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# **The Panorama of Michael Finnissy (I)**

## **Ian Pace**

***Tempo*, New Series, No. 196 (April 1996), pp. 25-35.**

A Michael Finnissy work is like a journey from one point to another, along which there are any number of digressions off the 'main path', some of them extended. By the end of this journey, one realizes that the digressions were far more interesting than the conclusion: indeed the journey primarily served the purpose of enticing one into the space in question. As a 'guide' through the near 200 works that occupy Michael Finnissy's catalogue in the year of his 50th birthday, I shall take the liberty of constructing 'paths' of my own: after all, there are an infinite number of such paths, and though none will lead us through the oeuvre in its entirety, I wish to give some impression of the sheer scope and stimulation of Finnissy's body of work.

There are two distinct formal/constructivist tendencies in much contemporary music. One is 'top-down': the composer starts with the broad idea of a work and works down towards the details. The other is 'bottom-up': the composer begins with small units of material and uses methods of transformation to generate the large work. Of course this is a simplification - any worthwhile composer recognizes and utilizes the dialectic between these two extremes - but I am talking of a matter of degree of emphasis.

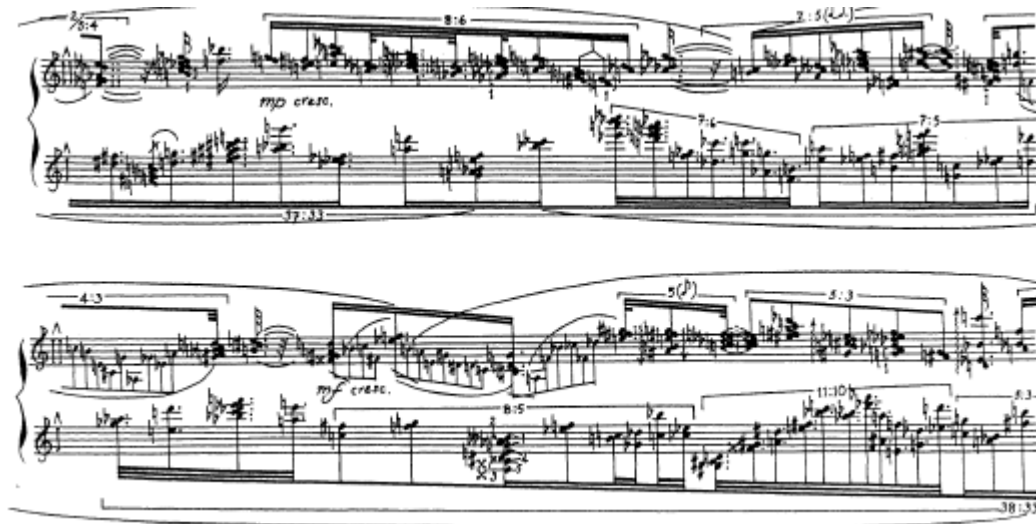
I would place Michael Finnissy in the first camp, though with many qualifications. He often makes use of relatively monolithic, and thus immediate, structures, which provide a n 'Ariadne's thread' for the listener; an initially comprehensible level. The activity of the material by no means serves merely to reinforce these structures, however; on the contrary it is allowed to move in directions often tangential or antagonistic, as well as seeking out every last corner within the posited restrictions. Hence the dialectic, and the reason why his music is able to sustain dynamism over long periods, in contrast to the soporific 'padded-out' structures of some of the works of Tristan Murail. Finnissy's approach is less a musical analogy of the subjugation of individual freedom by oppressive forces, as might be claimed of the music of Richard Barrett; rather it is a way of creating spaces to act within, around and against.

*As when upon a trancèd summer night* (1966/68) for piano, percussion and 3 cellos, takes an ascent from the lowest region of the cellos to the highest of the piano and beyond, into the unpitched territory of the cymbals, as its fundamental structure. This is only the most basic level, however; the material branches in many directions, often quite tangential to the overall shape of the work. Similar ascent/descent shapes are used within such quite different works as *Banumbirr* (1982/86) for small ensemble and *G.F.H.* (1985) for piano. The last of the *Verdi Transcriptions* (1988) for piano (from *Don Carlos*: the piece is also known as *Rushes*, after the ballet for which it was originally written) employs descent as a running theme, progressing from long, sustained, mostly falling, series of notes at the beginning to a series of descending stretto scales at the end.

Elsewhere, long sections or whole pieces are set in restricted registers. The last movement of *English Country Tunes* (1977) for piano, Come beat the drums and sound the fifes, is exclusively at the outer extremes of the instrument, while the Verdi

Transcriptions have extended passages in both the top and bottom (see Example 1). Such 'restrictions' produce energy and tension by providing boundaries to react against, especially vital where tonality is absent. When combined, registral areas are like bands of colour from a whole spectrum. At extremes of pitch, there emerges a predominance of contour - and thus melody, rather than harmony, which is blurred. Finnissy is aware of the possible connotations of *phantasmagoria*, as defined by Adorno,<sup>1</sup> in very high passages, but for him these are part of an attempt to create a visionary music transcending that which we already know.

Ex. 1



There are a number of other methods by which Finnissy provides immediacy of form. The different types of harmonic fields provided by 5-tone (pentatonic), 7-tone (diatonic or modal), 12-tone (chromatic) and 24-tone (quarter-tone) scales define very clear structural boundaries and are also used for more small-scale levels of articulation. *all.fall.down* (1977) for piano opens with a very rapid range of notes all over the keyboard, within which 'filters' are applied, so that there are sections respectively of only white or black notes. Such procedures have become more and more intricate as time has gone on, and can be evinced in other piano works such as *Fast Dances*, *Slow Dances* (1978-79) and (on a microscopic level) in some of the *Verdi Transcriptions*. *Contretänze* (1985/ 6) for ensemble and the *Beuk O'Newcassel Sangs* (1988) for soprano, clarinet and piano play with different instruments' facility for different harmonic fields. The possibilities inherent in stretching 7-tone fields to the limit never cease to entrance the composer, as in either the 'diatonic serialism' of the slow sections of *English Country Tunes* or the 'pan-diatonicism' of *East London Heys* (1987) for strings or winds or the first set of *Australian Sea Shanties* (1983) for amateur choir, in which the limitations of the medium necessitated some degree of relative consonance. Types of tonality and polytonality have come to the fore in works of the last 10 years, such as the *Obrecht Motetten II* (1988) for mandolin, guitar and harp, *Folklore* (1993-94) for piano and the stage work *Shameful Vice* (1994).

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the discussion of the Venusberg music from *Tannhäuser* in T.W. Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (translation London 1981, German original 1952) pp.85-96.

Finnissy also structures some pieces around changing intervals, most spectacularly in the opera *The Undivine Comedy* (1985-88), each of whose sections progresses inwards from the predominance of a perfect fifth at the beginning to unison at the end. The shattering intensity thus sustained all the way through the work mirrors the main protagonist's decline, both mental and political.<sup>2</sup>

A fascination with binary oppositions (clear from titles such as *Sea and Sky*, *To and Fro*, *Lies and Marvels* and *Mars and Venus*) may stem from the composer's interest in the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss. The *Songs 1-9* (1966-68) for various instruments, voices, or combinations of both, are mostly in explicitly bi-partite forms. Taking their inspiration from a series of short experimental films by the American director Stan Brakhage, the two sections in many of them resemble two different camera positions or angles. Song 9 for piano includes long periods of silence, at the end of which material is resumed only to find it has sometimes progressed from where it had ended, like a car travelling behind a building, or the sun moving behind a cloud. *Afar* (1966-67) parallels some of the songs in a more extended form. Its title comes from Beckett's translation of Eluard's poem *A perte de vue dans le sens de mon corps* (*Out of Sight in the Direction of my Body*). The line 'Afar the sea that thine eye washes' encapsulates two extreme perceptions of an expanse of water: the ocean viewed from a distance, and the sea of water seen when looking in extreme close-up at an eye (with reference to Bunuel's *Un Chien Andalou*). The corresponding extremes of dynamic series of notes in several instruments simultaneously, and very long-held pitches, are in actuality not so different: the range of activity within the sounds that are the held notes, is just as 'complex'<sup>3</sup> as when it is made explicit (see Example 2). Such a 'unification of extremes' shows Finnissy's 'critical' approach (as in Herbert Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man*) and exemplifies post-structuralist<sup>4</sup> as well as structuralist thinking.

In the following sets of *Songs 10-15* (1971-75) and *16-18* (1976), oppositions are explored within sections, such as those between rapid activity/ relative stasis, sound/silence, long pitches/ ornamentation, 'directional'/'adorned' melodic lines, angular/constrained melodies, clearly audible lines/a 'lava' of sound. *Song 18* for double bass is like a reflection on the previous songs, involving many of the above oppositions in quick succession or in parallel. It is a shame that these pieces are seldom heard, as they contain in microcosm many of Finnissy's compositional preoccupations throughout his career.

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<sup>2</sup> For a different view on this work see Richard Barrett - 'Michael Finnissy - An overview' (the most thorough article on Finnissy to date) in *Contemporary Music Review* 1995, Vol.13 Part 1, pp.23-43, esp. pp.36-37. See also Lynne Williams, 'Reinstating "The Spiritual Quest"' in the same issue, pp.45-63, which discusses the theatrical works of Finnissy; Williams, 'Finnissy's "Undivine Comedy"', *Opera* vol.39 (1988) and Andrew Clements, 'Finnissy's "Undivine Comedy"', *Musical Times* vol.129 (1988).

<sup>3</sup> I dislike using the term 'complex', or worse 'New Complexity', to describe Finnissy's work, because it implies disproportionate concentration on surface details, as well as he implied lineage from the Second Viennese School, then Darmstadt tradition. Ives, Satie, Varese, Nancarrow and Cage are of equal importance to Finnissy.

<sup>4</sup> In the sense of Jacques Derrida's work, especially in *On Grammatology*, trans. G. C. Spivak (Baltimore, 1977, French original 1963) and *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London 1978, original 1967), fixing on binary oppositions to the point where each component is found to lead to the other, hence reversing/collapsing/deconstructing the opposition.

Ex. 2

8.

Fl.

C. Ingl.

Trbe.

Tti.

Muta in  
Tantam Grande

TEMPO IL PIÙ LENTO POSSIBILE:  
O = tenuto quasi all' esaurimento del fiato  
(ogni O: 6-12 sec.) tutto anche pppp possibile

al bordo ↓  
lascia vibr.  
pp Single slow scrape  
around lower rim  
with ½-closed wire-brush.

al centro  
f Soft stick  
at the centre

ppp Right Hand (holding one  
hard-wind and one  
soft rubber stick)  
soft stroke against upper rim.  
Left Hand (with wire brush) lay brush  
against centre and on the attack, slide-tremolando-  
to the lower rim.

Ideas and concepts from the cinema inform other early works, as well as the *Songs*. His first acknowledged work, *Le Dormeur du Val* (1963-64/66/68) for mezzo-soprano and ensemble, makes explicit use of Eisenstein's theories of montage. Sections create meaning more through their juxtaposition than as discrete entities. This is also true of *From the Revelations of Saint John The Divine* (1965/70) for high soprano and ensemble. Finnissey has said that music bears more similarity to the dynamic, dialectical medium of film than the static one of painting, and this is particularly true of the piano pieces *Autumnall* (1968-71) and *Snowdrift* (1972), which continually hift between 'scenes'. To suggest music should always be continuous, as many do, is analogous to the demand that a film must forego cutting. That might be fine occasionally, but can every film be like Hitchcock's *Rope*? *Rushes* takes its title from the pieces of film that are left over after an editing session. *Nowhere Else To Go* (1989) for ensemble and electronics, attempts to create a bleak, continually transforming, soundscape that parallels the landscapes in Derek Jarman's *Jubilee* and *The Last of England*. At the time of writing, a long piece is planned on the history of photography.

Finnissey has an extraordinary degree of knowledge of the various arts (Busoni: 'He who knows only music is no musician') which has informed a large quantity of his music. Several pieces are preceded by a literary quotation, from which they take their

title (*As when upon a tranced summer night* from Keats; *Wild Flowers* (1974) for 2 pianos and "above earth's shadow... " - Blake; *Autumnall* - Donne; *Transformations of the Vampire* -Baudelaire). They set about either an evocation or a commentary on the work in question. Finnissy has set the words of authors including Hildegard of Bingen, Tasso, Shakespeare, de Sade, Jane Austen, Lear, Rimbaud, Zola, Hölderlin, Whitman, Blok, Mayakovsky and Esenin, as well as traditional folk verse, sacred texts. There are also narrations of historical events in *Jeanne d 'Arc* (1967-71) for high soprano and ensemble, *Maldon* (1990) for baritone, chorus and instruments, and a reference in the alto flute piece *First Sign a Sharp White Moon, as if the cause of Snow* (1968/75), to the Battle of Stalingrad. Especially poignant are the testimonies of British AIDS sufferers, intercut with poems by Russian homosexual writers, in the moving work *Unknown Ground* (1989-90) for baritone and piano trio.<sup>5</sup>

The directness, deviance and experimentalism of Finnissy's many stage works show his awareness of the modern theatrical developments and theories pioneered by Craig, Artaud, Beckett, Genet, Barrault, Grotowski, Müller, Wilson, Brook and Kantor (which is more than one could say of many contemporary British theatre practitioners), as well as classical and traditional forms of 'world theatre'. Other pieces stem from his reaction to art-works of Turner (*Sea and Sky* (1979-80) for orchestra), Caspar David Friedrich (*Traum des Sängers* (1994) for ensemble), Rubens (*Mars and Venus* (1992-93) for ensemble), Joseph Beuys (*Lylyly li* (1988) for piano) and Chris Newman (*French Piano* (1991) for piano). Finnissy worked for a long period with dancers and dance companies, and some piano pieces were either written to accompany dances or attempt to capture on paper the spontaneity of his improvisations for this medium: *Freighttrain Bruise* (1972/80), *Jazz* (1976), *To and Fro* (1978/95), *We'll Get There Someday* (1978), *Fast Dances, Slow Dances* (1978-79), *Boogie-Woogie* (1980/81/83/95) and *Free Setting* (1981/95). Just as overly 'improvisatory' performances of Cage fly in the face of his denial of human intention, however, interpretations of these scores as mere approximations of a general intent will most likely fail to capture the requisite quirkiness and asymmetry.

Finnissy's most 'abstract' works often have the most monolithic structures, as there is no text, programme or source materials to identify. *Offshore* (1975-76) for orchestra very clearly uses bands of different types of activity (tremolo glissandos in the double basses, arpeggios in the piano, harpsichord and harps, bursts of staccato notes in the woodwinds, held chords in the strings, etc.) as building-blocks from which to construct the work (see Example 3). *alongside* (1979) for chamber orchestra makes use of three types of material: melodic lines, sustained notes and chords and 'punctuation' from the percussion. In the three continuous sections, each of these elements is present, but one predominates over the other. *Sea and Sky* (1979-80) for orchestra, like the later *Red Earth* (1987-88), is in a series of sections which evolve over substantial periods of time, like 'sound plasmas' in their degree of activity, providing some parallel with the orchestral works of Xenakis or Scelsi. In the String Quartet, long passages involve all four instruments circulating around one pitch, so that the impact when they break out into wide angular contours is all the more shattering. The extremes of block structure in this work prompted the cellist from the

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<sup>5</sup> The first performance of this work was removed from the official Brighton Festival Programme because of fears of prosecution under the infamous Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988, banning the 'promotion' of homo-sexuality.

Arditti Quartet to liken it to a *cantus firmus*. This was to lead Finnissy to an interest in plainchant, which has influenced some of his recent work.

Ex. 3.

The image shows a page from a musical score, likely for an orchestra. It features multiple staves for various instruments, including Flute (Fl.), Clarinet (Cl.), Bassoon (Bsn.), Horns (Horn), Trombones (Tbn.), Tuba, Trumpets (Trp.), Percussion (Perc.), and Strings (Str.). The notation is complex, with many notes, rests, and dynamic markings. A prominent 'accel. molto' marking is visible in the upper right section of the score. The score is written in a standard musical notation style, with a key signature of one flat and a time signature of 4/4.

If *Alongside* does not sustain repeated hearings so well, perhaps because of lack of distinctiveness beyond the most basic level, more successful is *Pathways of Sun and Stars* (1976), for orchestra but with single strings. (Finnissy has no love for massed strings - the writing in the other orchestral works is often divided into individual players, which is why *Sea and Sky* requires a huge manuscript to be legible!) This is a mystical piece to do with ley lines. For a composer self-declaredly ill at ease with brass instruments, the opening section, oscillating between simultaneous lines and sustained pitches in the horns and trombones, joined by percussion and a few other instruments, has enormous power. Subsequent passages use only subsections of the orchestra before the final tutti.

What is essential to Finnissy's music, as I suggested above, is that particular structure and/or line are not the primary *raison d'être* for a work. Of equal interest is the tremendous range of activity that surrounds the most obvious level. Example 4, from *I'll give my love a garland*, the third movement of *English Country Tunes*, shows a melodic line surrounded by many seemingly unrelated gestures, like insects buzzing around or murmurings in a forest through which a track is beaten. Works such as *Untitled Piece to Honour Igor Stravinsky* (1967/71) in the version for flute, harp and viola, or the second version of *Blessed Be* (1995) for tenor and small ensemble, similarly give the main line a 'background' - 'de-centring' the individual, who is not isolated from society or nature.

Ex. 4.



The idea, common to much British musical thinking, that every note must serve a precise structural purpose is anathema to Finnissy. Rather, he wishes to create a music that in some way mirrors the enormous diversity of activity that one experiences in the 'world outside' and create a dialogue with that world. The concept of the autonomous first-person individual artist, aloof and superior to anything beyond his 'inner world' could not be further from Finnissy's thoughts. We know, since Freud, Marx, Nietzsche, Levi-Strauss, Adorno and others, that human beings are at least to some extent constructed by the world that pre-dates them, and also that ultra-individualism or provincialism/nationalism (also very British characteristics) tend to go hand in hand with fascistic or at least authoritarian ideologies.

The need for a composer to come to terms with the many different phenomena he encounters, often simultaneously, has been a consideration since Ives, a composer whom Finnissy greatly admires. Cage's denial of individual will against an extra-intentional sound world has also been a major influence. Finnissy often uses random devices to "shake up" or merely intersperse his material with some sounds other than those he consciously chooses. Some pieces, such as 'n' (1969-72) for any 1-4 instruments, the 5th and 7th *Piano Concertos* (1980, 1981), *Nobody's Jig* (1980- 81) for string quartet, *WAM* (1990-91) for piano and treble/bass instruments, or *Quelle* (1994) for four saxophones, have no score, only separate parts which the players follow independently; synchronization is thus very approximate and to a great extent up to chance. In other works such as *Lord Melbourne* (1980) for soprano, clarinet and piano, there is a score, but only roughly indicated vertical alignment. It seems that Finnissy often considers musical time as a series of intervals to be filled by topologically distorted phrases or fragments, rather than accretions of metrical units. In *From the Revelations of Saint John the Divine*, an unspecified melodic instrument is introduced towards the end, whose part is independent of the main score.



*Transformations of the Vampire* (1968-71) for small ensemble, which takes its title from one of the 'banned' poems from Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*, is both 'transformational' and 'vampiristic' in its approach to sounds and notation. From initial standard notation, Finnissy moves through independent parts without score, players hitting their instruments with their fingertips, to instructions to produce 'Intermittent sounds of breathing, scraping, buzzing, etc.', then 'Very quiet and continuous non-referential sounds'.

Where Finnissy differs from Cage, however, is in his resolutely 'non-naive' manner of handling material and sounds - he is consistently 'critical' in his approach to any sources, including his own. This obviously suggests parallels with Helmut Lachenmann (think of *Tanzsuite mit Deutschlandlied*), but I think an equally interesting comparison is with Christian Wolff's work of the last few decades. Wolff's attempts to place folk-derived materials or texts in a post-Cageian context (as in *Bread and Roses* or *Accompagnements*) mirrors Finnissy's attempts to give material a 'background' as mentioned above, as well as in his 'commentaries' on line and passages, as in the *Obrecht Motetten III* (1989) for solo viola and ensemble, in which the folkish melodies of the viola are periodically interrupted by highly atonal bursts of activity from the ensemble. *The Cambridge Codex* (1991) for soprano and four players, and the *Liturgy of Saint Paul* (1992-95) for voices and organ, to mention but a few pieces, place together materials with quite different historical contexts. This serves almost as a Brechtian distancing, objectifying, device, reminding us of our own historical distance from (for example) plainchant.

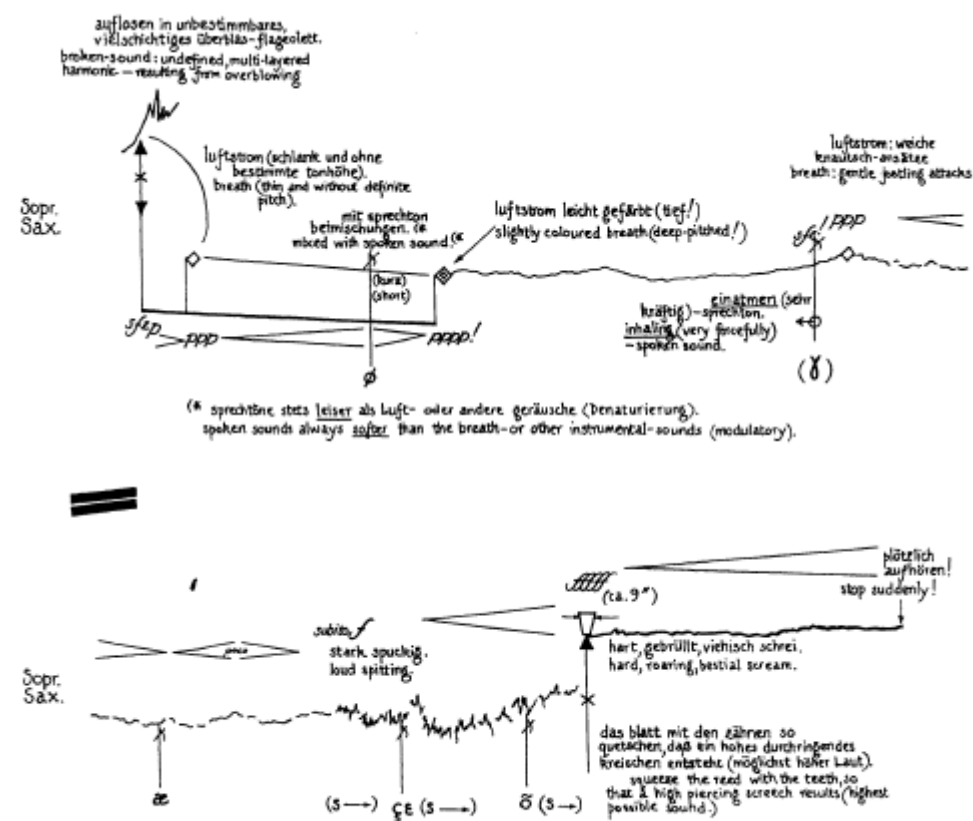
Wolff's influence is also apparent in Finnissy's use of 'open form'. I mean this term not in the sense of Boulez's *Third Piano Sonata* or Stockhausen's *Klavierstücke XI*, but rather to signify the way in which a work is prepared to leave loose ends, unanswered questions, space for the listener to make up their own mind. Neither Wolff nor Finnissy wish cynically to manipulate their audience, rather to stimulate them both intellectually and emotionally. Also, particularly in Finnissy's early works, the structures are 'progressive', finishing in a quite different state from that in which they started, resisting comfortable circularity and thus closure.

Finnissy has consistently performed the piano works of Howard Skempton and Chris Newman, who are just as important to him as the American 'experimentalists'. The extraordinary luminosity and intensity Skempton creates from only a few notes and chords, and Newman's bitter, black humour and estrangement, establish aural and conceptual parallels with Finnissy's music quite as close as the work of composers with hyperactive surface detail.

The use of other music or musics is another way in which Finnissy is able to react to a world 'beyond himself', as well as removing one level of inaccessibility. When source-materials, or at least their characteristics, are familiar to some degree, the musical processes can be more readily apprehended. As regards other contemporary musical developments, one might hear a little of Boulez in *Le Dormeur du Val*, of Nono in *Horrorzone* (1965-66/81/87) for soprano and ensemble, of Bussotti in *Songs 5 & 9*, of Xenakis in *Pathways* and *Celi* (1984) for 2 high sopranos and ensemble, of Scelsi in the String Quartet and so on, but such influences are little more than one ingredient among many. Some of the developments of the 1960s and early 1970s did stimulate a reaction from Finnissy: as well as *Transformations of the Vampire*

mentioned above, in *Lost Lands* (1977) (after a line in Levi-Strauss's *Triste Tropiques*) for Eb clarinet, soprano sax, piano, guitar and violin (itself an unorthodox combination for 'classical' ears), the instruments begin to overblow, bow so hard as to produce raucous noise, etc., until we are left with a saxophone solo almost exclusively of peripheral techniques, straining to produce a true note (see Example 5). The work relates to Hans-Joachim Hespos's conception of the dis-integration of conventional language, leaving only tics, breaths and random pulses for the enunciation of a 'primal scream'. the spoken word is reduced to only a few phonemes in *Ohi! Ohi! Ohi!* (1978) for solo voice and *Mountainfall* (1978) for mezzo-soprano.

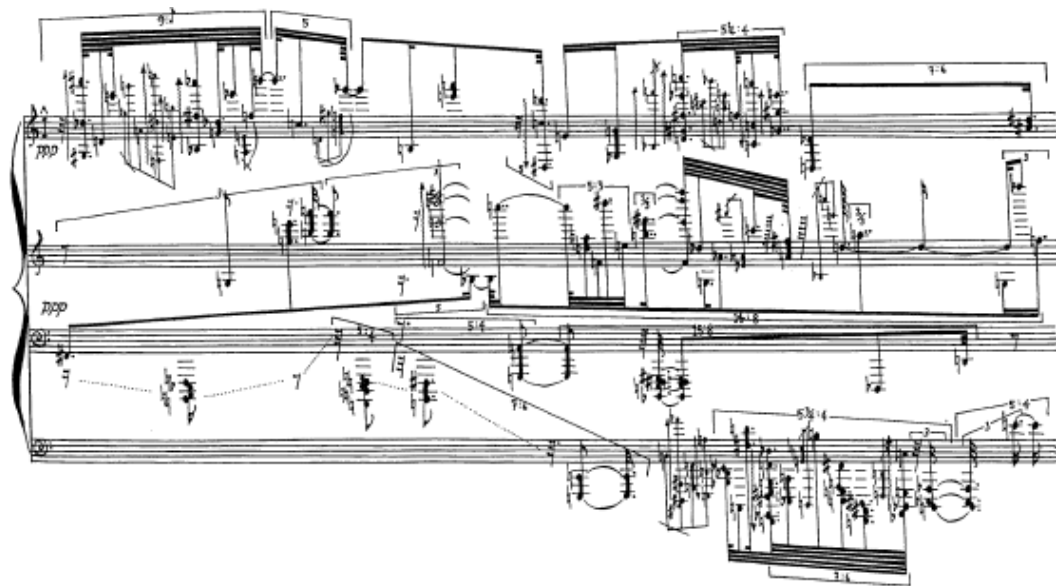
Ex. 5.



Extended instrumental techniques are only used in a few of the early works; Finnissey has little desire to re-invent instruments in the manner of Berio, Globokar or Holliger. If he has a reputation for exploring virtuosity, especially in some of the piano works, the 'virtuosic' writing comes about as a result of musical considerations. The hyper-activity in *Song 5* (see Example 6) is an explosion of many different lines simultaneously; the super-high vocal pitches in *Mysteries 5 - The Parliament of Heaven* (1977-78) for voices and choirs (up to Eb''''!) has to do with the other-worldly conceits of the text. The *Alice* pieces (1974-75) for double bass, cello or cello and percussion make some play of the physical relationship between performer and instrument and the theatrics of performance (Finnissey's one foray into the territory of

Schnebel or Kagel). Maybe in the *Piano Concertos 1-7* (1975-81) the historical connotations make digital dexterity an inevitable factor, but otherwise such a focus is unusual. The piano part of Concerto No.3, influenced by the playing of Cecil Taylor, is in terms of sheer stamina the most demanding work Finnissy has written; and Brian Ferneyhough described the resultant instrument in No. 4 as a 'meta-piano'.

Ex. 6



The 'influence' of other composers is surely inevitable on any composer who does not live in a musical vacuum; but when acknowledged, it can occasionally be brought to the foreground and 'dealt with'. Finnissy has paid tribute to the many composers from different eras that he feels helped to determine his compositional make-up, or merely whom he admires, in short works such as the *Untitled Piece to Honour Igor Stravinsky* (1974), *Grainger* (1979), *Nancarrow* (1979-80), *Liz* (1980-81) (to Elisabeth Lutyens), *G.F.H.* (1985), *B.S.* (1985-86) (to Handel and Bernard Stevens respectively), *William Billings* (1990), *Rossini* (1991), *Therese Verne* (1991), *Imesbref* (1991) (to Cornelius Cardew), *A solis or tusc ardine* (1992) (to Messiaen), *John Cage* (1992) and *Ethel Smyth* (1995), all for piano. These pieces do not pastiche the respective composer's style; rather, they 'zoom in' on the element of Finnissy's own that owes most to the composer in question, where they are an 'influence', or otherwise set one or more of the composer's works. Larger works such as the *String Trio* (1986) use an admired piece (in this case Mahler's Ninth Symphony) to derive both macroscopic and microscopic parameters.

Finnissy's use of other composers' music as his source material has been a key consideration throughout his compositional career. Busoni described composition as the transcription of an abstract idea, so that what we usually call 'transcription' is an attempt to go behind the surface to the idea itself, then re-compose it according to one's own set of aesthetic concerns and priorities. The interpreter and listener then

perform their own acts of 'transcription' as well. This conception was the genesis of the *Verdi Transcriptions*. As a cycle, they are a type of 'art of transcription', in homage to Busoni. Sometimes the original materials are recognizable, sometimes they are transformed beyond recognition, with varying degrees in between; sometimes they are presented in a wholly different 'style'. Considerations of the particular moments in the operas can be of equal importance to the actual musical materials. Finnissy's technique is often to break the source material down into small fragments (a search for 'archetypal' units, in the Jungian sense of the word), then re-assemble them, distort them, transform them, or use them to produce quite different material. Similar procedures can be used to relate the macroscopic levels of source and transcription (again, structural 'archetypes', returning to Levi-Strauss). There is no space here for a detailed analysis of the precise manners in which these techniques are employed, but I believe the most important point to note is that the sources do 'feed' the final work - different sources produce quite different transcriptions. On another level, the work makes reference to virtuoso pianist-composers (Liszt, Alkan, Busoni, Godowsky, etc.), and is as much a 'portrait of the piano' as a 'portrait of Verdi' (in Finnissy's words 'inspired by the energy, passion and wide-rangingly generous humanity of Verdi's operas') and a 'portrait of transcription'. In small-and large-scale senses, Finnissy forsakes the particular viewpoint in favour of a multiplicity of different perspectives (which he has likened to Cubist and Futurist painting), attempting to give as complete an overall picture as possible.

Quite different in approach is the other large transcription cycle for piano, the *Gershwin Arrangements* (1975-88) and *More Gershwin* (1989-90). These reflect the composer's childhood (hearing Gershwin on the radio), thoughts on 'popular'/'high' culture and the associated class-based and commercial connotations, the contemporaneity of Gershwin and Schoenberg, the appalling poverty, deprivation and emergent fascism during the 'Jazz Age', and many other very personal factors. The songs are in this case usually recognizable and have a more improvisatory quality than the Verdi works. Yet they are unmistakably written in the modern day. Finnissy implodes harmonies to the point of atonality in a sometimes quasi-expressionist manner (see Example 7, from *They can't take that away from me*), distorts melodic profiles, gives titles (as in the undanceable *Shall We Dance?*) a new meaning. The procedures are immediate to hear, but complex and enigmatic in nature. Such an emphasis on intricate musical processes with more sparse material, almost a reversal of the situation in *Alongside* and *Sea and Sky*, was to become an important new set of priorities, as evidenced in *In Stiller Nacht* (1990) for piano trio, *Nine Romantics* (1992) for piano, *Folklore 1-4* (1993-4) for piano and the stage work *Shameful Vice* (1994). Producing original, critical and non-circular structures is one of the most radical things a composer can do - this perhaps accounts for why some listeners find both early and late works of Finnissy a little too 'advanced' for them.

Ex. 7.



Other piano transcriptions include *Romeo and Juliet are Drowning* (1967/73) in which Berlioz's music is 'drowned' in a passage derived from Berg's *Wozzeck*, and the three *Strauss-Walzer* (1967/89), as 'open' works (in the sense defined above) as any. The other important transcription cycle, however, is the five *Obrecht Motetten* (1988-92) for different ensembles. All are based on Obrecht's *Salve Regina* and *Ave Regina Caelorum*. The first piece halves all the intervals of the original, then manipulate fragments as described above, so as to produce microtonal lines which retain elements of the melodic contours. The three lines for mandolin, guitar and harp in the second piece are all in different keys and only begin to approach consonance towards the end. A solo viola, in the third piece, rethinks Obrecht in the style of Irish folk music, and is subject to 'commentaries' from the ensemble. The fourth piece structurally resembles the second in reverse, but uses the very different instrumentation of a brass ensemble and introduces elements from the other pieces. The last piece was written for the tenth anniversary of De Volharding, and has to do with the conflicting forces of integral serialism and rock music, continuing the questions explored in the *Gershwin Arrangements*. Finnissy says that the instrumental timbres 'equally remind me of Giovanni Gabrieli and Duke Ellington. Now THERE's richness and diversity for you!' In this further 'art of transcription', we have come a long way from Obrecht's originals.

There are many other works that refer to 'classical' musical sources. The stage work *Thérèse Raquin* (1992-93), based on Zola's novel of the same name, makes use of musical materials from the period in which the opera is set, in particular Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine*. The most recent stage work *Shameful Vice* (1994) takes the life of Tchaikovsky as its subject, and involves a spectrum of different degrees of referentiality. Some works allude to composers towards whom Finnissy is not personally sympathetic: WAM is deliberately myriad and haphazard, in contrast to the chiselled perfection of Mozart (not a note out of place!?) that is all too often seen as the ultimate aesthetic ideal. Mozart is sardonically parodied in the assemblage of quoted materials in *Cozy Fanny's Tootsies* (1993) for piano; *Cibavit Eos* 1991) a transcription of an early choral work, written for the Mozart bicentenary, was of interest to Finnissy as a representation of Mozart's own transcriptions of plainchant.

When approached by the Bekova Sisters to produce a piece 'in the manner of Brahms', Finnissy was annoyed by the patronizing request for stylistic composition and the associated nostalgia for a composer he detests, yet produced the luminous and visionary *In Stiller Nacht* (far from Brahms's cardigan and slippers music) using Brahms's own folksong arrangement, with Brahmsian restraint in the instrumental writing, another 'restriction' to push to its limits.

After the String Quartet, as I mentioned earlier, Finnissy resolved to investigate plainchant. After employing a *cantus firmus* in the String Trio and *The Undivine Comedy*, he produced a series of works that reflect his interest in this area: *The Cambridge Codex* (1991), *Seven Sacred Motets* (1991) for chorus, *Three Motets* (1991) for soprano and differing string instruments, *Two Motets* (1991) for counter-tenor and guitar, *Anima Christi* (1991) for solo voices, chorus and organ and the *Liturgy of Saint Paul* (1991-95). Again we have a panorama of perspectives: *The Cambridge Codex* takes texts in 11th-century Latin, 13th-century English and 15th-century English from manuscripts in the Cambridge Library and arranges them in a palindromic structure, with sharply distinct types of music (modal, diatonic, microtonal) which serve the historical distancing function mentioned above. The various *Motets* (see Example 8) explore close imitative counter-point (derived from Japanese gagaku music), expanding/decreasing intervals, ornamentation, melodic assemblages and large scale harmonic/ intervallic structures, also important to the cantus firmus structure of *Anima Christi*. The *Liturgy* contrasts quasi-modal choral writing with a chromatic organ part, not unlike the similar combination of modal/microtonal writing in the earlier *Haiyim* (1984), a setting of Hebrew psalms for chorus and 2 cellos. Some listeners, hearing only the most superficial elements of the style of these works and comparing them with *Alongside* or *English Country Tunes*, have mistakenly accused Finnissy of having 'sold out' and bracketed him with the 'holy minimalists' Part, Górecki and Taverner (not a term I would use, having some respect for their work). It should be clear from what I have said that many of the procedures have a long history in Finnissy's work - he is just dealing with new sources, and thus new requisite degrees of interaction. The gamut of intentions, aesthetics and preoccupations have largely remained consistent over the years. Though different elements have come into focus at different points (rather in the manner of *Alongside*!), they are merely refracted through different media. As for sacred and associated texts and music, one need only look back to *From the Revelations of Saint John the Divine*, the *Mysteries* (1972-79) for various combinations of voices and instruments, the Machaut setting *Le Lay de la Fonteinne* (1983/90), *Celi* (1984) for 2 sopranos and ensemble or *Haiyim*.  
(To be continued)

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