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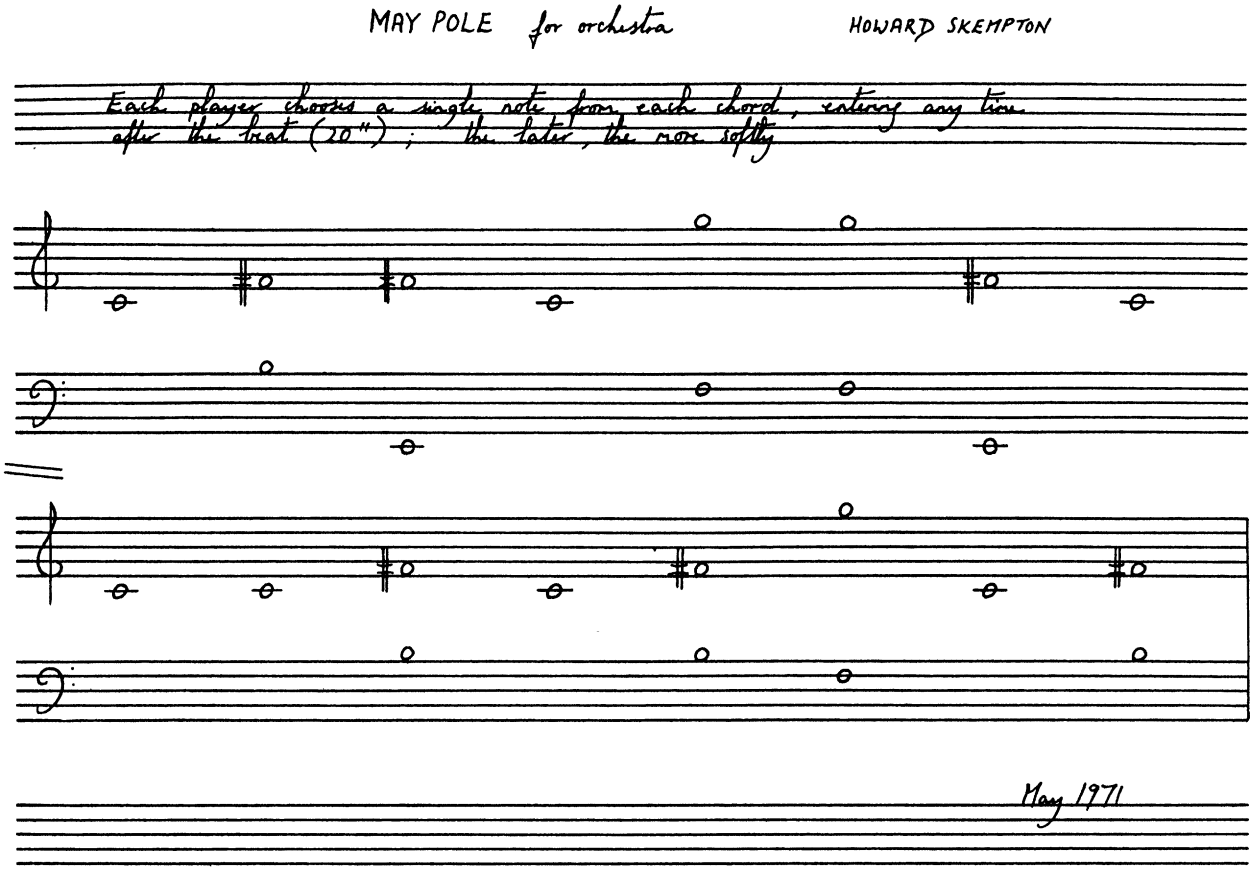
Archetypal experiments

IAN PACE reflects about and around Howard Skempton in his 50th year

THE MUSIC of Howard Skempton forces one to rethink the categories that are so often used to delineate contemporary music. Commonly, he is described as perhaps the leading figure in the 'English Experimental' movement since the death of his teacher Cornelius Cardew. Notwithstanding the problematic nature of such a term, it is not so difficult to see how such early works as *A humming song* (1967) or *Snowpiece* (1968) for piano, or *May pole* (1971) for orchestra (ex.1) have roots in the tradition of Cage, Feldman and Wolff, and its Anglicised mutation at the hands of Cardew. But the later works, in particular those from *Chorales* (1980) onwards seem at first sight quite different both in intention and result, and the immense success of *Lento* (1990)[1] leads inevitably to comparisons with similarly popular works of Górecki or Taverner.

In what sense, then, if we discard our knowledge of his work with Cardew, is Skempton's work to be considered 'experimental'? Since it was first coined by Michael Nyman, the term has gained a wide currency, and has been used to describe such disparate figures as Philip Corner, Dave Smith, Sylvano Bussotti, Walter Zimmermann or Hans-Joachim Hespos. But it is the English and American groups of such composers who seem to have a most coherent identity. The difference between these two 'schools' has been described to me as 'the difference between jacket and baseball cap'. Whilst a Cage, a Harry Partch or a Conlon Nancarrow brings to mind the classic wacky, rebellious, pioneering American inventor, Skempton, Michael Parsons, Lawrence Crane and even to a certain extent Cardew seem gentler, more good-humoured figures, forever searching within rather than tearing apart and rebuilding from

1. This work is discussed amply in Keith Potter: 'Howard Skempton: some clues for a post-experimental 'movement" ', in *MT* (March 1991).



Ex.1: Skempton: *May pole* © Howard Skempton and reproduced by kind permission

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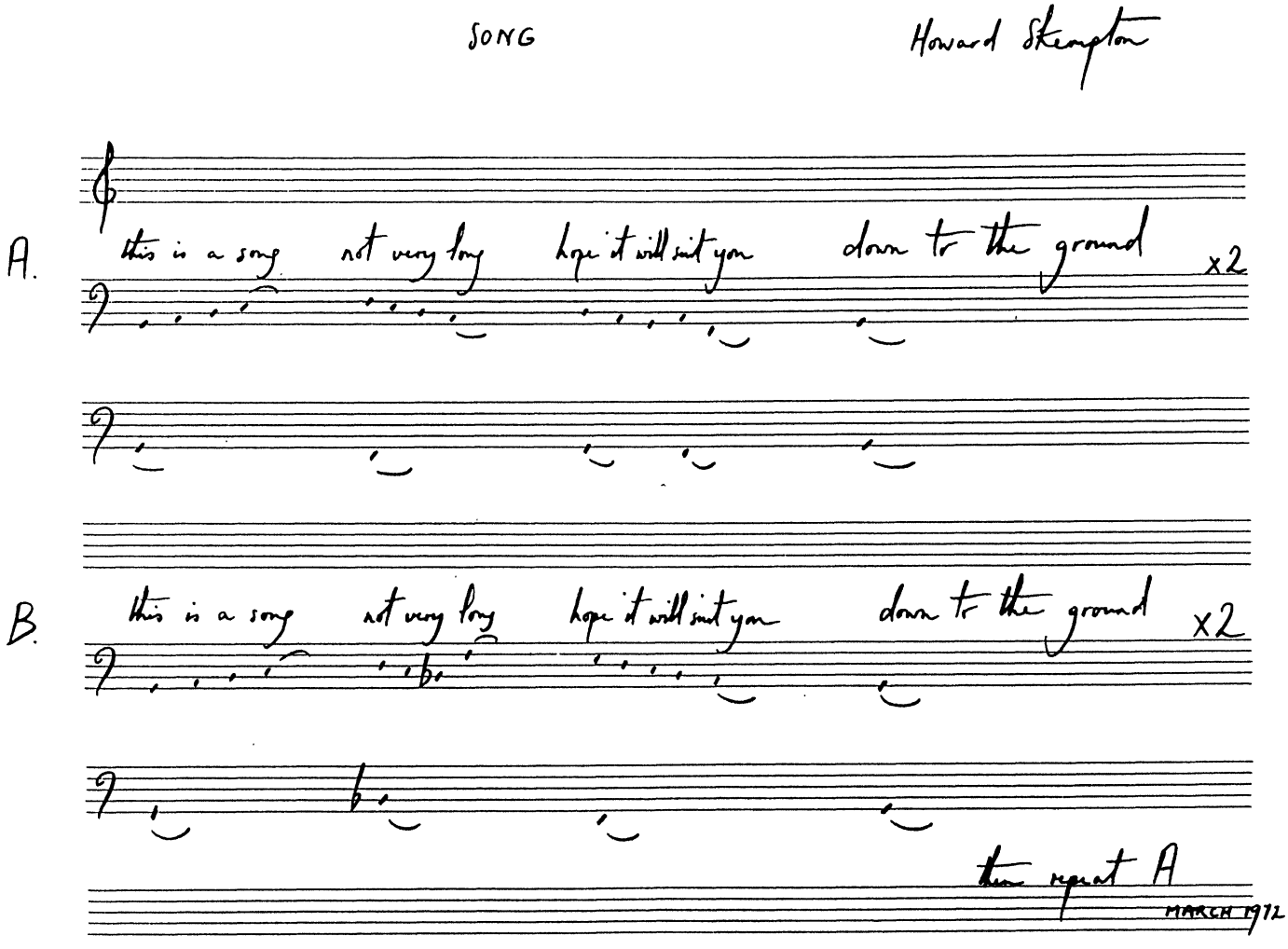

Ex.2: Skempton: *Not-very-long-song* © Howard Skempton and reproduced by kind permission

2. Quoted in Michael Parsons: 'The music of Howard Skempton', in *Contact*, no.21 (Autumn 1980). This article and its successor, Parsons: 'Howard Skempton: Chorales, landscapes and melodies', in *Contact*, no.30 (Spring 1987), together with Peter Hill: 'Riding the thermals: Howard Skempton's piano music', in *Tempo*, no.148 (March 1984), Walter Zimmermann: 'Stillgehaltene Musik: Zu Howard Skemptons

without. For all the vehemence of Cardew's polemics and the absolutism of his changes of direction, he continued to work within idioms that had a clear history, though always with an underlying sense of doubt (but that is for another article).

Skempton's early' work made use of random permutations of notes or chords, indeterminate instrumentation, and dynamics and tempo left to the discretion of the performer. The latter has remained the case in a good many of the piano works, but generally Skempton has become more specific in his performing instructions. One of his most discussed pronouncements is the following, which needs further examination:

> Self-expression is not the aim. One looks out and responds to an external necessity observing and discovering possibilities in the chosen material. The aim is to fulfil a need. One studies the technical properties of the instruments, the abilities and limitations of specific players, the amount of rehearsal time available, the place, the performance situation and potential audience; all these things determine the character of what is to be composed. The objective requirements are paramount. Once I know these things, the piece is there in all its essentials.[2]

Perhaps the most important legacy of the experimental movement is its radical challenge to the romantic notion of composition as self-expression. Whatever the nature of Stockhausen's technical, formal and sonic innovation, it was always at the service of an all-powerful controlling personality, which has developed into a monstrous ego-cult, more solipsistic than most of what the 19th century had to offer because of the lack of any degree of common musical language with which to conduct a dialogue. By contrast, Cage's attempts at abjugation of the compositional will seem a more enduring and influential development within progressive music of the last few decades. But self-expression is itself a complex notion and obviously extends far beyond the myth of the composers sat at their desk, pen poised

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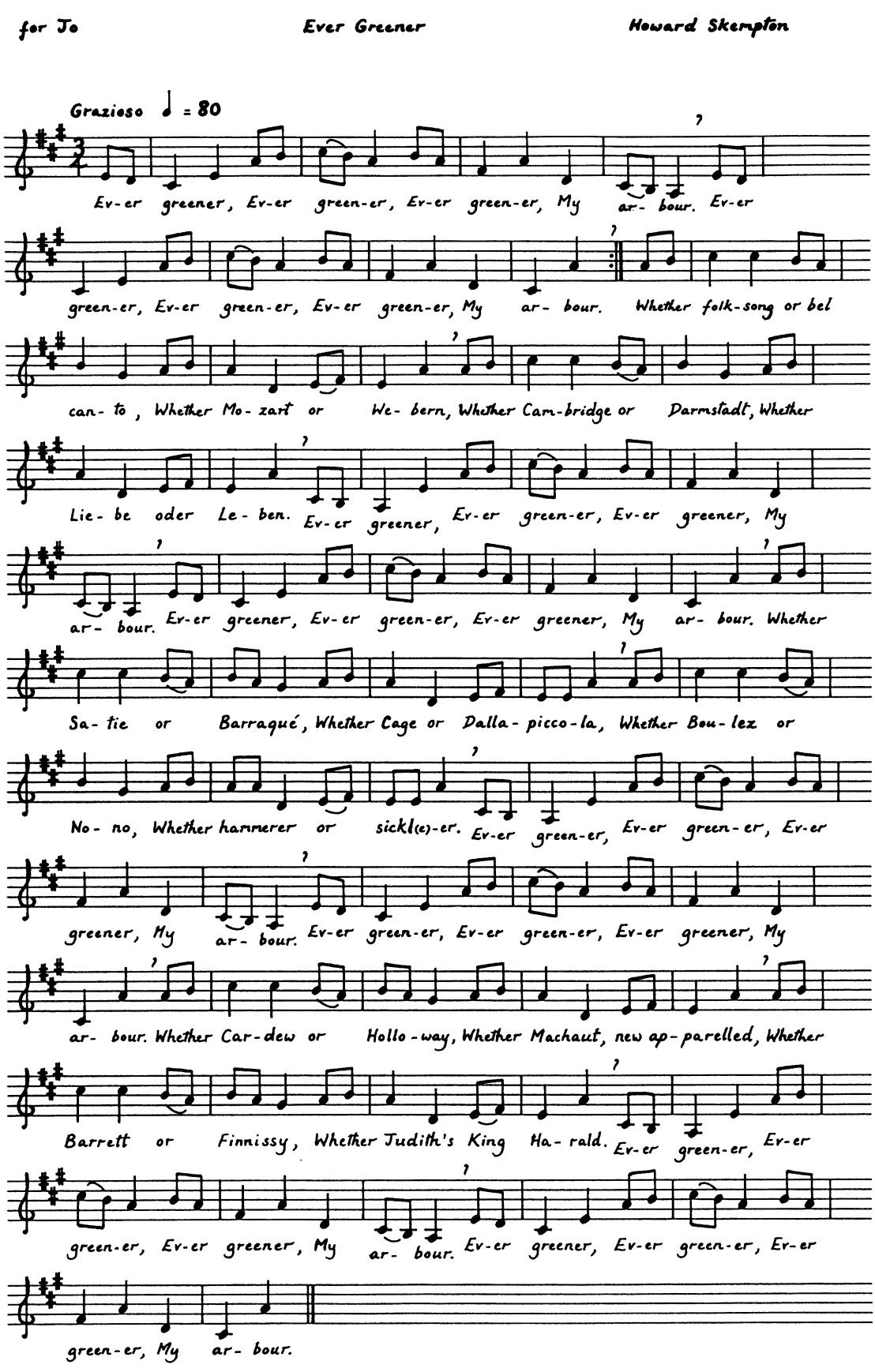

Ex.3: Skempton: *Ever greener* © Howard Skempton and reproduced by kind permission

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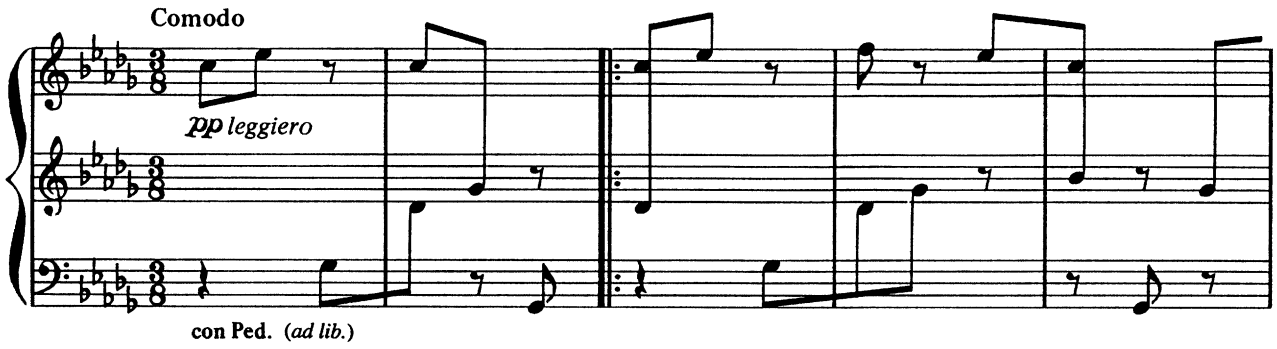
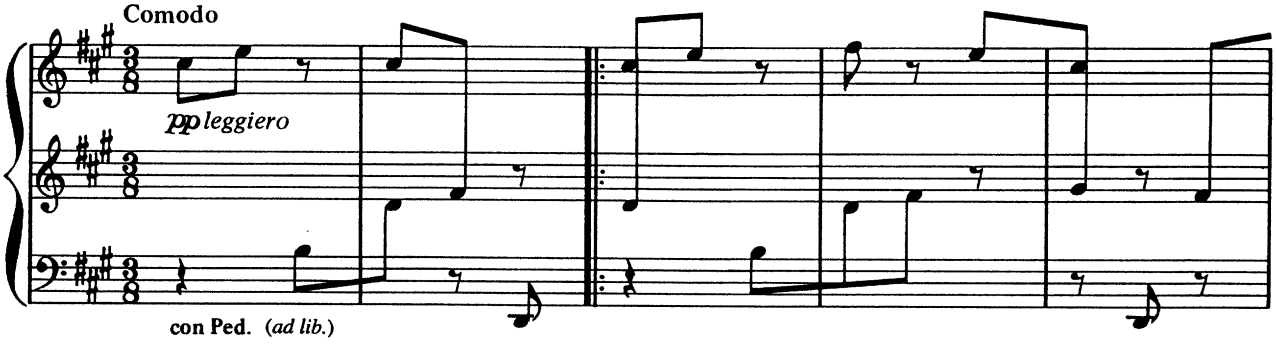


Ex.4a: Skempton: *Images*, Prelude no.1, bars 1–5 © Oxford University Press and reproduced by kind permission



Ex.4b: Skempton: *Images*, Prelude no.3, bars 1–5 © Oxford University Press and reproduced by kind permission

Kompositionen', in *Musiktexte*, no.3 (February 1984) (of which there is an English translation by Herman Hauge), and the Keith Potter article mentioned above, form the standard literature to date on Skempton's work.

3. See Ian Pace: The panorama of Michael Finnissy (I)', in *Tempo*, no.196 (April 1996).

in hand, awaiting the flash of inspiration that they will diligently commit to paper.

As has often been pointed out, Cage's works are unmistakably his, not only because he had to specify the basic parameters of a piece in the manner described by Skempton, but also most purely by virtue of his decision to compose the the way he did, and sign his name to the completed products. Similarly, the computer programmes used by Xenakis or Clarence Barlow have to be created or designed, and every decision in this respect represents an utterly subjective choice, as the huge differences between these two composers' music amply demonstrates. What is being conducted is what I have elsewhere called a 'top-down'[3] approach to composition, whereby the composer's attention is focused foremost upon the large-scale factors in a piece. Skempton's description of such a mode of working is exemplified wittily, but also poignantly, in *Not-very-long-song* (1972) for voice and accordion (ex.2). In this or any other of his works, however, one could hardly deny that every specified aspect of the score is chosen with meticulous discipline and ultra-refinement, but these qualities are made possible by his particular mode of working. What is one of the most important characteristics of Skempton's music is the manner in which he works to delineate a musical space, with differing degrees of specification from piece to piece. This enables his level of intimacy and timelessness more than the particular idioms he utilises. This is made clear when one compares Skempton's music with other composers working in similar idiomatic domains, such as Feldman with his illusory narrative forms, Hans Otte with his extended, relatively linear, improvisations, or the younger British composer Mark R. Taylor, who like Skempton works with slow moving chords, but uses them for dark, doomed attempts to articulate tenderness that have as much in common with the work of Richard Barrett. It is too easy to classify composers by momentary stylistic characteristics; the processes involved are surely a more defining factor.

So self-expression may not be the aim, but is it ever completely separable from the result? Most people who know Skempton well can see clearly how much his music is infused with his personality. In an interview, Skempton once commented that he was no longer quite sure what his much-quoted statement really meant. He went on to suggest that his music probably was expressive of himself, but the fact that he didn't consciously set out to achieve this feature allowed it to manifest itself in an unforced

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way.[4] And therein lies the essence of his Englishness, in the best sense of the word; the soft-spoken, non-didactic nature of his music can make the utterances themselves all the more penetrating and substantial. On the other hand, his use of English folksong and poetry, particularly in the recent works, can be seen as an essentially pragmatic decision, relating to potential audiences or performance situations. Were Skempton living in another country, and receiving different types of commissions, there is little doubt that his source materials would adjust accordingly.

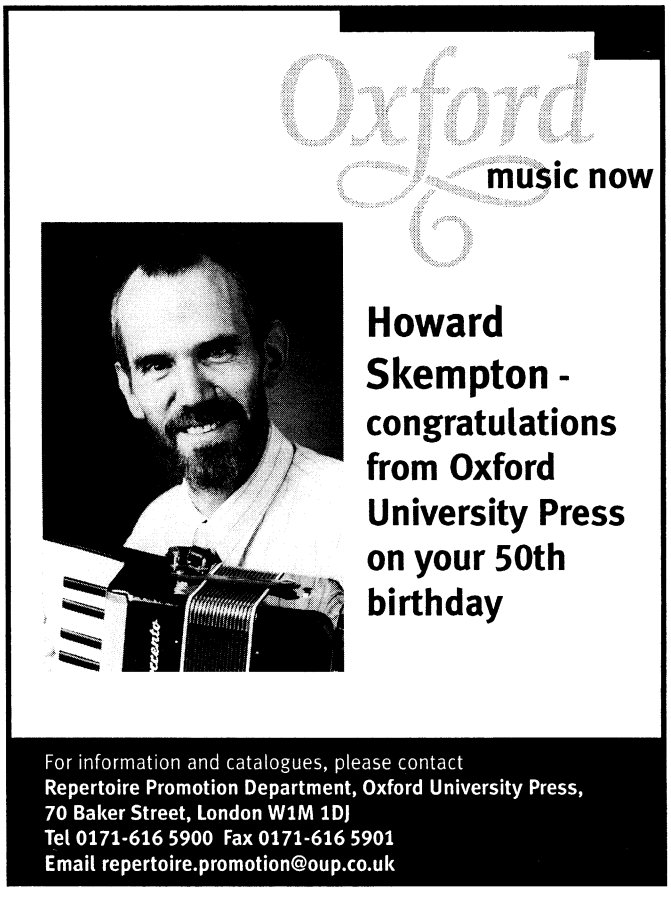
Many of the qualities of Skempton's music might equally well be said to characterise the work of Górecki or Pärt, both of whom he highly admires. But Skempton makes no claims of spirituality for his music; it is more akin to the type of secular contemplative experience that Feldman so admired in Rothko Chapel. Skempton's work does not present an (inevitably empty) escape from reality, but rather a heightened perception of that which is real. It is music of one who is ever the optimist, as demonstrated in his song *Ever greener* (1986) (ex.3).

One should not, however, overlook the darker sides to Skempton's output. *Surface tension* (1975), for flute, cello and piano, uses descending figures in the piano that seem to be traversing ever-murkier corridors, in such a way that harmonic resolution comes almost as an afterthought, as is the case in *Eirenicon 4* (1986) for piano. In *Even tenor* (1988), also for piano, the resolution is omitted altogether, so that one is left at the end of the piece suspended partway in a journey towards the unknown. The whimsical, bluesy first phrase of *Rumba* (1973) is tempered by the pensive, even brooding, nature of the second. In numerous of Skempton's pieces, an exuberant and playful surface opens up to reveal more sombre or, equally often, warmer, interiors.

Skempton's more recent music has involved more of an engagement with larger-scale pieces than previously. A number of the longer works, such as *Gemini dances* (1994), or the Chamber Concerto (1993) consist essentially of a series of shorter sections or movements, sometimes linked by common material. Longest of all the piano pieces is the 30-minute *Images* (1959), which extends the idea of 'flatness' that has been used to describe the early Waltz (1970).[5] *Images* consists of eight preludes and interludes, together with three other short pieces and a postlude, the order of all of which is to be chosen by the performer. The preludes, which provide the nucleus of the work, form one group of four pieces and two of two pieces; the groups are identified by their sharing melodic figures or gestural contours, which are altered or transposed so as to produce different harmonic fields in each piece (see exx.4a and 4b for the beginnings of Preludes 1 and 3). Once the harmonic fields, which vary in their strength of characterisation, have been established, there is little sense of any motion, emphasised by the fact that most or all of each piece is repeated. Whilst some of Skempton's other shorter works operate in a similar manner, the sheer scale of *Images* makes it one of the most uncompromising espousals of his aesthetic. Beyond the alternation between pieces, Skempton does not spoonfeed his listeners with discernible processes with which to engage with, but rather opens up a state of mind, within which they are to think or feel for themselves.

Thus this work is notable as much for its stasis as for particular characteristics of the musical materials. The stasis itself is of a sufficiently radical nature, as to enable a different mode of listening, which is not in itself necessarily static. Most of the seven-minute *A Perugia* (1991), involves a continual repetition of a melodic and harmonic fragment, with minute changes of voicing, distilled to such a degree as either to 'make strange' the fragment or touch upon its fundamentals, depending upon one's interpretation. These modes of operation require larger time-spaces; that is what makes them possible and pushes the music beyond mere middle-of-the-road lyricism. Only a few works, such as *Lyric* (1984) for cello and piano, lack either distinctiveness of material or taste-exceeding processes, and thus seem rather slight.

As a melodist, Skempton has said that his aim is to match the memorability of the best popular songs. His setting of Alex Glasgow's *Close the coalhouse door*



4. These comments come from an interview between Skempton and Andrew Sparling prior to the first broadcast of *Gemini dances*.

5. This description of Waltz first appeared in Michael Nyman: *Experimental music: Cage and beyond* (London: Studio Vista, 1974), pp.145–146

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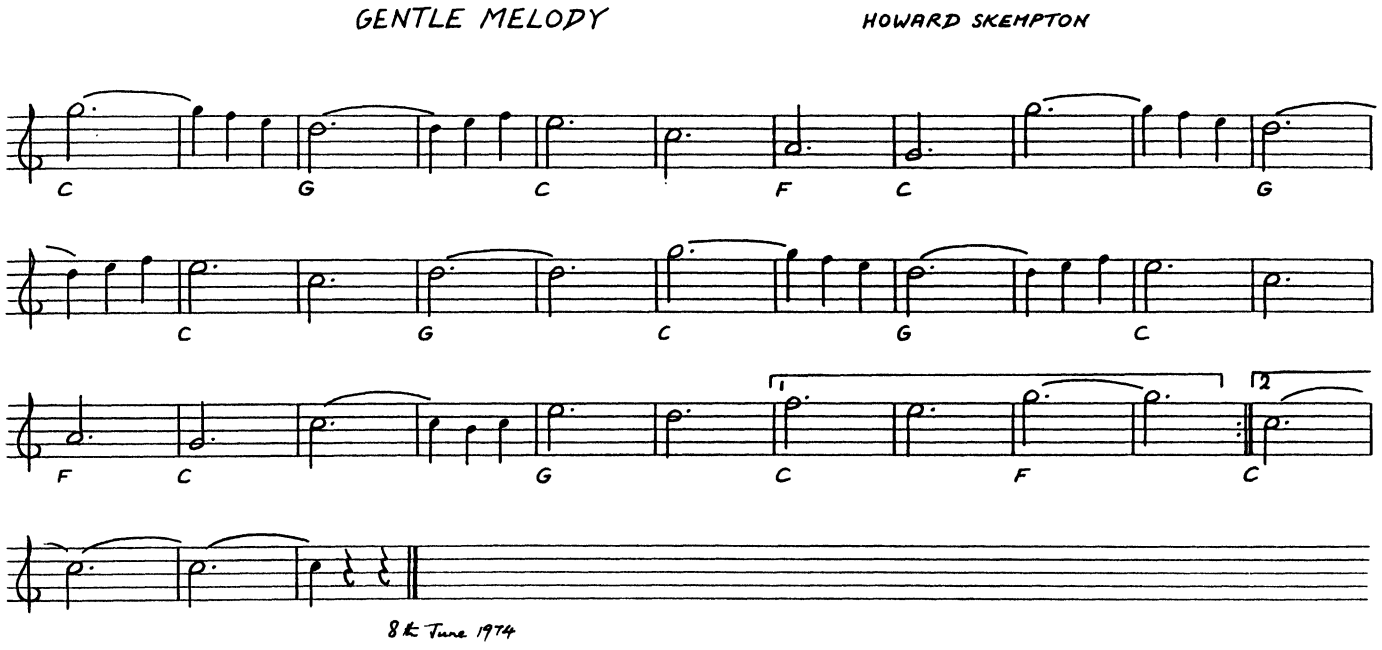

Ex.5: Skempton: *Gentle melody* © Howard Skempton and reproduced by kind permission

(1986)[6] demonstrates how many similarities there are between Skempton's re-explorations and re-orientations of the same territory, and the changing verses of pop songs. But Skempton's original melodies are constructed from the most essential and archetypal of units, which can lead to one hearing snatches that are reminiscent of some famous song somewhere. Skempton is not using quotation or allusion, and to discover these similarities is not a parlour game; rather both his melodies and the songs of which they remind us touch upon the most deep-rooted archetypes of melody itself. The beginning of *Gentle melody* (1974) for accordion (ex.5) uses the same pitches as the beginning of the chorus of 'I only have eyes for you', whilst the closing phrase is similar to Schubert's 'Ave Maria'. And it is Schubert who provides the most important precedent for many aspects of Skempton's music. The sonorities of Schubert's music have a degree of autonomy which exceeds their structural function, as for example at the beginning of the G major Sonata D.894, where a tension is created between the experience of listening through to the vibrations of the chords and the music's need to progress. The German composer Wolfgang von Schweinitz has suggested that Schubert's music has parallels with that of Feldman (this consideration is the basis for his piano trio *Franz and Morton*[7]), and this lineage is continued by Skempton. for whom Feldman is of paramount importance. Both Schubert and Skempton write with a level of honesty and innocence that is almost painful in its extent, making contact with that which is repressed by taste and decency. It is this degree of proximity that makes Skempton's music cross the fine line that divides the staid and trivial from the transcendent and ubiquitous.

6. This was a song that Skempton had sung frequently during the 1984–85 miners' strike.

7. For a discussion of von Schweinitz and this work, see Silke Hilger: 'Wolfgang von Schweinitz's impersonations', in *Tempo*, no.193 (July 1995).

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