so it would be impossible for me to have had any feelings at all in 1972. However, it would be equally impossible for me to accurately recall, let alone recapture, the feeling I had in 1992, 1999, or 2002. When I began writing *Trying to get the feeling back that I had in 1972*, I wanted to evoke the sensation of nostalgia for something one has not actually experienced; as I worked on it, I began to realise that nostalgia for something one *has* experienced is not necessarily any more fulfilling—particularly when (as often happens in the experience of listening to music) one could indeed be experiencing it *now*, if only the composer had allowed it. *Trying to get the feeling back that I had in 1972* is a meditation on the textual (that is to say, object-like) treatment of memory and experience. An exercise in slow transformations and lengthy repetitions that attempt to distance the listener from their material, the piece foregrounds the passage of time by emphasising small variations and front-loading gestural diversity within each of its three parts.

This density of gesture is apparent at the very beginning of the piece. The first bars contain several disconnected gesture-types, one of which—close to the middle of the second measure—briefly flashes the object of the piece's nostalgia: a diatonic chord progression, IV to iii, that will reappear throughout the piece in various guises. As in the penultimate section of *It Plays You*, these gesture-types are intermingled in a manner suggesting that the piece will proceed through their development and interrelationship. The first page and a half of the piece does not contradict this impression: Indeed, gesture-types that initially seemed contrastive are contextualised; the droning, unmusical dyad that opens the piece, for instance, is habilitated by m. 26 into a self-consistent chordal texture. However, this texture is soon reified and subjected to subtly varied repetition at some length (m. 28).

Materials introduced at m. 55 and m. 98, also preceded by gesturally deceptive passages, meet similar fates; in both cases, what seems at first to be a sort of musical tissue culture becomes a biopsy instead, revealing every so often

the signature of that IV-iii progression. Where the *Arcana* logo in *It Plays You* is a springboard for establishing the distinction between two definitions of music, the IV-iii turn (prominent, naturally, in “Until I Believe In My Soul”) here exists as an object of desire rather than a germinal motive. My hope is that each appearance of these chords will pique the listener further; after the progression's complete indulgence at m. 109, however, the question arises of what is left for the listener to want. Put another way, why does the piece continue after the consummation of this symbol?

It continues in attestation that the IV-iii progression, the “music,” is and has always been peripheral to the alternately ephemeral and interminable musical behaviours in whose midst it sometimes appears. It is illusory, nothing more than a shape momentarily assumed by the squeezings and dilations of the piece's fabric, and the harmonic neutralisation that ends the piece offers no evidence that it existed at all. The “feeling” of the piece's title is but a misapprehension of the compressions and rarefactions of experience, an attempt to nominalise the texture of 2009—a feeling that it will be impossible to get back.

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