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**Interview with *Composition Today*, posted April 19<sup>th</sup>, 2005 at [http://www.compositiontoday.com/interviews/ian\\_pace.asp](http://www.compositiontoday.com/interviews/ian_pace.asp)**

*Ian Pace is one of the UK's leading performers of contemporary piano music. He is renowned for his ability to tackle the most demanding contemporary scores, including, in 2001, the first performance of Michael Finnissy's 5 1/2 hour long 'The History of Photography in Sound'. He has commissioned and premiered a huge number of new works by some of the world's leading composers. He is also a writer and thinker on music and co-authored 'Uncommon Ground, the music of Michael Finnissy' (Ashgate Publishing, 1997)*



Ian Pace

**Tell us something about your background.**

Well, I was born in Hartlepool, in the North of England, started learning the piano at the age of six, went to study at Chetham's School of Music at age 10, where I was for the next eight years (somewhat mixed feelings about my time there, but which opened my eyes to lots of things, which I'll return to in a bit). My first major musical enthusiasms were Beethoven and Wagner; soon afterwards I discovered some records of Cage and Stockhausen (see below). I studied piano, percussion and composition at Chetham's, and got interested in lots of

other things in my teens, including radical politics and rock music.

I'd like to answer this question by going into more detail about convictions that stem from this period, and are much developed in my mind nowadays (or at least their nature is something I feel more able to articulate). I hope you'll excuse the digression! During this period, certain things became very intuitively clear to me. Above all was the degree of snobbery and condescension associated with the classical music world, coupled with all the concomitant effects upon conception and performance. Chetham's is a particularly bad place in this respect (or at least was in my time, I'm not sure if it's changed now), full of aloof, quasi-suave, guru-like teachers who were worshipped by their students as founts of superior wisdom, mostly as a result of numerous carefully cultivated affectations both in personality and performance. I could see instantly how false and meaningless this culture was, but also its potency. To this day, I remain acutely aware of the manifestation of these qualities in the music world, and attempt to evade them if it is at all possible.

Let me see if I can elaborate on these things more specifically. For me, the most powerful aspects of music are a combination of its *immediacy* and its *relevance*. The meaning I apply to the former category might be misunderstood: I do not mean this in the sense of music's appealing to some 'lowest common denominator', which might imply a maximum eschewal of ambiguity or anything else that might invite or require a more active and personalised response (rather as Clement Greenberg defined kitsch). I am instead contrasting some notion of immediacy against a wilfully applied mystification, in the sense of music's (or any art's) deliberately setting itself at a remove from the listener (this does happen frequently), distant from real concerns and emotions as they might be understood by non-specialist-musicians. Immediacy to me doesn't imply any compromise with respect to *content* (which includes the ways in which content is made manifest by particular stylistic means – for example the use of sotto voce to convey a sense of distance), but it is in opposition to meaningless aloofness. By this I refer to a sense that music can be deliberately rendered aloof from the field of alive experience, instead aspiring to culturally-derived qualities of bourgeois 'good taste'. These almost by definition serve to render the work inaccessible to those who haven't been taught how to appreciate such things. I felt very strongly that this latter attribute was ever-present in common notions about music subconsciously accepted at Chetham's, and could elaborate on how this dictates particular modes of performance (and composition). Such musical attitudes and their results are frequently praised as being 'aristocratic', in the sense of the musicians (and consequently their work) 'not being like us'. From my political perspective, that which is 'aristocratic' or at least shows allegiance to such a class, is that which perhaps most deserves to go the way of the last Russian Tsar (or any other monarchy!). J

It's important to point out how I *don't* see these qualities as being an intrinsic feature of certain music, for example that of Debussy, which makes extensive use of blurrings, murmurings, half-presences, shadows, etc. These aren't idle affectations on Debussy's part, as distinct from any number of neo-impressionistic composers; on the contrary they are intrinsic to the content of the music. Debussy

represents an ambivalent and mysterious emotion clearly. Someone like Thomas Adès, on the other hand, represents a rather banal emotion, or no emotion at all, in a deliberately mystificatory manner that serves no purpose other than to create a halo of 'artiness' around the work.

Another thing I discerned pretty early on was the extent to which, for the most part, there was a convention by which a lot of highly dissonant pitches and harmonies should be played down, whether or not they function as passing notes, in such a way that they act as decorations around a basically 'harmonious' conception, never really disrupting that. This is and was not how I see dissonances in Beethoven or much other music. While most are resolved in some sense, their effect is something that to me can endure beyond such a momentary musical closure. These sorts of particularly English conventions seemed a strategy to 'tame' the music, as if to make it 'behave itself', somewhat akin to asking black people to keep a low profile in white society, tolerable only in a tokenistic respect without being respected as individuals with wills of their own. I notice how different approaches are in this respect in jazz in particular. Often the weaker beats will be stressed, the dissonances accentuated, etc. Now, for a variety of reasons there isn't space to go into here, I do actually believe that the 'classical' mode of performance as we know it is a relatively recent thing, deriving above all from the withdrawal of performers from music of their own time as a central part of their activity. Some of the attributes now more often associated with more popular forms would, I believe, have been found in a lot of performance in the 19th century and beforehand – it is the need to re-invent this music as part of an imaginary museum that has necessitated this more recent approach. What is worst is the extent to which these approaches are ever more dogmatically applied to contemporary music (especially that by older composers who are seen to have earned their place in the 'great tradition'). I don't want to be dogmatic in asserting the validity of the reverse by any means – that itself would be another form of over-indebtedness to convention – just to suggest we should look critically and dialectically at these things.

In the sort of musical environment I was brought up in, music was seen as appealing to 'eternal truths', and the like, something timeless, beautiful in an ahistorical manner, etc. This is total nonsense, I think, and does no justice to the music concerned. Above all, such conceptions say nothing about how engaged the best works of whatever era was, about their inner dialectic with conventions, the very qualities that made such works able to assert their individuality. Now, there are various attitudes performers can take to such things. It is sometimes a bit too easy and didactic to consistently underline such things as radical modulations or harmonic shifts, by means of accentuation, rhetorical pauses, ritardandos, etc. These aspects exist in some sense in the music anyhow and make some sort of intrinsic sense within their context, not just as isolated events to be foregrounded at all times so as to create a particular didactic sub-text. I sometimes find it a bit tiresome when I hear performances that are trying to 'tell you how to listen' in such a preachy manner. But submerging these in such a way that never disturbs a pre-imposed sense of totality is equally problematic I think. There are other means beyond these extremes, not simply a compromise but actually also some form of inner dialectic between the various manifestations of performance ideologies in this respect. This is what I find most exciting to explore.

I go over these sorts of points continually because I'm concerned to examine precisely why classical music as so widely perceived as a twee middle-class phenomenon, particularly in Britain. I realise this is less true elsewhere, certainly in continental Europe, where there still exists some notion that culture is something to do with people's lives and the society as a whole (I'll say more about this later in response to another of your questions).

In Britain, it seems only two alternatives are commonly articulated: either that music should be an elite, rarefied activity that can only be 'understood' if one has special knowledge, training, education. or that music should aspire to the qualities found in the most heavily commercialised outpourings in more popular genres. I find this a false dichotomy, between wilful elitism pertaining to the means of communication rather than the content, or simple submission to the demands of short-term entertainment. Call me an old idealist if you like (or an old romantic, or an old modernist – these three things are not so different in my book!), but I suppose I still believe in some notion of music's potential for universality, or at the very least in its potential to be meaningful to those outside of a small elite set who 'know how to listen'. Just because the avant-garde were exploring new forms of musical experience doesn't mean that the experiences themselves are only meaningful in terms of the specific techniques for bringing them about. Schoenberg was very clear about this, actually denying in a letter to Rudolf Köllisch there was much to be gained from identifying the series in one of his pieces. But there has been, as I perceive it, a profound loss of faith in contemporary music's communicability to a wider audience, and to be honest I think a fair number of composers nowadays don't really care. No composer should have to compromise in terms of whether what they are communicating is arcane or unusual (to be able to do so is their prerogative, I believe), but slipping a few 'clever' quotations in to be greeted with grins of recognition by the musically literate, or other sorts of tonal or popular allusions to assert one's credentials of accessibility, is the worst of all possible worlds, I feel.

To create good jazz, or good popular music, which has more than a transient cultural impact, is very difficult indeed – the characterisation of all products in this field as ‘entertainment’ by some classical musicians is too simplistic. It’s true that popular musics have to operate within some boundaries circumscribed by the entertainment industry (as the possibilities for the dissemination of such work exist primarily according to the dictates of the mass market), but the best work manages still to retain some real identity and purpose that goes beyond simple surface novelty (also demanded by the market). So when I make a distinction between ‘art’ and ‘entertainment’, it shouldn’t be seen as identical with a distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture.

To this day, I do believe that I can honestly say that many deep-seated musical feelings come as much from listening as a teenager to Hendrix or Captain Beefheart or Public Image Limited as they did from listening to Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, Brahms, Debussy, etc., during the same time. I’m a little reticent saying this, having seen how commonly various musicians mention such things in an attempt to gain street-cred. It would be ridiculous to attempt to imply some imitation of stylistic aspects of the former category when I play, aspects which are deeply rooted within personalities coming from a very different sort of social and cultural background from myself. It’s more a question, for me, of trying to understand how this sort of music communicates itself, what it communicates, and thus somehow attempting to learn from those things when working within a different musical field. A lot of affective categories that are common to ‘classical’ performance would be meaningless in these other contexts.

In my text-music piece for speaking clarinettist and speaking pianist, “...*quasi una fantasmagoria Op. 120 No. 2...*” I tried to engage with some of these questions. I made a list of some of the sorts of rather contrived theatrical gestures that various performers use to woo a middle-class audience (sometimes making lists of such things at concerts I was at), as well as other musical ‘expressive’ tropes. In the piece, I have the clarinettist, in between playing, describing such things (in caricatured fashion!) in a flat, almost incomprehending voice, whilst never actually doing them. His spoken text is then gradually infiltrated by another narrative, of a traumatic event which he describes as if it were part of his own life (based loosely on a true story I heard about, modifying it in a way that attempted to relate both to 19th century tales of unrequited love (as found in various lieder cycles) and vaguely to some events in Brahms’s life, purely personal interests here not of any great significance to the work as a whole). So you have the contrast between the canned ‘emotions’ that he describes, as if having been instructed to do them, and this very harrowing story that might be causing him profound emotional consternation. I’m fascinated by the discrepancies between the outward personae that people project and what else might lie within, especially the ways these things clash. I suppose I’ve always felt that music-making at best involves an attempt to communicate the inner qualities, but a number of performances I hear aren’t like that at all, instead creating a contrived outward musical and theatrical exterior to hide behind (the same is true of numerous actors). Anyhow, the pianist has a quite different part, in which he plays with books under his arms so as to cause physical discomfort (as some teachers would prescribe) whilst describing in rapturous but demented tones some imaginary piano teacher (actually based on a real figure, but whose name I’m not going to mention! – nothing like any teacher I ever had) who has an almost dominatrix-like hold over him. This eventually leads to disillusionment and bitterness on his part.

Let me return to your initial question! After Chets, I went to Oxford, where I did a maths degree; after that I went to the Juilliard School in New York on a Fulbright Scholarship to work with Gyorgy Sándor, who I’d known I wanted to study with since age 17 or so. I had at that time discovered his book *On Piano Playing*, which to this day I believe to be the most vital book of its type on approaches to the instrument and the human performing mechanism. I had a wonderful time studying with him (notwithstanding the fact that we disagreed quite vehemently on such things as contemporary music and period performance, two of my principal interests nowadays) – he’s an inspiring and immensely generous figure, whose élan for life and vitality remained undiminished at around age 80. Whilst I wouldn’t remotely want to play Mozart, Beethoven and some others in the way he does, I was and still am bowled over by the incredible conviction, unforced personality, joy, ferocity, lyricism and much else in most things he plays. His approach to the keyboard allows for the widest possible spectrum of attack and touch, together with vast possibilities in terms of types of legato (of which there are many), phrasing, articulation, more so than in most other schools of piano playing I’ve known. These are things I’d like to feel I picked up very much from Sándor.

### **How did you become interested in Contemporary Music?**

At age 9-10 I discovered some records of Cage and Stockhausen in my local library, which were revelatory (I think they were of the Cage Concerto for Prepared Piano and Orchestra, and Stockhausen *Kontakte*, *Gesang der Jungeling*, and *Momente*). I knew nothing about how these pieces were put together, or what they were ‘supposed’ to signify at this time, they just simply grabbed me from the beginning. Essentially it all continued from there – my next big enthusiasms in the contemporary field were for Xenakis, Nono, Ligeti and for a while some Reich. Other things including Kagel, Berio, Lachenmann, Feldman, Ferneyhough, Finnissy, Sciarrino and lots of others came a little later. Few people at Chetham’s had much interest in or knowledge of new music, whether staff or students, so it

was essentially an interest I pursued on my own. Obviously I know the work of these composers and many others a lot more deeply nowadays, though I feel that's as much a result of simple continued listening as anything else. Some enthusiasms have ebbed and flowed (some music is very exciting at first but the impact doesn't always last) – I blow very hot and cold about the music of Scelsi, for example, but most of them have remained. Whilst interested in various composers sometimes considered marginal figures, I suppose my tastes gravitate mostly towards a relatively standard canon of post-war European and American music. I don't really believe this canon (or earlier ones) is a wholly arbitrary construction, whilst accepting that some canons should be re-examined over time.

**Over the years you have had a great deal of involvement with the music of Michael Finnissy. What attracts you to his music?**

When I first heard his *English Country-Tunes*, it was a revelation – here was an English composer who wrote music that somehow spoke of an England I could recognise (far removed from the picture-postcard reality or polite social conventions that I perceived in much else written in Britain). This wasn't a stable reality, nor one untouched by sexuality, passion, violence, and so much else that lurks beneath the surface of British society however much people try to hide it. I find these qualities in Beethoven, Schumann, and many others as well. I know a number of composers in Britain had a similar experience when they were at the first performance of Finnissy's ensemble piece *alongside* at the end of the 1970s, including James Dillon, Richard Barrett, Richard Emsley, James Clarke, all of who for a while afterwards showed an influence of this apocalyptic music (though at the very time when Finnissy himself was changing direction!). It's hard to describe quite what an impact this sort of music can make when you've never heard anything like it before, nor realised it was possible within such a culture.

Anyhow, as you say I've had much involvement with Finnissy's music, but my various perspectives upon it have changed quite a bit over the years. I'm writing more about the music at the moment, specifically a monograph on the *History of Photography in Sound*, and trying to engage more critically with the work than has perhaps hitherto been the case. I'm also writing at length about the implications of differing perspectives upon the work in terms of performance practice. I sort of feel the need to wear two hats with regards to Finnissy's music, one when trying to play it convincingly, the other when writing about and trying to maintain some degree of objective critical distance. The two things can and should feed off each other, of course, surely performing and musicology ought to be interdependent practices.

There are complex issues involved which I'll try to summarise here. At the time I first began to play Finnissy's music I was most interested in the late romantic pianistic tradition, both its literature (Rachmaninoff, Scriabin, Busoni, Godowsky, Grainger, Sorabji, etc.) and performers, but also equally in the modernist work of Stockhausen, Nono, Kagel, Xenakis, Cage and numerous others. Finnissy more than anyone else seemed to find a way to bring these very different musical movements together. On top of this I also felt strongly a conflict, a battle between extremes, between on one hand a type of yearning for a very English lyricism, even a nostalgia for a distant, idealised world, and a much more hard-edged European critical sensibility on the other hand. So much of the tension in Finnissy's work comes from a sort of epic battle between seemingly irreconcilable extremes. And though these battles have taken different forms over the years in his work, I don't think the tensions have subsided. That's very much how Finnissy is as a person, either passionately embracing something or violently rejecting it, with little middle ground. It doesn't exactly make for calm, peaceful or even reflective moods, but it certainly produces a good deal of very exciting music. It's a temperament I can relate to very strongly.

His *Gershwin Arrangements*, which I think are amongst his most important works, exemplify these traits, more so than sometimes realised. On one hand they can easily be interpreted as simple homages, slightly more elaborate and chromatic than the originals, even decorative. For those of his 'modernistically' inclined admirers these works were problematic for these perceived reasons, and seemed something of a retreat from the blazing and uncompromising earlier music. But I think the pieces go much deeper than that. As with most of his music, what counts is less the idioms he inhabits than the ways in which he makes them his own (which are substantial). The inner parts or even the accompaniments play a quite fundamentally different role to those in the bare original texts (or even compared to some of the particular performances of them that he alludes to). They are murky, highly chromatic, often subverting the implied tonality of the melody (which is something that Schumann and Brahms did as well, though not to the same degree) and as such assume a life of their own that is much more important than simple 'filling'. The rhythms sometimes push forward or hold back by the use of rhythmic distortions from the basic pulse. Sometimes a recognisable melody is submerged within a more mysterious texture, sometimes it's presented incessantly, almost parodistically. A tonic resolution such as that at the end of 'Embraceable You' seems to me have quite an ironic quality. In essence, he offers startling new perspectives on the originals. The pieces in the first book especially have a rather bittersweet quality and, to me, a frequent sense of estrangement and sadness. One person once

described as like hearing them from outside the window of the room where they are being played, another as like 'a tired pianist sitting in a lounge trying to recapture an old dust-laden flame, Casablanca?' in my recording (though this wasn't necessarily a complement!). That's very much how I conceive of them.

I think one can see a dialogue at place in this work, between outlooks of nostalgia and a recognition of its futility, every bit as much as is the case in *English Country-Tunes*. These pieces can suggest new ways of conceiving the earlier works as well (the same is true with respect to the recent music of James Dillon, I find). Finnissy seems to be searching for some way to bring his arguably modernistic concerns to bear upon material so pregnant with implications as that of Gershwin.

How I play them is sometimes very different from how he himself interprets them (which is itself not a fixed quantity – as with Stravinsky or Boulez, his interpretations and musical priorities have changed substantially over time), or that of various other interpreters (which is often as different again). I've been performing some of them quite a bit again recently, trying new approaches, moving away from a relative equilibrium between parts which was my earlier attitude, something I found created a sense of precariousness and latency, towards different strategies of voicing, sometimes foregrounding particular inner parts that interest me.

Using found musical reference, in a recognisable form is a tricky and perilous business. Listeners seem in my experience to latch onto the tonal references, find comfort when encountering something familiar. The impact made upon the listener by the 'return of an old friend' (as was described by one critic in the context of the *Verdi Transcriptions*) can very easily supersede any more individually distinctive concerns, pushing them strongly into the background. The appearance of a quite sumptuous quote from Berlioz's *Romeo et Juliette* in the first piece from the *History of Photography in Sound*, or the use of a left-hand tonal melody in the *Ernani* transcription, do tend to have this sort of impact, I've found when gauging listeners' reactions – certainly many seem to identify these as emotional high-points. My strategy when first playing the *History* was to try and present the passage in question in a rather distant and more 'objectivised' manner, with sparing use of pedal, and a greater concentration upon the other parts than the found melody. Playing it on subsequent occasions to Finnissy, I'm not sure he liked this, so I changed it, making it a little more expansive and resonant, though I still find it difficult to be convinced by this moment in the piece in that manner – there's something questionable when such a high-point in terms of warmth derives primarily from the fact that the melody and style in question weren't created by the composer.

This was similar to a strategy I tried in the recording of the *Gershwins*. I was also searching for all the other elements I felt to be more 'modernistic' in the way I describe above and in my response to your first question – the moments of discontinuity, fragmentation, emotional instability and volatility, the ironies, sometimes bitter, the opacity caused by the dense interweaving of contrapuntal writing, etc. While calling these things 'modernistic', I do believe they have a long history in music, way before what's now considered the modern era (and 'modernism' is to me more of an attitude than a style, and as such has existed for numerous centuries). I suppose a more 'romanticised' approach (in the sense that the term 'romantic' has come to mean nowadays, which I have argued elsewhere constitutes a quite different conception from that of the early romantics, expressing a politicised aesthetic of upheaval at the time when the bourgeoisie were a revolutionary class) would tend to foreground the melodic line, stress organic continuity, treat the rhythmic complexities more as *rubato* to be smoothly integrated into the basic line, flexibilities in the pulse rather than interruptions or discontinuities, play the more dissonant pitches as passing notes. The result could be lush, exotic, but ultimately not a lot more than comforting and diverting, at least to my ears, not 'asking the difficult questions' that I believe the music does. Even occasionally some of Finnissy's own performances (depending on the mood of the occasion, these things can change substantially as I said before!) did strike me in this way. It interests me how his playing (sometimes of the same works) in the 1980s and early 1990s had a much more hard-edged and 'objective' quality on the whole (I have a tape of him playing the first book of the *Verdi Transcriptions* that's quite startling in this respect!); nowadays it's become more fluid, rounded, less angular, even in some of the same pieces. There are major exceptions to these general trends, of course, but it remains fascinating to me to see how the texts (which I know Finnissy would say have a life of their own after they've been committed to paper) seem to be so continually reinterpretable in different circumstances.

Interpretation, as I see it, is at heart a process by which one ascertains which aspects of a work of music the performer believes to be most vital and relevant, and attempts to articulate these in particular. I would describe this as a type of 'prioritising of information'; most important works contain more potential

qualities within them than could probably ever be elucidated by a single performance or recording, so the interpreter makes priorities according to aesthetic choices. During the period from about 1996-2001 when I was most deeply involved with Finnissy's music, a common perception from both traditionalists and radicals alike was of the recent music in particular constituting a retreat, a final acceptance and thus reaffirmation of some rather conservative English ideals. For the traditionalists this was a reason for celebration, for the radicals a reason for scepticism. Certainly I remember arguing most vehemently the case for Finnissy's modernity against some of those composers at one time deeply influenced by his work who now saw it as rather marginal and provincially English. Of course Finnissy most definitely *is* English, as is any English composer (I'm sure anyone from abroad can see this instantly, just as we in the Anglo-Saxon world can immediately identify a French composer, say), and there's no reason why this should be seen as a bad thing. But I think there is a level of self-reflection about this sort of 'Englishness' in Finnissy's work, one of the things that makes his music deeper than that of some others. Anyhow, during that period I suppose my priority was to make the most of those attributes of the music that I thought resisted such an easy conceptualisation. In many ways I still feel the importance of this, sometimes more so than ever, but I'm also now interested in a particular type of dialectical engagement with the music's traditionality and its simultaneous refusal of that very aspect.

There are those that would charge Finnissy, drawing as he does on such a wide range of musical reference and semi-quotation, with being a cultural tourist? While this is certainly true of many of Finnissy's lesser imitators, who swell the ranks of the fringes of the new music scene in London, indeed of a great many younger composers in Britain today, I've always felt it to be an unfair characterisation of Finnissy himself. This is an issue I'm trying to grapple with in the monograph I'm writing on the *History*. There are a few occasions, including some in the *History*, where I think Finnissy's resort to stylistic allusion becomes a bit too easy and manneristic, especially in a piece such as the *Seventeen Immortal Homosexual Poets* (taking a Greek folk-song to characterise Kavafis, etc.). While the self-characterisation in the music is multi-layered, complex and deep, portrayals of others sometimes don't go much beyond the level of stereotype.

Where in particular I break with Finnissy's self-conception of some of his music, including the *History*, is with respect to the importance of its referentiality. Much of the music he sources is highly obscure; engaging with that on the level of actual recognition (either of specific source or stylistic attributes) is something that's only ever going to be accessible to a select few. The sorts of 'latent narratives' that underlie the works may be of interest to musicologists (of which I'm one, of course) and composers, but I'm not convinced they are necessary to a full appreciation of the work for listeners. If in this respect they were absolutely necessary, that would place severe limits on the music's wider cultural relevance. I know that isn't how Finnissy sees things, but I find that viewpoint elitist in a most negative sense. For me they aren't anymore fundamental than say the various forms of superstitious or religious numerologies are in Bach or Schoenberg or Messiaen. Or the hidden ciphers in Schumann. I suppose I'm concerned with the wider meanings of a work of music as they might manifest themselves to those other than specialists and devotees. Obviously parallels can be made with reading the multi-allusive works of Joyce or Pound or others; one could argue that (within reason) these works stand or fall to the extent they are potentially communicative 'in themselves' (about which I'm ambivalent, and not sure whether I'd like to assert this as a criteria). But literature is different to media like music, abstract visual art and dance which are able to bypass a second-hand semantic level. I come to judgements about Finnissy's work to the extent that it *can* work in this way, which I do believe to be the case.

I was listening recently on the radio to a performance of Finnissy's *Wild Flowers* for two pianos, in which everything seemed nicely gauged, balanced, timings not too long or too short, dynamics running into each other, same was true for shifts between material, clusters rounded off, played with a 'nice sound', and thinking how different a 'Finnissy' this is to the one I admire. How that conception relates to Finnissy's changing perceptions of his own work I can't say, but to me it seemed to turn what I perceive as a lacerating, sometimes terrifying and also deeply sensuous piece into a version of English landscape painting (even if of a more exotic subject than is usual). It interests me how for a lot of English tastes everything has to resemble some sort of visual image or landscape. Thinking about this helps me identify more clearly precisely what it is that excites me at best about Finnissy's music, the sense in which to my mind it resists certain pre-given expectations, roaming far and wide towards a much more transcendent vision. Richard Barrett described once how so much British music dealt with social pleasantries, whereas Finnissy's work appealed to him because he seemed to be 'laying himself bare'. That's very much how I feel as well. He doesn't simply adhere to typical English ideals of organic, non-dialectical continuity and 'closure'; his work is much more edgy, incorporating so many things that can't simply be reduced to a mere functional role in terms of the grand design. Actually these qualities seem to have become more rather than less pronounced in the more material-specific works since around 1980; in various earlier pieces such as *As when upon a trancèd summer night*, *Offshore*, *all.fall.down* or even *alongside* to an extent, the finer details, whilst not arbitrary, are

quite generalised and for the most part simply colour in the wider structural and dramatic procedures. With the introduction of a more quasi-thematic approach later on, there seemed to be a greater dialectic at play between outward thematic development and external macroscopic procedures. Attaining a workable balance between these distinct musical attributes is one of the hardest things when playing the music, trying to avoid the pitfalls either of a lack of dramatic and structural focus and tightness on one hand or of too-great anonymity of the inner material on the other.

Maybe there is sometimes a certain wilful 'artiness' in some of Finnissey's music that can become manneristic and a little pretentious (as with many of his programme notes as well!). At best, his stylisation can serve the purpose of somehow heightening the emotional effect by a process of quasi-irony (as you find in Genet and Pasolini, say, aestheticising depravity); though occasionally an all-purpose stylisation can overwhelm the content, reducing to little more than a few blips on the surface. There is a recording of the *Strauss-Walzer* in which I feel this very deeply, with ample use of pedal, flattening out of most discontinuities and inner drama, leaving just a decorative surface which sounds closer to the sort of kitsch that I expect from the likes of Thomas Adès or other British middle-of-the-road composers. How much this is to do with performance, how much to do with composition and conception, is something I'm a little ambivalent about in the context of these particular works.

In a review of the book *Uncommon Ground* which I co-authored and co-edited at the time of Finnissey's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, Arnold Whittall fairly criticised the fact that the authors rarely questioned Finnissey's own way of seeing things. I know for myself that I see the music differently when I've analysed the sketches, interrogated the beneath-the-surface network of music reference, etc. But as I said before, nowadays I'm trying more to consider how the music comes across to someone without that prior knowledge, how the work stands up regardless of those things that would perhaps never be apperceptible from mere listening alone, even for those with a wide musical knowledge. That said, I do describe the sources and the nature of their transformation in my writings on the music, but less to 'explain' than to *demystify*. As with Ferneyhough's most outwardly complex music, some are in awe of Finnissey's work simply because of the wealth of the detail; I simply want to enable analysts and critics to move beyond that rather superficial level. If you know the character of Morris Zapp in David Lodge's campus novels, he has a project to write a definitive multi-volume work on Jane Austen, attempting to cover the novels from every possible angle so as to hopefully put an end to the burdgeoning industry on her work. But he finds this to be futile as, in his words, 'every decoding is another encoding'. This is a predicament I'm well aware of!

### **What excites you about a piece of music - what keeps you interested?**

Often a quality of excess. I don't mean simply lots of notes or many complex rhythms, etc., rather a sense that music 'exceeds' the expectations that might be placed upon it. Music that makes me hear things differently, that explores emotional trajectories lying beyond other experiences I've had, music that deals with real intimacy or vulnerability even in ways that are uncomfortable, music that stimulates thoughts, ideas, through the listening process. Music that looks anew at the medium within which it is working, music that actually questions the received tropes of 'expression' as we know them, or that questions the particular reified constructions of the 'masterpiece' ideal (feminist criticism has questioned this, and the cult of the 'great composer' - rightly so, even if I don't necessarily share some of the conclusions).

But more than any of these things, I might say music that demonstrates a quality of *empathy*. It's very difficult to locate precisely how this comes about, but I feel confident that I know it when I hear it. I'm talking about a perception I get when I feel that the composer (or performer) in question somehow communicates worldliness, thoughts for others, a sense of inhabiting a world outside of the confines of their own psyche, all those other most humane qualities, without resorting to emotional manipulation. How to put this? - maybe I find it more convincing when a composer is prepared to 'present' a subjective vision in their music, and allow their audience the dignity of engaging with it in whatever way they see fit, rather than attempting to calculate the desired response.

### **And what turns you off ?**

Music that obviously 'plays to the gallery', especially that which cynically employs tried-and-tested clichés whose effect is well-known, to make a 'big splash'. Alas I've heard all too many pieces like that. Music that has a megalomaniac quality, that creates a portentous grandiosity without much in the way of inner self-reflexivity. Music that just latches onto the current fashionable tendencies. Music which



somehow communicates only reified abstract concerns, with little sense of a deeper subjective motivation. One might reasonably ask how I can reconcile this latter idea with an interest in the music of Cage, say. I'd suggest that for all the non-intentionality and anti-subjectivity in Cage's music, I still get, powerfully, an impression of how in love he is with this world of sounds that he presents. Somehow his work maintains a humane quality in that respect.

**Many of the more challenging pieces you play, for example, works by Ferneyhough or Richard Barrett, presumably require a considerable amount of preparation. Do you think the audience needs to "prepare" for such work as well?**

No I don't, not in the sense that I think they need bring specialist knowledge and training for the reasons I mentioned above; simply a degree of open-mindedness to music's possibilities is required. If one is looking for music to wash over, to entertain, to titillate, 'tickle and seduce' (to use the parlance of one radio presenter) in whatever manner, I'd say forget it. Those qualities don't interest me much in music or any artform, nor do the types of performances which spoon-feed the audience. That is often at the heart of a certain type of received 'musicality', the use of various rather mannered rhetorical devices to telegraph harmonic shifts, modulations, etc. The foregrounding of one voice above others in a contrapuntal texture (which itself relates, I believe, for the need of some dogmatic sense of hierarchies which has wider social implications) operates in a similar manner. By no means whatsoever, though, would I advocate some 'just play the notes' or 'let the music speak for itself' approach (neither is possible, I believe). With regard to Ferneyhough, the first work of his I heard was the *Second String Quartet* in the fantastic, electrifying first recording by the Arditti Quartet. This immediately struck me through the violence of its expression, the sense of fantasy, the labyrinthine trajectories through different states of mind (sometimes simultaneously), the passion in the music. All these thoughts and emotions communicated themselves most vividly on a sonic level to me. I didn't know much else about the music, how it was constructed or anything like that, nor do I think that matters particularly. But for all the vehemence of expression in the music (it amazes me when people think it's 'inexpressive'; if anything the expression is almost too much to take!), I still found it allowed me the dignity of engaging with it in my own way, stimulating rather than circumscribing the imagination.

As a listener, I suppose I look for the type of music and performance that allows me some opportunity to interact in a non-passive manner, to reach my own personal conclusions and responses in a sense, rather than being lulled into submission. Thus I try nowadays to create something like that in performance.

**What do you see as the role (intended and actual) of new music in the modern world?**

That's a very big question! Often bypassed by many in that world too easily – it is important! Let me see if I can sketch an outline answer to it, perhaps speaking in more general terms about contemporary culture? What I certainly *don't* think new music is about is the promotion of the 'inner worlds' of a few choice people, who by definition are of a more elevated importance than everyone else. On the contrary, I try to approach all music and culture as something 'in the world', and try to relate it to that wider world around it, not just to the individual creator's particular sense of priorities. *Can* a work of Xenakis or Lachenmann or Sciarrino or Barrett potentially have some meaning to a manual labourer, or a single mother on a sink estate? I think it can, I really believe that, without necessitating that they take an idolising fascination in the personalities behind it. Without remotely wanting to diminish the significance of the subjective component of artistic creation (on the contrary, I think it's paramount), I believe the resultant work is ultimately of far greater importance than the personalities behind it or even their particular intentions.

Let me put it this way: Culture with a capital 'C' (in the sense of the products of individual labour that we generally refer to in this sense) exists in a broader cultural (with a small 'c') arena. That broader culture, at any particular time and place, comes with all its own attributes, in terms of forms of general cultural practice in speech, human behaviour and interactions, ways of finding pleasure outside of working hours, styles, fashions and so on, either those market-promoted or those arising more spontaneously through localised cultural practices, ways of thinking (dominant ideologies) that are prevalent in the mass media, etc. Culture with a capital 'C' can either simply reflect these values, ideologies, aesthetics in a passive manner (that's essentially what entertainment does, hence why it's reassuring), or it can look beyond them. The possibility of the latter is one of the things that keeps a society alive, and I think it's important to preserve the conditions that make this an available option. In musical terms, that has to do with some of the virtues I mentioned above, expanding perception and encouraging 'critical listening', perhaps (after all, we're bombarded by music and sounds during most of our awake hours), in the sense

of encouraging listeners to question the ways in which music is used to manipulate (you'll find that in any shopping mall) and as such hear things differently and with more acute forms of perception. Discovering new sounds or their combinations, or new forms of temporal experience, sharing new types of emotional or other experiences and sensations.

But let me also try and address why I think this question is important, indeed vital. We live in a time, in the Western world, where subsidy for new music and contemporary culture (an essential prerequisite for anything that doesn't answer first and foremost to the laws of the market) is under attack and decreasing all the time. A market-driven culture can just about handle hallowed celebrations of the works of the established great men (focussing attention on the personalities more than the work), but has little use for a continuing challenging and searching culture driven by younger figures. Without some notion of the importance of culture over and above entertainment (whether or not given a highbrow gloss), what arguments do we have to support the maintenance of such subsidy, other than those from a self-styled elite on the basis that a select few are 'better', and as such deserve privileged treatment? Those in the wider world wouldn't accept this, I believe, and why should they?

### **How do you go about programming your concerts?**

When I have the freedom to choose a programme entirely myself (which isn't so often, but that's fair enough), I look for interesting new ways of combining works (sometimes old and new) so that particular juxtapositions can throw new light on how we perceive any of the works in question. I'm always looking for works from the past which anticipate concerns of the present, for this reason. Sometimes I put together programmes with a certain 'theme', for example the 'Text and Music' concert I did with Carl Rosman (in which we presented a wide variety of works from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century that combined spoken text with music, often on political themes, trying to connect the melodramas of Schumann and Liszt with the darkly ironic quasi-cinematic world of Kagel, or the text/music works of Rzewski and Finnissy, or even the works combining spoken phonemes with notes, by Globokar), or my 'Meta-Piano' concert (where I presented numerous works that somehow foreground the factor of 'key noise' (the sound of fingers on the keys) on the piano, including those of Bussotti, Sciarrino, Kagel, N.A. Huber, Lachenmann and others), or my 'Modern Mystics' concert (looking again at processes of mystification in music, in relation to the music of Debussy, Scriabin, Radulescu, Guerrero and others, attempting to suggest there might be a better definition of 'mysticism' (to do with transcending the 'known') than that of wilful obfuscation). I have lots of other ideas in that respect at the moment, including a programme called 'Music pro and contra globalisation' (presenting various works that employ a wide and diverse range of musical materials, leaving the audience to decide which of these present some critical perspective on the very fact of being faced by such a plethora of musical information, and which go little further than espousing a 'shopping mall' aesthetic).

Otherwise, I suppose I simply pick pieces that I think are very worth hearing, or which I'd like to think I have something new to say about, then find some non-arbitrary context within which to present them. The format of a concert in terms of programming (not to mention other aspects of presentation, duration, etc.) is something which interests me very much, and which I think offers many more possibilities than are commonly used. How we hear one work is to some extent affected by what we have heard before it, and this in turn affects the piece we hear afterwards. Now, one can address this in many different ways, presenting pieces with some common attribute so as to foreground their differences, presenting highly distinct works to make something of the contrast between opposing aesthetic outlooks, or constructing a programme almost like one might create a work of music. Simply, I think, it's worth considering the implications for listeners of what one juxtaposes in this respect. There are many stimulating things to be done with respect to combining music with visual art, poetry, film, etc. as well, that create some genuine interaction rather than just idle eclecticism.

### **How do you respond to unsolicited work- do you give feedback? Do you ever commission new work yourself?**

I get lots of works sent to me, for which I'm very pleased, though often a bit slow in responding! Ideally, I'd like to respond to new pieces as often as possible (it can be tricky if I don't feel so positive about the works in question), as I'm *always* genuinely interested in what new composers are doing or trying to do. I've commissioned many new works myself (with the aid of promoters, radio stations, festivals, etc.), and hope to commission many more. It's one of the most rewarding aspects of being involved with new music; I'd like to think that a number of composers have felt able or stimulated to explore wider into the 'unknown' when writing for me, knowing that I'm so interested in that. I can list so many wonderful pieces in this respect that I've either commissioned or premiered: Richard Barrett's *Tract*, William Brooks' *Wallpaper Pieces*, Aaron Cassidy's *ten monophonic miniatures for piano*, Philip

Clark's *Home*, Pascal Dusapin's *Études* and *À Quia*, James Dillon's *The Book of Elements*, James Erber's *Abiya*, Brian Ferneyhough's *Opus Contra Naturam*, Michael Finnissy's *History of Photography in Sound* or *Recent Britain*, Christopher Fox's *Prime Site*, Volker Heyn's *203*, Wieland Hoban's *when the panting STARTS*, Ross Lorraine's *Tacet*, Alwynne Pritchard's *Invisible Cities*, Gerhard Stäbler's *Internet 1.1*, Serge Verstockt's *Noumena II*, Walter Zimmermann's *Blautwerk*, and many many more. There are still many things possible to explore more widely when writing for the piano (including further exploration of the uses of 'key noise' or the use of some disjunction between physical action and sonic result, as actually goes back quite a while in the history of keyboard writing, as well as more conventional concerns) that I want to encourage composers to delve into.

### **What are you working on at the moment**

Right at the moment I'm finishing off the *Sonata for Piano* of Gilbert Amy, a neglected, even forgotten, work, which to me occupies a major position within contemporary piano literature. Amy expands some of the techniques and ideas used in Boulez's *Piano Sonata No. 3*, but to a much greater extent. He similarly presents multiple trajectories for the pianist to choose between in the course of some of the work, involving different coloured materials (six colours) with differing characteristics in the score (which of course is very expensive to print!). The possible structures obtainable are fascinating and quite diverse, each presenting the individual components (which are themselves sharply characterised, with an entrancing range of sonority, gesture and expression) in different lights. Another movement is more pointillistic, and also involves a high degree of structural choice on the part of the performer. How to do this and make some sort of sense of the music is a big challenge, but one I enormously relish. I played the piece to the composer, who seemed very pleased. When playing some of the short staccato punctuations that occur frequently in the piece, I offered to him a variety of different types of attack, from a pointed 'throwing' motion to somewhat more cushioned 'press and quickly release' type. Amy's preference was definitely in the second region, feeling the former to be too harsh, whereas when I'd played James Clarke's *Landschaft mit Glockenturm I* to the composer earlier that week, his preferences were quite the reverse, for the more harsh and austere effect thus produced. Both used the same notational conventions, demonstrating how the meaning of such symbols can vary (perhaps some increased notational specificity in this respect as a general rule would be no bad thing).

I'd like to mention another piece in particular that I've been working on recently. As I said before, I'm always interested in young composers who are trying to create something genuinely new and distinctive, and one piece in particular that's struck me as being like this is *when the panting STARTS* by Wieland Hoban, a composer in his mid-twenties, born and raised in Britain but now living in Germany. This to me is an incredible work, written by one who has the most acute awareness of all the received tropes of contemporary musical expression and pianistic writing, and is able to move beyond them without losing some sense of spontaneity. The piece is all notated on ten staves, one for each finger, and makes the physical choreography of the performance a prominent factor (most clear in live performance, of course). The pianist uses ten fingers rather than two hands, as it were. There are a myriad of detailed articulative and rhythmic interactions between the different parts, whilst the piece maintains an acute sense of harmonic structure. Often Wieland deliberately writes awkward fingerings, to create a type of expressive tension through physical difficulty (most spectacularly in a section towards the end where the right hand is 'locked' in a place high-up on the keyboard, traversing a series of the same pitches with near-impossible fingerings, almost creating a degree of indeterminacy); elsewhere he sort of 'decouples' the pedalling from the rest of the action, so it attains an autonomous life of its own in a quite unique way (very different, say, from the work of Lachenmann in this respect). But these things aren't just novel 'effects'; on the contrary, I have a sense of how each of the 'moments' (the piece is structured around reasonably clearly discernible blocks of activity) is integrated into a deeper set of structural relationships. Continually Wieland seems to be undercutting habitual perception and expectation; of course this can turn into a mannerism of its own, as Wieland well knows, but he manages to avoid that, I think. I get a sense of some very real, deep and intimate expression that is trying to forge a route for itself out from all the expressive clichés that have now attained a reified status. As such, the expression itself is all the more 'real' to me. It looks forward, and opens up all sorts of possibilities, both on a momentary and structural level, of how one might find new dimensions for composition and piano-writing in the future. I'm immensely proud that it was written for me. It's also of course hugely challenging to play – I'm working on it again at the moment for another performance in February.

When working on and performing Wieland's piece, I was thinking so strongly 'THIS is why I play new music'. It's so incredibly rewarding to feel one has played a part in making something genuinely new and visionary possible. It was similar with a set of pieces called *ten monophonic miniatures for pianist* by the young American composer Aaron Cassidy written for me a few years ago, in which he explored a wide range of new oblique techniques for striking the piano keys (some very difficult in their sequences, and others a bit painful!) so as to foreground the parameter of 'key noise', building upon some of my ideas

on this subject.

### **What are your plans for the future?**

It's difficult to look too far ahead, as it's so hard to predict what will happen in the musical and wider world (and developments in the latter undoubtedly affect the former, in my opinion)! Obviously I hope to continue playing more new works and those I've already performed and particularly believe in, especially when it's possible to play these to an audience outside of those in the profession. I want to find lots of new programming possibilities, in particular combining the old with the new, and want to keep exploring in depth new perspectives upon the more standard piano literature. I've been doing a lot of thinking and lecturing about this in recent years, especially in this paper 'Rethinking Romanticism' that I've given in a number of places, suggesting that our whole notion of what is a 'romantic' style is really a 20<sup>th</sup> century conception. I'm fascinated by the period of early romanticism, when the composers of the time continued to inhabit some classical conventions but work outwards from within those. The very tension between these two factors is part of what makes the music so vivid, and enables it to project out into the future (in terms of its inner dialectics). When the classicism of this music is overridden (as I feel it is very frequently), or conversely when the music is made to conform to reified classical models, you lose a lot of that inner tension. The music enacted radical operations upon conventions, characteristically of the radical bourgeoisie of its time, when they were a revolutionary class, as I mentioned earlier (remember that Marx spent a large portion of his output praising the achievements of the bourgeoisie in this respect). The relationship of individualism to genre or inherited form, and the questions of which of these two aspects one might foreground the more in performance, is something I want to continue to explore more and more in performances and research.

I'm also compiling a book of interviews of my own with a wide range of leading composers and performers, attempting to talk with these composers about wider issues than simply their life and work, engaging with issues of culture, society, the state of new music, etc., then discuss their work within the context of these wider concerns. This seems rather different to the usual style of composer-interviewing, but I think so far it's proved productive, with some difficulties at times, though! I don't see musicians as super-beings, founts of superior wisdom, I see them as human beings like anyone else, and hope to communicate something of this in the interviews, by attempting to get them to demonstrate that they do take some interest in other aspects of the wider world as well as their own music. This might, hopefully, help in projecting the message that these composers' works themselves do entail some degree of wider engagement, contrary to what is commonly believed by those outside the musical world. I'm also trying to assemble a book of a lot of my writings and papers (and some new work) to do with performance and its implications.

I started composing again in 2002 after a six-year hiatus. At the moment, I'm mostly interested in work combining spoken text and music, drawing upon study of other works in this genre. I wrote a big work for Carl Rosman and I, which I spoke about earlier. I was quite pleased with this, and it's given me an impetus for other planned works, including a solo cello piece that attempts to say something of musical consumerism, and a song cycle combining modified versions of Schumann's *Frauenliebe und Leben* with numbers of my own for speaking pianist, trying to make the male figure in the Schumann concrete, and interspersing parallel narratives to try and suggest different ways of viewing the Schumann/Chamisso original that run contrary to more conventionally moralistic interpretations, so that the woman in the cycle is inextricably drawn into a circle of sexually-charged submission, masochism that is ultimately destructive for both parties. I also devised recently a piece using recordings of Jelly Roll Morton's *Hyena Stomp* and *Black Bottom Stomp*, combining these with highly explicit recordings of a woman being caned, with live musicians joining in with the music in an (ultimately fruitless) attempt to drown out these sounds (rather as the Nazis assembled groups of musicians to drown out the sound of prisoners being tortured). This was an attempt to create a Pasolini-like conception, drawing the listener into both the eroticism and the dark irony of the accompanying music, but stretching it to the point where it becomes disturbing. I think this came across to some people at least, and I'm considering ways to build upon these ideas for other pieces.

### **How can people find out more about you?**

Look at my website (just about to be updated and then redesigned) – <http://www.ianpace.com> ! I'm always interested in communicating and corresponding with other composers and performers, and others with an interest in music and other cultural matters, my contact details are included on the site.

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