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## Interview with Marc Bridle, February 2001

Online at <http://www.musicweb-international.com/SandH/2001/Feb01/pace1.htm> and <http://www.musicweb-international.com/SandH/2001/Feb01/pace2.htm>

**IAN PACE** (b.1968) is a leading British pianist, renowned for his transcendental technique and championship of new music in both the UK and Europe, and in recordings. He is currently in the middle of a groundbreaking series of three London recitals attended by *Seen&Heard*, at the Wigmore Hall, Royal Academy of Music and King's College. In a wide ranging interview with **Marc Bridle** he discusses his background and musical training, and the egalitarian, anti-nationalist aesthetic and political beliefs which inform his gruelling schedule of varied musical activities, and that led him to seek to present an 'alternative Britain' in his debut CD *Tracts* recorded in 1997, but which has only now been belatedly released. He discusses in depth working with his chosen composers, and Michael Finnissy, with whom he is most closely associated as interpreter and commentator. Recently he premièred, in a marathon recital at the Royal Academy of Music, Finnissy's monumental *The History of Photography in Sound*, which he is also recording for CD.

Ian Pace believes that new music should be for all people, and the best of it comprehensible without specialist training. He has a healthy scepticism of received wisdom and tradition in interpretation of the classical and romantic 'canon', and discusses knowledgeably the limitations of the famous schools of piano playing. Some may be surprised to read of his interest in early music (and respect for the best period performers), lieder and chamber music. He talks of his aspirations to perform and record (on period pianos as well as modern instruments, and with his group *Topologies*) unique programmes juxtaposing disparate musics to their mutual illumination - an idea which was pioneered in the BBC's College Concerts. BBC Radio3, and some of the progressive record companies, should seize with alacrity upon Ian Pace's timely programming suggestions.

This is a long and thoughtful interview, which deserves to be printed out and studied at leisure by all readers, of whatever main musical interests.

*Peter Grahame Woolf* (Editor *Seen&Heard*)

### Part One

**MB: Can you tell us about your early teaching and its influence on your attitude to piano playing?**

**IP:** I was very fortunate in studying with a wonderful teacher in America, the Hungarian pianist György Sándor. When I was a teenager, I came across his seminal book 'On Piano Playing', which to my mind is the most important work on the subject of piano technique ever written. I've studied different approaches: French schools of playing, Russian schools of playing, descending from Josef Lhevinne, and frequently taught in American institutions, the English school descending from Matthay. All these 'schools' have great merits, but I am also conscious of their limits: the high-finger French school rarely makes a true legato possible, contrariwise, the Russian school makes short staccatos, detached playing, off-limits; the English school

typically provides a limp and limited compromise. Sándor's approach is the most all-encompassing I can imagine: it derives from a basic understanding of the fundamental nature of the instrument and the human performing mechanism. For just about every way I wish to expand the types of sounds, balancing, articulation, voicing, etc., that I can achieve in line with the various ideas I have, I find these are absolutely compatible with Sándor's methods.

Really, we place far too much emphasis on the idea of some God-sent talent when playing an instrument. I truly believe that most people could play Beethoven, Liszt, Ravel, Stockhausen or Barrett to a very high standard given the right training, dedication and application. In Japan, a much higher percentage of musicians have perfect pitch than is the case here. Is this because the Japanese have the 'perfect pitch gene'? - I think not. It is the result of good training in a society that believes in the principle of meritocracy. We don't really believe in the principle of constructive education in Britain - it conflicts too much with our tired feudal ideas that people's abilities are mainly a result of their birthright, and should 'know their place'. This opinion is rarely expressed explicitly, but is still embedded quite deeply within the collective subconscious.

**MB: Your latest CD *Tracts* includes five works by five different composers. How was this programme chosen, and which of the works posed the greatest challenge?**

**IP:** This was the first CD I recorded (in the summer of 1997 - I remember it was at the time when Diana died!), though since then I have made many other recordings, several of which have already been released. So this was my 'debut' CD. It was to be a disc of British composers (as it was for NMC) of my own choice. The first definite piece to include was Ferneyhough's *Lemma-Icon-Epigram*, which I had played many times; it is a very highly regarded piece of music, and of which there was no easily available recording. Then I particularly wanted to include Richard Barrett's *Tract*, which was written for me; it's an earth-shattering piece quite unlike anything else. This also provided a perfect opportunity to bring Richard in as producer. So these two contemporary masterworks (for all the problems inherent in that term!) were to 'frame' the disc. Then I had free choice of what else to include, so I chose three other pieces that I thought would make a coherent but diverse CD. All the music I chose seemed to be 'hard-edged' rather than necessarily opulent (though there are moments of that in the Dench and Barrett works). Richard and Bert Kraaijpel (the engineer) worked hard with careful placing of microphones to achieve a sound which was dry and clear but without being 'plasticky'.

I wanted to record composers whose work (not just the piano music) I knew intimately, and with whom I'd worked with closely. So I chose pieces by James Erber, Christopher Fox and Chris Dench. They're all very different. Chris Dench's music hasn't been played so often over here since he moved to Australia, which I is a great shame, I think. His piano piece *Topologies* actually the most 'optimistic' piece on the disc; my ensemble takes its name from that piece. I'm particularly pleased to include the first CD recording of an Erber work (I intend to record more of his music - he has numerous other pieces for piano, and ensemble works I'd like to record with *Topologies*); his work is extremely powerful and visceral. In the piece on the disc, *You done torn your playhouse down*, he begins with an abstracted 'riff' derived

from a style of jazz piano, though cast in atonal terms, and works this into this labyrinthine, hallucinatory polyphony. His work should be much better known than it is - I would love to see someone take up again his fantastic piece *Music for 25 Solo Strings*. The Fox might seem an odd choice; obviously it is at a considerable idiomatic distance from the other works. However, I wanted to avoid this disc being easily categorised as so-called 'complexity' music, and Christopher's piece, which I like enormously, seemed a way out of that impasse. It uses a relatively sparse range of musical material, but what he does with it, harmonically and rhythmically, is very intricate and 'complex'. For all the idiomatic difference, I sense some connections between his work and Richard Barrett's music; they both often de-emphasise individuated material in favour of *processes* (this perhaps shows the influence of Stockhausen), and both pieces on the disc have a bipartite structure which involves a form of dual visitation of a 'terrain'.

Overall, I wanted the disc to present an 'alternative Britain'. I think many of us know the characteristics of the sort of middle-of-the-road British music that one hears most frequently: emotionally reserved, well-proportioned, not stepping outside of clearly defined limits, concerned with 'colour' for its own sake rather than the expressive potential of colour, notable for its 'musicianly' qualities i.e. those things that are only really comprehensible other than to musicians. This is most particularly true, I think, of the composers that have come to prominence in the last two decades (in the previous era, Bryars, Ferneyhough, Finnissey, Holloway, Knussen, Colin and David Matthews, Maw, Osborne, Saxton, were all recognized - that was real diversity, and all those figures composed from genuine conviction rather than opportunism or ignorance). With this disc, I wanted to show another, quite different, side to British music which is marked by its distinction from the mainstream: often acerbic, relentless, unafraid to be demanding on the listener, but in a way that fundamentally stems from the immediacy (in my opinion) of the musical language, which is expressive of extreme emotions.

However, I don't at all want the disc to be seen as an exclusive group of the best of British music. There are many other composers I who I admire equally: Birtwistle, the earlier work of Maxwell Davies, Michael Finnissey, Howard Skempton, James Dillon, James Clarke, Chris Newman, Rebecca Saunders; lesser known figures such as Gordon Downie, Richard Emsley, Ross Lorraine, Alwynne Pritchard, Mark R. Taylor, Ian Willcock; some of the work of Gavin Bryars, Steve Martland or even Michael Nyman (before he started being sponsored by car companies!) has a strength of purpose. I've played works of Julian Anderson and Thomas Adès, and may at some point perform works such as George Benjamin's *Sortilèges* or Oliver Knussen's *Variations*. Nor in any sense do I carry any particular flag for British music - that sort of nationalism I dislike very much. There is a wide range of contemporary music that I play or am interested in which is every bit as important as the British composers whose work I champion: Luciano Berio, Pierre Boulez, Sylvano Bussotti, John Cage, Elliott Carter, Aldo Clementi, Franco Donatoni, Pascal Dusapin, Morton Feldman, Vinko Globokar, Hans-Joachim Hespos, Volker Heyn, Nicolaus A. Huber, Toshi Ichianagi, Michael Jarrell, Mauricio Kagel, György Kurtág, Helmut Lachenmann, György Ligeti, Luigi Nono, Horatio Radulescu, Wolfgang Rihm, Giacinto Scelsi, Dieter Schnebel, Salvatore Sciarrino, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Toru Takemitsu, Galina Ustvolskaya, Christian Wolff, Iannis Xenakis, Walter Zimmermann, and many others. One of my next tasks should be, I think, to explore

more fully the work of younger generations of European and American composers - I'm sure there's lots of interesting stuff out there. Whenever concerts are presented of 'alternative' music, it's usually still British - to many people abroad, the 'Britishness' of all sorts of music from here is more apparent than the apparent diversity. When Lachenmann and Rihm were featured in Huddersfield last year, I got sick of reading reviews commenting on how 'German' they were - why don't the critics think about why our own music sounds so 'British'? However, as I mentioned above, I absolutely realise how the positing of an 'alternative' Britain still maintains the Anglocentricism of our musical scene.

In no sense do I adhere to some particular stylistic camp, and I don't at all like being seen as part of some 'complexist faction'. There are a number of such factional composers, usually shallow imitators of Ferneyhough or Finnissy, whose music has little substance beyond a superficially 'complex' surface. Depth, stimulation arising from the music, powerful emotions, music that challenges ones preconceptions; those are the things that I find most vital, and different idioms provide different possibilities. I play often around Europe; it's always interesting to see the different view they have of the most interesting British composers to the accepted 'canon' here. A concert of mainstream British composers was presented at Darmstadt in 1998 - people just found it trivial, and continue to talk about it. One younger composer I know found it difficult to battle against perceptions that his own music would be like that.

As for the greatest challenge, beyond any doubt that is provided by *Tract*. It's one of the hardest piano pieces ever written, in a way I would describe as 'transcendental' - meaning a difficulty that lies on the very fringes of possibility. There are a number of such 'transcendental' pieces that come to mind: Xenakis *Evryali*, and some of the piano parts in works such as *Eonta*, *Synaphai* and *Keqrops*, several works of Michael Finnissy such as *English Country Tunes*, *all.fall.down*, some of the *Verdi Transcriptions* and the *Piano Concerto No. 4*, Clarence Barlow's *Çogluotobüsisletmesi*, Walter Zimmermann's *Wüstenwanderung* (which I have recorded for Metier). A few other pieces skirt the border of this category: the beginning of Stockhausen's *Klavierstück X*, Bussotti's *Pour Clavier*. All the other pieces pose great pianistic challenges, but not in that league of difficulty.

**MB: The works by Erber and Fox owe more to popular musical influences than the three works by Ferneyhough, Dench and Barret which take their inspiration, either directly or indirectly, from literature and poetry. Did this make recording the disc, and achieving a sense of musical integration, more difficult than it might otherwise have been?**

**IP:** Well not necessarily, because as I suggested above, I think there are broad ways in which the pieces relate to each other. I listen to jazz and rock music, and hope that informs (at least on a subconscious level) my approach to the music of Erber, Fox and others, and read a lot of literature and poetry (and other writing) which affects how I approach the other composers.

What I'm always trying to get away from is the cultivation of a singular style of playing. When you play contemporary music, or for that matter music of any period, you are dealing with many different worlds, many different ideas, emotions, sounds. I

believe it is the task of a performer to expand *themselves* around the piece they are playing, rather than adopting the piece into their own self-contained set of prejudices and preconceptions. Performing musicians, pianists in particular, rarely take this sort of approach, and the nature of critical discourse which praises the 'individual style', regardless of the music being performed, only encourages this. For any all-purpose set of 'musical' or pianistic ideals, it's not difficult to find a piece from any era that turns these on their head. Recently I've been working with composers such as Dusapin, Kagel, Lachenmann, Rihm and Zimmermann; I think they've all been pleased that I try and take a flexible approach to all aspects of playing, from types of *rubato* to the actually physical way of approaching the instrument. Working with composers is both one of the most testing and one the most rewarding aspects of playing new music - you can learn much more, discover more possibilities, than from much of conventional pianistic wisdom.

When playing older music, I try to imagine having to play that to the composer themselves, from what I can discern through reading their writings, letters, biographies, listening to the instruments they would have heard, etc. Sometimes the conclusions can be startling: I am convinced that Brahms desired a quite fundamentally different approach to articulation than one hears conventionally, and that Schumann's piano music is a lot more raw and urgent (not least with respect to the tempi) than it seems usually, sheltered by the comfortable aura (which incorporates such ideals as 'depth of tone', 'long line') that is provided by the late-romantic aesthetic of much playing. Nowadays I perceive an unfortunate trend towards this aesthetic being applied to the performance of contemporary music, to make it more conventionally 'musical'. I don't think we should be afraid of such qualities as dissonance, asymmetry, dryness, flatness, in music; they are all part of the seemingly infinite range of possibilities. Sometimes even to 'shape' a melody in the usual way can cause it to assume an undue prominence within a polyphonic texture.

In the last couple of years I've become very interested in historically informed performance (as I gather the politically correct term is at the moment!), and the debates surrounding it. In this, I think I have been influenced by friends and advocates from within the *contemporary* music world such as Richard Barrett (few people know how deeply interested he is in period instruments, period performance practice, and early music - this informs his own work), Carl Rosman (with whom I have exchanged many a lively e-mail debate on the subject) and especially the clarinettist Guy Cowley, who plays in my own group, and with whom I have worked frequently. He's an absolutely brilliant player who combines a career playing contemporary music with work in various period instrument orchestras. He rejected the ideal he was taught at the Royal College, of developing one's own singular 'individual sound' in favour of an approach which seeks to expand one's sound and approach with each new piece of music.

All this said, it would be disingenuous to deny some essential characteristics to one's own playing - this is the sort of thing that another person can often hear more clearly, with a greater degree of objectivity and perspective. I listen to my own recordings, and listen to the opinions of fellow musicians and others who I respect, and listen to other people playing music that I play myself, all to try and get some measure of how I would hear myself if I were someone else. So I aim to view my own playing more dispassionately, to get a sense of how it is circumscribed, so as to try and explore

beyond these circumscriptions.

As I mentioned earlier, I recorded this disc three-and-a-half years ago; since then I think my playing has changed quite a bit, and it will go on to change. If I recorded these pieces again, I would probably do things somewhat differently. All solutions are inevitably provisional. There is in my opinion no such thing as a 'definitive performance' (or a definitive recording of any piece); what I do is a document of my own playing, my own conceptions and ideals (as well as practical things such as nature of piano, studio, schedule, amount of recording time, etc.!) at any one particular time. I think most of the music I play, old or new, contains much more potential than can ever be encompassed in any one performance or recording.

**MB: Brian Ferneyhough is well known as one of the most intellectually rigorous of all British composers. How far did you have to understand Ferneyhough's compositional and technical complexities (i.e. the inspiration beyond the notes) to make sense of *Lemma-Icon-Epigram*?**

**IP:** I read several times over the brilliant article by Richard Toop on the piece, in which he exhaustively explored the compositional processes that brought it into being. Understanding how one gesture relates to another, even if that is not immediately apparent from the musical surface, affects on a deep level how one perceives the overall trajectory of the work. In much music, a dialectic occurs between the macroscopic design of the whole, and the latent energy contained within the localised level. In composers such as Barrett and Finnissy, I think the balance of power is in favour of the former; in Brian's work, the latter takes a greater degree of precedence. When I first played *Lemma-Icon-Epigram* to him, I was struck by how clear a sense he had of the expressive potency of each gesture. Understanding how these things are perceived, and how the various unseen compositional processes 'feed' the musical surface, plays an important part in how I construe the piece and sense a way of playing it. However, I do think the 'intellectualism' in Brian's music is not some type of wilful obscurantism: it manifests itself in the hyper-expressionistic, sometimes surrealistic, quality of the musical object. His notation is complicated because it's *counter-intuitive*, intended to channel the performer's efforts in directions other than the familiar and supposedly instinctive.

I also read Ferneyhough's various ideas and essays (I reviewed the volume of these some time ago), and perhaps more importantly, listen to and investigate his other works, not just those for the piano. I am interested in some of the artists and intellectuals who Brian often refers to - Baudelaire, Benjamin, Adorno, Derrida, and others, though I could never pretend to Brian's level of understanding and insight. Nonetheless, I hope I have some measure of 'where he is coming from'!

Brian wrote a new piece for me last year, *Opus Contra Naturam*, which I have played a number of times now. It's an amazing, macabre, disorientating, work which plunders the deepest recesses of the imagination (also very hard to play!) in which it is most clear how much Ferneyhough's music exceeds the systematic expectations that are imposed upon it.

**MB: Richard Barrett's Tract is by far the most challenging, as well as being the longest, work on this disc. What particular problems did learning and playing**

### **this composition cause?**

**IP:** Richard takes a quite startlingly original approach to the instrument and performer. He seeks to re-invent it in terms of the ten fingers as if they were all separate instruments or players, and composes accordingly. He creates a level of intricacy that is mirrored on every level: using an essentially 'vectorial' approach, the trajectories of pitch, rhythm, dynamic envelope, articulation (graduating at various rates between ultra-staccato to ultra-legato), density, register, etc., are all working at different disjunctive rates. Consequently the difficulties for the performer are immense!

When learning it, I found the best approach was to repeatedly work on passages, concentrating each time on different parameters: pitch, rhythm, dynamics, articulation, until his desired result becomes reasonably embedded. His music in particular raises questions of *prioritisation*: not in the sense of paying attention to some levels and ignoring others, but rather to do with which levels of information one pays most conscious attention to at the moment of playing it. There is so much going on, no-one could be reasonably expected to be conscious of every level of detail in the course of one performance, so one makes decisions, which consequently affect the manifestation of spontaneity/pre-planning, based on convictions with regard to the nature of the work, and for the rest, hopefully the practising will serve its function! The priorities I make for a recording are not necessarily identical with those for a live performance.

The piece creates the sense that the hands and fingers have a life of their own, and literally 'drag' each other across the keyboard. Within the first part the writing is mostly contained within the lower register of the piano, so you have this immense tension created by something wanting to 'break out'. This is achieved in the second part. In *the light gleams an instant*, you need to combine an attention to the fine details with the sense of this incredible momentum and consistency, as if the whole piece is one extended sound. In the last part, *as heard so murmured*, a compression of all that has come before, the challenge is to make the events - changes in dynamic, register, articulation - seem as if they emerge as discontinuities within the texture, rather than specifics imposed upon it.

But just as much of a pianistic challenge is to create the right type of sonority and balancing in the slow sections, which obliquely quote from Beethoven. To me they have a sort of dark but gilt-edged quality, like the black spots on the sun.

**MB: Barrett has consistently resisted the 'inaneities' of minimalism and simplicity in his music (so much so, his music deliberately evokes the spirit of being almost unperformable). Do you, firstly, feel any empathy for his Marxist materialism and, secondly, his desire to seemingly breach the capabilities of the piano which is so evident in Tract?**

**IP:** Indeed I do feel much empathy for his Marxist materialism, but with some differences (Richard probably thinks I'm something of a woolly liberal!). Marx's analysis of history, politics and economics is immense, penetrating and far-sighted in its implications (from my selective reading of his writings, in English translation; I don't feel I know his work in quite the level of detail and intricacy as to be able to call

myself a Marxist). There is no more important intellectual paradigm from the last two centuries. Nonetheless, I am instinctively a reformer rather than a revolutionary (unlike Richard), and would prefer to call myself a progressive rather than necessarily a socialist. Probably naïvely, I still hold out some hope for the possibility of a better world achieved through democratic means (though the stranglehold a figure such as Murdoch holds over the country's, and the world's, media, is anything but democratic - changes in the concentration of media ownership are an essential prerequisite for any broader democratically-achieved reform).

Many people of my own generation are too young to remember clearly any time before the Thatcher/Reagan years. In the 1980's, there was at least some measure of resistance to Thatcherism - the miner's strike, CND, Greenham Common, poll-tax protesters, etc. Now, with the end of the cold war and so on, those with short memories and empirical non-imaginings believe that this is the only type of world there is, and that politics in any real sense of the word is dead. I don't accept that this is the best world there could be (one only needs to look at the third world, the hideous inequalities in the world's wealth, at nationalist wars, at the oppressive face of American, British and European foreign policy, to see that). Capitalism as we know it has only been active for around 250 years - feudal societies lasted much longer than that. Many of the world's problems: environmental, nationalistic and racial, religious, of gender, even of sexuality, have their basis, in my opinion, in material conditions. The oppressive Sharia laws in the Islamic world are primarily used by the rich against the poor; those who might preach feminist liberation don't necessarily extend this to the woman who cleans their house at a pittance, etc., etc. The contemporary tendency (American-imported) to focus on single-issue politics, without taking into account their economic determinants, is a very weak form of engagement.

I come from Hartlepool (though from a middle-class suburb on the outskirts, so my background is of a bizarre no-man's land!), a town which was one of many that experienced the terrible brunt of the Thatcher years - a legacy of much unemployment which remains to this day, notwithstanding the best efforts of local people to improve the situation. When I drive through the neighbouring ex-mining villages - Blackhall, Horden, Easington - they are like ghost towns. The mines were closed, then all the shops and other local businesses closed, when the residents lost their purchasing power. This makes me both upset and angry whenever I see it. Few people in government care about this any longer - Blair, like Thatcher and Major, tries to find ways of shifting the blame onto the unemployed as a justification for welfare cuts. People from the shire counties generally know little of this world, and care less. Like many people, I had hopes of the new Labour government, only to see them frustrated under the new politics based on style rather than real issues, while maintaining the stagnant consensus. The election (by dubious means) of George W. Bush in the U.S., and probably the inevitable election of William Hague or some comparable figure in the British election after next, is another step in the reactionary nature of things. However, on the basis of hunch and instinct as much as anything else, I somehow have a sense that the consensus may be sowing the seeds of its own destruction, and different times (to some extent) might not be so far away.

Anyhow, my political convictions do inform my musical activities at least in a small way, bizarre though that might seem. Quite simply, as an egalitarian, I believe that new music should be something for all people, and I believe that the best music has

the potential to be comprehensible to those without a specialist training (indeed that is one of my most fundamental measures of quality). I would include Ferneyhough within this category, surprising though it might seem to some; what he creates may present difficult, complicated, ideas and emotions, but not in an *auto-referential* way; beyond the techniques by which it was composed, the musical language is quite archetypal in nature. What it has to say may be unfamiliar, and not what everyone wants to hear, but that doesn't necessarily imply that it is only meaningful in terms of 'taught' criteria. In the 1960's, Stockhausen was at one point practically a household name (before he emigrated to Sirius!) - I saw a newspaper cartoon about *Hymnen*. That if nothing else demonstrates that there is the potential possibility for wider appreciation for radical music than is currently the case.

The audiences at some of my concerts, though I can't deny that they're often a relatively small and particular crowd, include many people who are not musicians by training or profession. Often they have the most interesting perspective on the music being played. Recently, I played an extremely strange piece by Nicolaus A. Huber in London, and someone who was by profession a social worker spoke to me about the piece afterwards. He latched on immediately to the way in which this piece was in a non-rarefied sense not just about the sounds being made, but also about their means of production. A lot of musicians would just talk about whether the composer has 'an acute ear', whether they have found their 'individual voice' or whether the piece is compositionally 'interesting', in the sense it relates to other compositions. These are indeed relatively meaningless categories to the non-specialist, which is why I reject them as exclusive musical criteria. I've recently been re-reading a seminal book from around 30 years, John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (which accompanied a television programme in better days of broadcasting), which hasn't dated at all. He has a lot of important things to say on these questions.

As a performer, I try and think about what I'm doing (or the performance 'language' which I work with) in terms of its comprehensibility to the non-specialist, if I am able from my privileged position to do so. I only hope so. Is it possible to achieve immediacy without resorting to crudely manipulative and sensationalist effects? Is there not a difference, musically speaking, in the representation of genuine emotion and idle sentimentality? The solutions of primitivist dumbing-down, or resorting to commercial gimmicks and marketing, are only patronising to their potential audience, or exploitative of transient false consciousness, respectively.

Also, it has become clear to me how much the world of new music, in this country at least, is dominated by a small network of people, mostly public school- and Oxbridge-educated (I should point out that I went to a type of public school, Chetham's, and to Oxford), probably like most artistic fields. Mostly they help their friends and other members of their circle. The old school tie is an easy substitute for any real notion of cultural possibility. People are too intimidated by new music to talk about it; consequently they exert an undue deference towards the cognoscenti.

It is extremely hard for anyone involved in new music, particularly a composer, to survive economically. To live in London (where all the networking and the rest of the paraphernalia goes on) is prohibitively expensive for many. I have had some fortunate circumstances; without those I probably wouldn't be doing what I'm doing now. I spoke to another performer recently, who has a very rich partner, who claimed that

everything was all right with the state of things, because things were going well for them. That also makes me angry, this sort of arrogant contempt of those in any field of life who conveniently choose to ignore the arbitrarily fortunate conditions that make their situation possible.

Richard comes from Swansea, Brian from Coventry, Michael from South London, James Dillon from Glasgow, Howard Skempton from Merseyside; probably none of them would want to lay claim to some mantle of economic 'oppression', but nonetheless they all come from backgrounds distinct from the comfortable, economically privileged worlds of many people that constitute the new music world. We are all shaped in part by the world we grow up in; I can't but believe that the perception of worlds outside of the cosy self-contained circle of 'artists' has a decisive influence upon the nature of all these composer's works, towards a greater worldliness, immediacy than might otherwise be the case. They have a perception, not just of their work, but of *themselves*, in terms of a wider world, so probably they would find it difficult to accept easily the notion that they and their music operate in some blissful oasis, oblivious of anything outside of it. That composers such as Cardew or Nono, both from backgrounds of extreme privilege, were able to see through the limitations of the ideologies they inherited, is a great tribute to their courage and integrity.

I am just a musician; I don't see myself or my role as any more important than any other member of society. I dislike the way that artists see themselves as special; that just creates unnecessary forms of social divisiveness. Actually, for the most part artists are narcissistic, self-centred people unconcerned with anything other than themselves; not people I would give the time of day to were it not for their work. I try to take a broad view of the term 'culture' (Terry Eagleton's recent book *The Idea of Culture* is very illuminating in this respect). If I can make a difference, albeit a small one, in cultural life through my own activities, then I will have achieved something worthwhile that exceeds the demands of my own probably over-elevated ego.

Returning to Barrett, I think the piece less 'breaches' the capabilities of the piano than 're-invents' it. Its difficulty is in part a result of the unfamiliarity of the pianistic idiom. This is a form of 'materialism' as well - Richard, by using the piano in an unusual manner, draws attention to the conditions by which the sounds are produced, thus avoiding the phantasmagoric sense of music 'from on high' that is always a danger with more familiar idioms. It's something for which I feel great sympathy, and which is quite fundamentally a part of the 'music itself'.

**MB: Just as in Chris Dench's *Topologies* (which is inspired by a Robbe-Grillet novel), Barrett's *Tract* makes musical inference to literature - in this case works by Samuel Beckett. Did you feel any need to return to the literature in order to understand the genesis of the compositions and to form your own interpretation of the music?**

**IP:** Both Beckett and Robbe-Grillet were authors with whose work I was already familiar, and I knew the literature already when approaching the music. Certainly I try to digest any literary or other influences when performing a piece of music - it can only help, I think. The extent to which Richard's work reflects the concerns of Beckett (and also of Celan, Heissenbüttel, Lägerkvist, B.S. Johnson, Pinget and others) is

quite deep. I know that the basic preparation for writing his string quartet *I open and close* was to read through Beckett's complete output several times. Many important composers have been influenced by Beckett's work: Dusapin, Feldman, Holliger, Saunders, and many others. The composer Ian Willcock takes structural ideas from experimental literature such as Joyce, Dos Passos and Nabokov. To understand this literature is to gain a greater perspective on the music, its motivations and its aims.

Many of the best composers I know have a deep knowledge and understanding of a wide range of radical art, literature, theatre, film, philosophy, politics, etc. This is especially true in Europe, where the overall level of education is so much better. I am sure that being exposed to a wider range of thinking and stimulation only helps in feeding the potential for creativity. Hanns Eisler said 'People who know only about music, don't know about that either'; Busoni said 'He who knows only music is no musician' - sentiments with which I would definitely agree. If music has no meaning outside of its own parameters, it is hardly likely ever to be of interest to those outside of the 'inner circle' of musicians, and consequently is very marginal indeed.

**MB: What are the attractions of playing music that so evidently stretches a pianist's technique to near impossible lengths?**

**IP:** Contrary to what some might think, I am honestly not all that interested in virtuosity for its own sake. At least in the sense that we usually mean the word: I prefer, if possible, to use it to denote a particular powerful *musical* effect. All the very difficult music I play (not just Ferneyhough, Barrett, Finnissey, Zimmermann, but also Liszt, Alkan, Busoni, some Godowsky) interests me because of the nature of the musical result - that makes the difficulties worth tackling.

To make it possible to play a highly demanding piano work, I find I need to have some overall idea of what I am trying to achieve, whether this is manifested most obviously in the localised or global level. This 'carries me through' a piece and supplies answers to the more detailed questions of technique and interpretation. There is some music that I used to play that I wasn't able to conceive of as more than a series of notes, sounds and gestures, and which I couldn't ever really bring off very convincingly in a *technical* sense, as I would get het up and self-conscious about each little note, rather than seeing how it fitted into a broader picture, which would enable me to relax a little more. By no means do I wish to suggest that every minute detail isn't vitally important when playing a piece of music; however if these can't be perceived outside of their purpose, the piece (and the performer) can easily collapse under the weight of it's own detail! Even in an avowedly 'non-expressive' piece such as Cage's *Music of Changes*, which I play, I know the type of quietist result I am aiming for, so am able to play it. This is one of many ways in which technique and interpretation are highly *interdependent*.

## Part Two

**MB: Finnissey's Gershwin arrangements are just one part of this composer's output of piano transcriptions. Do you think Finnissey has something important to say about the art of transcription for the piano? How do his transcriptions**

**compare with those of other composers, such as Busoni and Liszt? How successful is Finnissy in incorporating the original meaning of Gershwin's original songs?**

**IP:** Finnissy definitely has much of importance to say about transcription! He has spoken and written at length on the subject. Basically, he has been fascinated since a young age with Busoni's essay on the subject, in which he defined *all* composition as a form of transcription; music exists as an abstract idea, then the pen 'transcribes' it into written form, at which point it takes on a life of its own. This is why the maxim for composers 'you should hear it, then write it down' is very simplistic - musical notation is not innocent or transparent. Notation carries with it a whole series of connotations - historical, graphic or psycho-semantic - that operate to some extent beyond the composer's attempts to control them.

To return to the point, most of Finnissy's works of the last twenty years or so are in some sense 'transcriptions', by virtue of making reference to other musical material (as often from folk music as from the 'classical' traditions). I think he believes that in so culturally 'constructed' a field as music, it is practically impossible for a composer to have an 'original idea' - even a negation of everything before would be a form of relation. The post-war serialists had the ideal of a universal musical language, free from the past and from national connotations; with hindsight, however, we can see how much Boulez relates to French traditions, Stockhausen to German ones, and Nono to Italian ones. Finnissy's way of dealing with what Gramsci calls 'the infinity of traces that historical processes leave upon the soul', is to try and bring 'influences' and interests to the foreground, so as to be able to acknowledge them, deal with them, and modify them towards quite new ends. Finnissy's distortions, cut-ups, juxtapositions, over-layerings, etc., of Verdi, Gershwin, Bach, and many, many others are to my mind much more individual works than those of numerous composers who consider themselves to be writing without reference to previous models. He is able to create a *synthesis* (in the Hegelian sense of the word, not in the sense we use it now to refer to some type of compromise), taking that leap of the imagination to create something genuinely new from the bare-materials of the pre-existent.

Finnissy is certainly very aware of, and interested in, the whole history of transcription (of Liszt, Alkan, Busoni, Godowsky, Grainger, Sorabji, and others; I would also add the variations of Mozart, Beethoven and Brahms to the category of 'transcription'). But I think his understanding of this 'tradition' is much deeper and more insightful than others. I believe he appreciates the *radicalism* of this literature, the qualities which make it still of interest today. Some of the transcriptions of Liszt (e.g. his *Reminiscences of Simon Boccanegra*) and Busoni (e.g. his *Kammerfantasie über Carmen*) can still seem strikingly 'modern'; Finnissy also says that the appeal of Godowsky's transcriptions was to do with their slippery, chromatic, approach to harmony. The *Verdi Transcriptions* are on one level a 'Homage to Busoni', but not in the sense of writing a piece 'in the style of Busoni' (whatever that might be!); more an attempt to relate Busoni's ideas (and Verdi's) to the present day. It's for this reason that I think the works are modern rather than nostalgic. I'm wary of programming Finnissy together with romantic pianist-composers for fear of this leading to a downplaying of his modernity.

It's very easy to turn the whole 'romantic' legacy of piano music into something

altogether safer and less dangerous than I think it seemed at the time. I feel this has something to do with the fact that pianists and other musicians have lost contact with living traditions, so all music becomes appreciated for its distance rather than its proximity (I could say a lot more about this). The first half of the nineteenth century was a time of great social change, some of it progressive. People speak of a certain ideal of 'romanticism' in music; what they really refer to is a *late* romanticism, when the initial *political* motivations of the romantics had dissipated, and the movement as a whole had degenerated into a type of narcissistic individualism. And then many of the so-called 'neo-romantics' of now (particularly those composers of that description from the U.S.) have lost even that aspect; their romanticism is that of pre-packaged, easy to digest, commodified emotive gestures and effects. This is music that mirrors the worst aspects of mass consumerism. On the other hand, there are deeply interesting figures from Germany, such as Wolfgang Rihm or Wilhelm Killmayer, who have utilised fragments of romantic music (as Charles Rosen points out in his book *The Romantic Generation*, the fragment was a defining feature of early romanticism) from an undeniably modern perspective, creating a fascinating dialectic between form and content. Another composer who interests me very much in this respect is Salvatore Sciarrino who takes pianistic figurations or ornamentations from Chopin, Liszt, Debussy, Ravel and either creates a hallucinatory, physical experience from these 'archetypes', or presents them as disembodied surfaces of a world that no longer exists, applying compositional processes that cause them to 'decay', like the flowers in *avanitas* painting, something that is alluringly beautiful but forever lost.

The best period performers have recently been re-thinking the music of the nineteenth century in terms of more radical notions of the meaning of 'romanticism', and discovering how many of these conceptions are born out by the performance aesthetics of the time. I just quite recently bought the CD of Emmanuel Ax and the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment playing the first Chopin concerto. Quite apart from the fine piano-playing and Erard piano (not quite as impressive as a Pleyel!), the *orchestral* playing is so striking. Using a medium size orchestra, the strings playing with less vibrato and a more pointed sound than is customary, it's amazing how much of that spirit of rebellion and hope are contained even within the first few bars. When I hear it played in the 'normal' ways now, it just sounds kitschy to me.

To return to the *Gershwin Arrangements*; they are, I find, some of the most challenging of Finnissey's music to play convincingly. There are a great many ways of performing them, and my approach is very particular, relating to my own set of priorities of what I believe to be most important in the music. While the melodies remain in a more or less intact form, the rest of the notes go in all sorts of directions. I was very conscious of trying not to over-emphasise the melodies, which I know is something Finnissey doesn't like - then they sound just like Gershwin tunes with Finnissey very much in the background. No, I firmly believe that these pieces should be addressed as music of *now*, music which couldn't exist without all that has happened in the intervening modernist period. So sometimes I consciously try to avoid 'shaping' the melodies too much, as that can lead to their assuming an overly foregrounded position (for example in 'Things are looking up', where the melodic voice is marked at a higher dynamic at the very outset, but not afterwards). The aim was to try and achieve the sense that the melodies exist in an uneasy equilibrium with the other lines/harmonies/rhythms. This can lead to some of them sounding quite flat on the surface, but containing all this suppressed 'latent energy'.

A piece like 'Blah, blah, blah' was an evocation of a particular individual who never stopped talking, so I tried to make it sound as incessant and relentless as I could. For 'I'd rather Charleston' I wanted, rather than aiming for an exuberant 'whiz', to create a type of *danse macabre*, so I took it extremely fast and often completely without pedal. At the end of 'Nashville Nightingale' I remember absolutely pounding the piano, trying *not* to get a 'nice sound', raucous rather than grandiose. Inevitably the microphone homogenises this a little. In general, I felt the true *intimacy* of the pieces demanded a somewhat 'bare-knuckled' approach; even in the many slow pieces, I thought their lyricism should seem a little too close-to-the-bone.

It would be much easier to 'characterise' the pieces in clichéd manners; indeed pianistically things can be a lot easier when what one's aiming for has been tried and tested by other performers. Inevitably therefore what I'm trying to achieve is by nature somewhat experimental. While I'd known and played the *Gershwin Arrangements* for nearly ten years before I recorded them, my ideas were continually developing or changing - probably they will continue to do so. Overall the disc seems to have been well received (contrary to what I'd expected!), but after a while I don't listen to my own recordings. As I think I mentioned in another answer, recordings are a document of a particular view, a particular type of playing, at a particular time. If people like them, then that's great, but I have to put them behind me and go on to keep exploring. Maybe some other time I'll record these and other works of Finnissy again and do them completely differently. The music is so rich and offers so many possibilities.

On the other hand, these pieces *do* contain the traces of earlier traditions within them, and I did want to acknowledge this in some way. At the recording studio at Wantage that we used (where we have also recorded the complete piano works of Walter Zimmermann - a future release), there's a beautiful Fazioli piano, a slightly soft-toned instrument. When we were testing the sound, we settled on a medium-distance position for the microphone (David Lefeber, producer and director of Metier, always likes to work with a single microphone). I heard the sound and it just clicked as being 'right'. I didn't quite realise why at the time, but it was because it reminded me a little of some of the sound of earlier piano recordings. This seemed a very potent mixture, a sound reminiscent of other times, whilst playing very modern music. While in some of the pieces I strived for a Stravinskian type of quite detached articulation, in others I went for a quite ultra-legato approach, which is quite out of fashion nowadays. I tried to apply this to multiple lines, however, rather than just the 'singing melody' as older pianists might have done.

Recording and live performance are two fields that I treat quite differently. If you're going to do more than one take of a section, because of a wrong note, a note that doesn't quite speak how you want it to, a plane going overhead, a pigeon stuck in the rafters (I've had that a few times!), the air-conditioning suddenly switching itself on automatically, or any of the other pitfalls that most recording musicians will be familiar with, there needs to be some consistency of approach so that edits can be made without the result sounding too arbitrarily disjunctive. It necessitates a rather different balance between the spontaneity and pre-planning.

Spontaneity, in the sense of *not* pre-determining everything I am going to do, is very important to me in live performance. I don't think I could really play a performance in

an identical manner twice. There are so many factors to take into account and respond to - the piano, the acoustic, the levels of attentiveness in the audience. I think most listeners can tell quite clearly the difference between a performer who is just going through the motions and one who is creating something distinctive *at the time of performance*. Much of my practice and investigation of music is concerned with an attempt to expand the possibilities for spontaneous engagement. There's no contradiction, in my mind, between thinking concretely about a piece of music and how to play it, and acting instinctively, irrationally, in performance. The extent of the thinking serves to enlarge the reservoir of possibilities for the spontaneous imagination to draw upon and fashion into new approaches. Obviously a spontaneous approach carries a greater degree of risk, but it's a risk worth taking, I think. In the recording of the *Gershwins*, in some of the pieces I took a slightly more spontaneous approach than usual. This is still a balance I'm trying to get right, some types of impulsiveness or extreme stillness that are 'felt' can sound quite different on a disembodied recording - there is always a more 'objective' quality when you can't actually *see* the performer.

There's a brilliant article by the American musicologist Robert S. Winter in which he examines the tempi in a large sample of recordings of the second movement of Beethoven's Op. 111 - from Schnabel and Fischer, through Arrau, Ashkenazy, Brendel, Pollini, Rosen, to Badura-Skoda and Binns on period instruments. What is remarkable is quite how consistently almost all of these players speed up and slow down at the same places. The score would at least suggest a quite regular pulse - Winter doesn't claim this as the only possible interpretation, but suggests that one would have thought that someone might have tried it. No doubt many of these players were acting 'instinctively' in the rather naïve sense of the word. Some of what we classify as 'instinct' might actually be accumulated habit, not least bearing mind the huge influence of recordings; this is why I believe it's important to engage dialectically with both instinctive and rational approaches to performance.

There are many other ways in which I feel live performance and recording are different. I would compare them to the difference between a stage play and a film. The type of *rhetoric* that a stage actor applies, so as to project their voice across a hall, is quite different to that of a film actor whose words are being picked up by cameras and microphones. This is just as true of musical rhetoric, whether one is 'playing out' to an audience, or playing to a microphone, though of course these things can easily be exaggerated in both cases. I only occasionally record my live performances, mostly just for promotional purposes. Ideally, if recording a concert, I would place the microphone quite a bit further away than usual, but this tends to make the sound dull and cause lots of extraneous noise to be picked up.

Many times I've been to concerts which have sounded very dull and unengaging, then heard them broadcast on a later occasion, when they have seemed much more full of life; contrariwise, I've known electrifying live performances which have sounded over-the-top, messy and unduly volatile when broadcast. Nowadays many concerts (especially those of new music) are recorded, and musicians' approaches are more often engineered to the demands of the microphone than that of the concert hall. This is a shame I think, and I think it is better if possible to preserve the differences between the two media. If I ever get to be artistic director of a festival (something I'd like to do some day), I'd like to put limits on the recording of concerts, not least so as

to tell listeners that if they want to hear this, they actually have to be *there* to participate in the unrepeatable moment of the occasion.

As far as the meaning of Gershwin's words go, I think Michael reacts to very particular facets of these. Some of the words echo with events in his own life - these provide for the most 'personalised' pieces, others remind him of people he knows, others make him think of the events of and historical circumstances of the time. He told me that in *Shall We Dance?* He imagined one of these horrendous dance contests that took place in the 1930's, which many people went in for desperate to win some money to help with their own perilous financial circumstances. Some people literally danced themselves to death; consequently this bizarre piece is a type of *Totentanz*. Nonetheless, I think these ideas feed the musical surface rather than actually being it; the pieces stand with just their title - a listener need not know the words in order to be able to appreciate the piece.

**MB: You have, of course, performed Finnissy's monumental *History of Photography in Sound* at the RAM, and you are also recording it. How did you come to be offered the opportunity to perform the world premiere of the work in its entirety?**

**IP:** I played Finnissy's complete piano works in a series of six big recitals in 1996 in London. It was after hearing this series, having a chance to hear his whole piano output laid in front of him, that Finnissy spoke with me about the idea of writing a mammoth piano work, which I would play complete. As it progressed, I performed each chapter as it was completed, so it was only natural that I should give the premiere. I've also written quite extensively about Finnissy's music, most notably in the two large chapters I contributed to the book *Uncommon Ground*, which I also co-edited. I think in fairness I could claim to know his music as intimately as anyone.

**MB: The work has been written for many different pianists. Despite this, do you feel that the work has a symmetry and integration which makes it possible for one pianist to perform it successfully?**

**IP:** Absolutely. *The History of Photography in Sound*, is no mere assemblage of separate pieces. There is a huge amount of thematic cross-referencing going on between the different books and chapters, and I actually think that many of the chapters make more sense as a part of the whole than individually. Now that I've played the complete cycle, it looks like there will be several further opportunities to do so; that nowadays interests me more than playing the separate chapters.

Finnissy has an acute sense of large-scale drama. In this sense the work is very different from other piano pieces of comparable length. When playing the whole, I am very conscious of how the individual moments relate to the whole, and try and use this knowledge as the basis for my overall interpretation. In this sense, I might play some chapters differently when giving a complete performance from how I might do so if I were playing them separately - the relative 'weight' given to certain appearances of material is in part conditional on whether this is their only appearance. I actually think that there are many good reasons for one pianist to perform the whole - otherwise big discrepancies can occur between different approaches which upset the balance of the whole.

There is a symmetry (slightly lop-sided, but Finnissy is far too thoughtful a composer to enact symmetry without some distortion!) to the whole work. Book 3, at the centre, was the first to be composed, and is the most accessible and most episodic. The middle piece of this, *Seventeen Immortal Homosexual Poets*, was the first piece to be written. Then the piece has a sort of fractured palindromic form around this. Chapters in Book 2 are mirrored by those in Chapter 4, and Book 5 is a counterpart to Book 1. Perhaps 'mirrored' isn't quite the right word, the various counterparts are more like 'the other side of the mirror'!

For the first chapter, *Le démon de l'analogie*, Finnissy described to me the idea of some long 'tracking shot', across broad expanses of much of the material that will occur later in the cycle. When playing this chapter as part of the whole, I tried to maintain a certain aloofness or sense of 'distance'. Conversely, in the last chapter, *Etched Bright with Sunlight*, again there is a wide range of material, but it is presented mostly in short snatches as the piece spirals frantically *en route* to its conclusion. The second chapter, *Le réveil de l'intraitable réalité*, presents short snippets of material that go in and out of half-focus, *dimms* and *crescs* to and from *niente*, never for a long time going beyond mezzo-piano. Traditional ideals of clarity and projection seem inappropriate to me at these points, in the context of the whole. There are also long passages at various points that are extremely quiet, another type of 'distance'. This sort of 'holding back' makes the events when material is presented in a more fully-fledged, 'in focus' manner, all the more striking. In the last piece, *Etched Bright with Sunlight*, there is a quite explicit quotation from Berlioz's *Romeo et Juliette*, which had been vaguely alluded to at various earlier points. There is a lot hanging on such a moment - if one 'plays it out' too much, it becomes the 'big tune' at the end, a type of catharsis that could sound very tacky and banal. When playing this, I was very concerned to do the opposite, and keep it 'under wraps' or veiled. That sort of thing can affect one's perception of the whole piece.

Above all, when playing the complete cycle, my top priority is to maintain the sense of the whole; to concentrate in particular on the macroscopic dialectical relationships between stillness and activity, flatness and variegation, stasis and dynamism, as well as obvious contrasts of dynamics, articulation, etc. There is always a danger of a 'law of diminishing returns' - too much variety can itself produce a form of sameness. This is something that I think most 'complex' composers have been highly aware of, and a performer should think about also. My personal *bêtes noires* are kitchiness and excessive sentimentality (there is a world of difference between sentimentality and genuine emotion. I realise with some hindsight that I have been guilty of a sentimentalised approach sometimes in the past, something I now try hard to avoid!); if a piece contained these qualities in large measure, I probably wouldn't play it. I don't think this is at all true of Finnissy's music, but I think it takes a careful approach to ensure they don't enter by the back door. There are passages within the *History* marked 'sentimental', but these are contextualised in such a way as to partially objectify such an affectation, and survey it from a wider perspective.

**MB: *History of Photography in Sound* incorporates many different styles, ranging from the Negro spirituals of the second chapter to the more classical elements of the Alkan-Paganini sections of chapter three - and beyond. How successful do you think Finnissy has been in achieving his aim of composing 'a history of**

## photography in sound'? How all embracing is the work?

**IP:** There are many 'histories', many 'photographies' and many 'sounds'! Like most of Finnissy's titles, this can be read in numerous ways. It's as much about the connotations of the three concepts as a chronological 'history'. I'm wary about using the term 'style' - that implies pastiche. With Finnissy it's more like he takes an avocado, removes its contents, and replaces them with his own - only the 'shell' remains. The idioms or materials with which he works are only the starting point - what he does with them is the thing of interest. I think it's an immensely successful work because of the panoramic range of emotions and ideas stemming from it, as well as the way it combines into a coherent whole. 'History', 'Photography' and 'Sound' as concepts help to bring about this end; in this sense, it is very all embracing. Ideas from the cinema (the idea of 'photography' includes moving as well as still photographs) have for a long time informed Finnissy's approaches to structure and texture; he uses these with a greater level of sophistication than ever before.

*History of Photography in Sound* contains many allusions. In *North American Spirituals*, he takes the pitches of the spirituals, then reworks them within one of the parts of a chorale derived from William Billings, so as to present, ambivalently, a musical analogue of the whole notion of 'assimilation'. He performs similar procedures when combining Vendan African songs and bass-lines from Schubert and Mozart. Elsewhere, the rhythms of the materials are often distorted, or they are combined with other things; almost never is there pure quotation, 'photographs' presented with no element of critique. In *Alkan-Paganini*, he uses some basic gestural formations and small pitch cells from Alkan and Paganini (and Schumann), and the structure of the whole piece (left hand alone, right hand alone, then both combined) comes from Alkan's *Trois Grande Études*, but it doesn't sound like these composers' music; it is utterly a work of Finnissy's own. He has absorbed many influences, engaged with many older musics, but almost never uses them as convenient 'ready-mades'.

I wrote about this at length in the programme note; overall I think in part the piece constitutes a critique of the whole questions of musical representation and assimilation. This is what fundamentally differentiates Finnissy from superficial imitators, who just use the same sorts of references, but for cheap effect.

There *were* composers who were initially a little influenced by Finnissy's earlier works - such as Chris Dench, James Dillon, Richard Barrett and Richard Emsley - but all of these people quickly struck out on their own, to produce something genuinely original. The subsequent generation of 'Finnissy clones' don't begin to compare with these figures, I think. Sometime I might write an essay entitled 'Finnissy defended against his devotees' - the way in which he distorts, modifies, critiques his musical 'objets trouvés', the way in which he refuses to allow a nostalgic interpretation, these are what makes his music worthwhile, much more than the fact of his using the range of reference he does. Lots of younger composers can reach for a folk tune, a batch of clusters, an unadorned modal melody, etc., as an easy-to-handle 'sound effect' to produce a predictable effect in an audience, ensuring the piece will be a 'fun romp' rather than anything more serious. Of course then the music is consoling and not disconcerting for the audience, as it appeals to the familiar.

There was a talk that Lachenmann gave in Huddersfield last year where he cited a

piece of Penderecki that, at the climax, suddenly turns into a Bach quotation. People said that this was a moment of great elation, whereas Lachenmann found it so cheap. When this takes the form of direct quotation of stylistic pastiche, it's obvious; however, there is much other work that is little more than a patchwork quilt of 'heard' music, with a few minor alterations to cover one's tracks. Critics talk about what a fine 'ear' a composer has in the way that they 'hear what they write' - indeed, they sometimes heard it somewhere else before they put it onto paper and passed it off as their own.

Quotation is something that needs to be further thought about and discussed. Whatever a composer's motivation in using a quotation or pastiche, often that is what primarily the listener hears, and overshadows anything else. How many people listen to the third movement of Berio's *Sinfonia*, when really they would sooner listen to the original Mahler Symphony, but see this as the 'acceptable face of modernism'? It concerns me particularly in the field of contemporary opera that so many works in this medium are dependent on clichéd effects to create a rather hackneyed form of 'word painting' or 'commentary'. It's quite an easy way to write an opera, to take a stage play and add these elements; I think that composers would do well to ask not just 'how does one write an opera', but 'why write an opera at all - why is it a valid medium in this day and age?'

My basic view is that 'serious' music new or old is worthwhile to the extent that it moves *beyond* the tried and tested, beyond the familiar. This is a necessary though not necessarily sufficient condition, I believe; otherwise it's little more than light entertainment or quasi-film music. Now, of course there is a place for these latter categories, but I think popular music serves those purposes much better. The claims made that new music should primarily be entertaining don't hold up - only a small number of people listen to it, so it can't be succeeding very well in its aims. Is there not a place for something more serious and challenging? A similar situation applies in literature - so much new 'serious' writing seems to be pot-boilers dressed up in pointlessly verbose, 'literary' language. If people want to write a popular novel, why not just do so? Correspondingly, the trendy, image-conscious, string quartets that have been an unfortunate feature of musical life recently will never achieve the popularity of a real rock group. By being a string quartet, they are making a token gesture to achieve artistic respectability. There's no way it's possible to justify subsidy for new music if the only claim to be made for it is that it provides a respectable form of entertainment for the middle-classes, the vague aroma of 'high art' without anything more. It's a rather pathetic spectacle, hearing 'classical' composers talk about their interests in 'rave' and 'house' music; most people who are into such things would just laugh at what they produce. There *is* good music inspired by rock and jazz (e.g. the Fox piece we talked about earlier, I think) - that uses elements from these other styles, but creates something quite different from them. Richard Barrett was very happy when once his music was compared to Captain Beefheart - yet that similarity is much deeper than a form of stylistic allusion would allow.

The great thing about the best music of recent times (particularly that of the 50's, 60's and 70's) was that the composers, for the most part, wrote what they did out of a sense of necessity and commitment, rather than playing to audiences' expectations. That rarely applies nowadays; composers instead think 'what should I write to become successful'? I've seen and heard this again and again, composers who are so terribly

self-conscious about their place in the scheme of things, and write accordingly. It's careerist compromise at its worst, though I suppose somewhat mitigated by the perilous career insecurity that obtains today in the highly under-subsidised music world. Unfortunately it seems rather prevalent in Britain, amongst composers of all persuasions, whether they see themselves as 'mainstream', 'complex', 'experimental', or any other tired-out old category. The 'Manchester School' never saw themselves as a school (I was asking Maxwell Davies about this recently) - they were a group of highly distinctive composers who happened to study at the same place at the same time.

Another thing that comes to mind is the whole nature of 'character' in music. One finds 'character' in the novels of Dickens or the operas of Britten, usually a matter of stereotypes. As a humanist (of types!), I do believe that human beings are much complex and rich than can be contained within any pigeonhole. Music of 'character' or playing of 'character' is just as invalid, I think, as any novel of 'character'. Usually all the distinctive things - ambiguities, discontinuities, volatilities - are evened out by some hackneyed form of 'characterisation'. That doesn't interest me at all as a performer, though I know it's an easy way to win over audiences and critics. 'Characterisation' is a code word for playing something in a way so that it sounds familiar. All performers articulate their own sense of priorities about a musical work; mine are the ways in which the music breaks with convention, 'makes strange', is 'modern'.

There's some interesting recent writing by the American musicologist Christopher Gibb on Schubert, questioning the numerous myths that have grown up about the 'poor, struggling artist'. Actually Schubert wasn't doing too badly for someone of his age; it's mainly the fact that he died early that makes us think that he was unrecognised. Now this rather simplistic notion of Schubert has quite strongly affected the way of playing his music, just as the easy connotations we draw concerning the 'bearded Brahms' have conditioned attitudes to his. In Schubert's case it is quite commonplace to play the music extremely slowly, with an all purpose legato in place of his own quite detailed articulations, with a consistent 'rounded tone', to give the music some sort of cod-pathos. With Brahms, the music is often played in a heavy (with far too large orchestras), again slow, again unarticulated manner, rather stodgily, because isn't that after all the sort of music a bearded man would have written? (though he only grew the beard in his late years, nonetheless a CD I have of a wonderful period instrument performance of *Ein Deutsches Requiem*, which he wrote when he was in his 30's, still reproduces the old bearded photograph on the cover). It's equally easy to romanticise Schumann's madness, to see this as some form of daemonic possession; actually the works from his period of mental instability are more notable for their greater banality and over-repetition.

The importance of taking a biographical approach to understanding a composer's work is not necessarily one I would dispute, but it can be very problematic. Biography is something forever being rethought and modified, and it's all too easy to form one-dimensional conclusions as to a composer's 'character', and equate the work with this. Perhaps composition can sometimes be a form of catharsis, a way in which the composer demonstrates a part of their personality quite at odds from that which they present in their everyday life?

A statement I'm fond of making is 'There are no good composers, just good *compositions*. Similarly there are no good performers, just good *performances*.' It's always a difficulty for both composers and performers, that people hear one work or one performance and assume that everything is like that. Sadly there are numerous cases where that is indeed the case, but that doesn't mean we should apply it as a general rule. Why is a recognisable personal style in all of a composer's works, and a performer's concerts, a good thing? If ten works might seem to be by different composer's, or ten performances might seem to be as if by different performers, what is wrong with that?

**MB: Does it slightly sadden you that pianists with incandescent techniques, such as Maurizio Pollini, do not always show a willingness to play, and commission, more contemporary music?**

**IP:** Well, Pollini has played works of Boulez, Stockhausen, Nono, Sciarrino, Manzoni, and a few others, which is more than most. I'm sure there are lots of pressures, from agents and promoters, that place limits upon performers such as Pollini's opportunities to play and commission contemporary music. For anyone with such a huge reputation and international profile as Pollini, there are obvious dangers were he to play a great deal of new music. While perceptions are gradually changing for the better, there is still a certain stigma attached to playing new music, or early music for that matter. Ridiculous prejudices still apply that somehow people in both these fields are the second best. To my mind, few 'mainstream' violinists could match Reinhard Goebel's performances of Bach or Biber, or Irvine Arditti's of Xenakis, Nono and Ligeti, and others. In both their cases, as well as their stupendous technical facilities, I'm impressed by the extent to which they are less encumbered by received ideals of 'musicality', and as such are free to think through the music afresh. Performers such as these, and others who have taken a thoughtful and insightful approach to music, and developed technical approaches which allow them to do all they wish, interest me nowadays more than the 'stars'.

Pianists such as Aloys Kontarsky, David Tudor, Herbert Henck, Frederic Rzewski, Pierre-Laurent Aimard, Pi-Hsien Chen, and others, whose focus is upon contemporary music, also have or had incandescent techniques. It's a shame, I think, that none of these figures were thought fit to be included in the Phillips 'Great Pianists of the 20th Century' series; nor wonderful *fortepianists* such as Malcolm Bilson, Robert Levin, Andreas Staier, Paul Komen, Jos van Immerseel. I would love to hear some of this later category playing new music.

I'm an agnostic as to the question of whether specialisation is a good thing. When people say so-and-so is a fine performer because they can play both Beethoven and Stockhausen well, they often mean that they play both in a conventionally 'musical' way. That's one possible approach, but not really the one I wish to take. I gave a concert of Beethoven and Tippett recently, and it struck me that the Beethoven seemed to have much more in common with the new music I play than did the Tippett. When doing another concert with the *Hammerklavier* Sonata and the Boulez 2nd, the closer proximity, temporally speaking, of the Boulez somehow made the interpretative questions much easier to answer than with the Beethoven.

I do believe that all performers should play music of their own time; that was the case

in previous eras, and should be now. That seems to me to be a good perspective from which to observe all music. Just to have the experience of working with living composers, living traditions, would affect many people's perceptions.

This makes me also think about programming - programmes of music the relationships between which can be relatively arbitrary, are often unified by a consciously applied consistency of interpretative approach (defined as 'musicality' or 'the performer's personality'). I believe there are meaningful connections to be made between music old and new, through programming; many more possibilities than standard recital formats allow. People often criticise programmes for having too much similarity; on the contrary, I believe a lot of programmes have too much difference, which is only alleviated by a sameness of approach. To put a programme together which contains works whose connections are clear, then to try and apply a diverse interpretative approach; that can be much more interesting.

As I suggested earlier, I don't believe in the *Werktreue* notion of performance, that the player should be just some type of transparent executor. That to me seems neither possible or desirable (Richard Taruskin's essay 'On Letting the Music Speak for Itself', in *Text and Act*, is very good on this subject). As a counterbalance to the late-romantic idea of the interpreter, the *Werktreue* ideal has been much espoused by performers of both early/period instrument and contemporary music. This was probably a necessary stage to go through so as to get rid of lots of 'deadwood', so to speak. I believe the best period performers today have a rather more sophisticated notion of the aesthetics and ideals of performance than many performers either of the standard repertoire or often of new music.

**MB: What new music do you want to add to your repertoire in the near future?**

IP: There are various things for the imminent future! - James Dillon has just finished a fantastic new set of piano pieces, very difficult but very rewarding, which I'm premiering at the Berlin Biennale at the beginning of March; also Pascal Dusapin has finished a new piece for me for the same concert. I'm also working on some more Sciarrino works for concerts in Geneva and Chicago, a big piano piece of Jay Alan Yim, and some extraordinarily difficult piano pieces by Gordon Downie for a recording session at the end of March.

Then there are a number of works that I have been meaning to get round to learning soon: Carter *Night Fantasies*, Ives First Sonata, the remaining Sciarrino piano music that I haven't yet played, some more Scelsi, piano music of Tristan Murail, Luc Ferrari, Christian Wolff *Accompaniments*, the few Ligeti Études I haven't done yet, maybe some more Cowell, Antheil, etc. I played Jolivet's *Mana* suite for the first time last year, and want to dig into some of his other piano music. Various other Italian music: Stefano Gervasoni, more Marco Stroppa, Marco DiBari. Of older repertoire, I've played about 70% each of the piano music of Schumann and Chopin; I want to learn the remaining pieces, Liszt's Dante Sonata, Don Juan Fantasy and some other pieces. Whenever there's a relatively quiet period, I often learn a big batch of music by a composer, e.g. last year I went through a period working on lots of sets of Beethoven Variations.

Overall, I think my repertoire is quite comprehensive, from Beethoven to the present

day (anything earlier I don't really like any longer on modern instruments). But there are always many corners to explore of lesser-known repertoire. At some point, I want to look further into some of the slightly more obscure early Russian modernists (Mossolov, Roslavets, Protopopov, Lourié, etc.). Also, I haven't played so much Scandinavian music. There are various interesting groups of Eastern European composers, particularly in Hungary and Slovakia, who formed *samizdat* cults around figures such as Cage, Feldman and Wolff in the communist days, when that music was scarcely known over there.

In Britain, we scarcely know that much of the music of the elder statesmen from Europe and elsewhere. I want further to explore what younger composers from outside Britain are doing. I've played and supported a lot of young British composers; now I want to familiarise myself more fully with younger generations from abroad.

But also, going through and re-thinking my old repertoire can be as important as learning new pieces. Almost continually, I'm engaged in a process of trying to think hard about the music I play and the reasons for which I think it's important. For example, I was playing Scriabin's Tenth Sonata recently. Now, Scriabin is a composer whom I have found problematic in the past - the music could seem overblown, superficial and ultimately banal. It's hard to deny that his formal structures are rather elementary. Now the standard way of playing his music involves a good deal of emphasis upon the primary melodic line, with the other parts placed firmly in the background. I started to think about the extent to which Scriabin was influenced by Chopin, and Chopin in turn placed such great store by Bach. So I have been trying a different, more contrapuntal, approach to Scriabin, attempting to achieve a greater degree of equitable balance between the various lines that occur simultaneously. I'm fascinated by the recordings of Rachmaninoff playing, in which, rather than over-emphasising one part, he creates a form of clarity of line by the slight de-synchronisation of different lines (even within one hand), a technique which actually finds resonance within the work of some Renaissance polyphonists. Rachmaninoff achieves a sense of fluidity and freedom (his rubatos overall follow the principle that where one adds time to a note, it is subtracted from a subsequent one, so that the underlying pulse remains relatively constant) which I find captivating without ever being sentimental. It's a shame that for the most part we hear the type of Hollywood-ised Rachmaninoff that is the staple of competitions the world over; Rachmaninoff himself almost never played like that.

Similarly, I found it extremely interesting to listen to the recordings of piano-rolls of Busoni playing. Busoni is a composer who is often assigned the simplistic role of late-Romantic pianist-composer, despite his disdain for Wagner and attempts to fuse a type of neo-classicism together with elements of the Romantic tradition which he admired. In his own playing, one finds a much more complex, varied approach to pedalling and articulation, amongst other things, than is commonly found in performances of his work. The conflicting pulls of both Germanic and Italianate traditions is crucial, in my opinion, to the individuality of Busoni's work. His interpretative approach to both his own and others' music demonstrates this form of synthesis. In the music of Busoni, Scriabin, Rachmaninoff, also Schoenberg, Debussy, Bartók, and many others, I am always concerned to try to look beyond all the paraphernalia that has come to surround them. This can be a difficult process and provoke some hostility from those who have very firmly ingrained and received views

about how these composers' music should be played, but I still believe it to be a worthwhile endeavour.

Notwithstanding my earlier comments about the differences between early and late romanticism, I nonetheless believe that late romanticism is a richer and more complex phenomenon than is commonly believed to be the case. We often speak of a 'romantic' style of playing; yet few of the pianists from the late romantic era actually played like that. Think of the relationship between Horowitz and Rachmaninoff and Scriabin, Rubinstein with Stravinsky, Marguerite Long with Debussy, Ravel and Fauré, Sándor with Bartók, Firkúšny with Janáček, Richter with Prokofieff; all these pianists, and many others, had contact and worked with living composers. I'm sure that most people today who have worked with composers will know that what those composers most desire in performances of their own music is by no means identical with what will be most crowd-pleasing or guaranteed to win over reviewers. Over the last fifty or so years, there have been far too many performers, singers, conductors who have had little or any contact with living composers; music of all times has become commodified by the easy availability of recordings. How often do people really sit down and just listen to a CD? - more often it provides background music while doing the cooking, reading a paper, or whatever (and I'm not innocent of these things myself). So much of the expectations placed upon music today are shaped by these situations - 'classical' music is expected to provide easily digestible moods, 'character', just like a print of a wonderful painting from the past is judged by its amenability to being an attractive piece of furniture.

I don't accept this view of art of any type. I still hold on to the, perhaps quaintly old-fashioned, view that culture can play a more fundamental part in people's lives, and can be enlightening and inspiring rather than fodder for passive consumption. These ideals are always in the forefront of my mind when performing music of any era.

I often write programme notes for my own concerts which some might find of a rather acerbic and belligerent nature. Another pianist asked me recently why I felt the need to do this, why I couldn't 'just let the playing speak for itself'. If this were a truly open-minded and pluralist aesthetic climate, then this might be possible; however, it is clear to me that this is emphatically not the case. Many come to concerts with fixed but rather narrow ideals of the role that music making should play - that is what I wish to challenge and question. When some critics accept all the baggage they inherit without question, I feel the programme note is a good medium to suggest how they might rethink and expand their musical expectations. They can say and think whatever they like about how I play a piece of music; what is more important for me is to attempt, through writing, to alter and critique the whole nature of critical discourse, which itself has a profound effect on the ways composers compose and performers perform, desperately seeking critical approval. Look for example at how often the term 'aristocratic' is used as an expression of praise for a performance or composition. When musico-critical discourse is so deeply infiltrated by the language of class supremacy, can we really treat it innocently?

**MB: Do you feel there is a general reluctance by the 'big' record companies to record contemporary music?**

IP: Indeed, and this is symptomatic of a general malaise in the recording industry.

Around fifteen years ago, when CD's were a relatively new thing, the big companies could make a splash by releasing the first digital recordings of the whole of the standard repertoire. Now, when they release a new recording, they're often forced to confront the fact that it has to compete with several digital recordings, by renowned artists, at mid-price, on their own label. Consequently, the only new selling point they can reach for is some type of glossy or alluring packaging or other form of hype. To be able to hype something, as all students of mass consumerism know, it is an essential prerequisite that the product itself be sufficiently homogenous and anonymous so as not to get in the way of the hype. What place is there for any remotely challenging contemporary music when this state of affairs prevails?

When you go back to the 1960's and 1970's, Deutsche Grammophon, and some other big labels, were regularly releasing discs of Stockhausen, Kagel, Berio, Schnebel, Globokar, and many others, even before these composers' reputations had become firmly established. The easy availability of these recordings made my local music library buy them, which is how I first became acquainted with this music. The foresight and perception of those executives who took these decisions can't be admired enough. Yet can we really see any such courageous decisions on the part of the big companies nowadays?

I feel that the big companies have had their day - their monolithic position has led to a good deal of inertia. On the other hand, there are more than a few smaller or medium-size labels who are much more adventurous in their choice of repertoire and performers: Accord, Black Box, col legno, CPO, ECM, Erato, Etcetera, Harmonia Mundi, Hat Art, Kairos, Metier, Mode, NMC, Salabert, and others. There are many complications: for example, some of the CD review magazines' readiness to review discs from these labels can be conditional upon the labels' willingness to take out advertisements in the magazines. However, I hope we can achieve a state of affairs where the discs from these and other labels are taken every bit as seriously as those from the big companies.

**MB: What are your hopes and aspirations for the future?**

IP: I hope to continue discovering and championing new composers, and commissioning and performing new works. I have seen how advocacy of such composers such as Christopher Fox, Richard Emsley or Mark Taylor has gradually had a knock-on effect, and now other performers are taking up their work. This is something I find immensely gratifying.

There are numerous ideas I have which I would like to see come to fruition. I would very much like to play and record cycles of the piano music of Debussy, Bartók and Messiaen. I have various other programming ideas that I believe to be stimulating, such as the coupling of Dusapin's *Études* with works of Schumann, Finnis's *English Country-Tunes* with the Beethoven-Liszt *Pastoral Symphony*, concerts exploring traits of mysticism and irrationalism in 20th century music, through the work of Scriabin, Messiaen, Scelsi, Wyschnegradsky, Radulescu and Mark Taylor.

I also hope to have more chance to perform and record on period instruments, on which I have had a certain amount of experience. I would deeply like to play works such as the Schumann Fantasy, or the F-sharp minor sonata, or indeed any of his

piano works, on a period instrument; the Liszt Sonata on an Erard, the music of Alkan, also on an Erard. The view of the development of pianos as being one of linear progress is becoming increasingly untenable today; I would be very interested to get contemporary composers to write works for older instruments.

On a personal level, I suppose simply that I want to continue to be able to give concerts and make recordings, and hopefully achieve bigger audiences. I also have great hopes for my group *Topologies*, which consists of a number of outstanding players who achieve a great level of rapport. I hope that the contemporary piano department which I co-direct at the London College of Music and Media continues to grow and expand.

I enjoy making music with others every bit as much as playing as a soloist, and want to continue to expand this side of my activities. When I was starting out, I did a lot of work accompanying singers and choirs, from which I learnt a lot. I would love to perform *Winterreise*, or *Dichterliebe*, with a good singer.

More broadly, I hope that a more just society, and a more genuine idea of 'culture' in Britain, will emerge in Britain than is currently the case. These two things go hand-in-hand, I think. I still find Britain a very narrow-minded and intolerant culture, in which people are always so apt to pass snide judgement on others so as to detract attention from their own weaknesses and insecurities. This is a process which generates its own momentum, and I am deeply saddened by it. If we were a little more tolerant of people and their true individualities, more accepting than patronising, I think it would be much for the better. Just consider the infinite variety and diversity in human beings: I am sure that most if not all of them have vast stores of creative potential if only it were not suppressed and thwarted by particular forms of education and social pressures.

I love playing the piano and making music, more than is imaginable; I couldn't imagine not doing so. When I play Schumann's *Humoreske*, or Debussy's *Preludes*, or Barrett's *Tract*, or Feldman's *For Bunita Marcus*, or participate in a performance of the Brahms Eb Clarinet Sonata or Lachenmann's *Allegro Sostenuto*, or listen to Bach's *Brandenburg Concertos* or Stravinsky's *Le Sacre* or Stockhausen's *Hymnen*, I never cease to be amazed and wondrous of what human beings are able to create. This gives me faith in humankind and thus in the possibility of a fairer, happier and a more equitable world. I truly believe that if more people can appreciate these and other things more than materialist values, then we will have taken a step forward.

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**Ian Pace's next recital on 26 February is at King's College, The Strand, London;  
6 & 7.30**