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### COMPLEXITY, CLARITY AND CONTEMPORARY BRITISH ORCHESTRAL MUSIC

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## **Complexity, clarity and contemporary British orchestral music**

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A binary of ‘clarity’ as a positive value judgement, versus ‘complexity’ as a negative, often underpins discourse around contemporary British orchestral music by reviewers, audiences, performers and composers alike, even though composers associated with ‘New Complexity’ have long-distanced themselves from a term<sup>1</sup> fraught with misconceptions.<sup>2</sup> Two reviews of the premiere of my *Substratum* (2006) for orchestra, performed during the 2007 BBC Proms, illustrate how the trope of ‘complexity’ was the site of ideological contention: for Matthew Rye, the work ‘revelled too much in its own complexity’, ‘complex’ appearing as a negative value judgement,<sup>3</sup> whereas Colin Clarke’s comment that ‘[it] would be good to have it on disc, to savour its complexities’,<sup>4</sup> valorized ‘complexity’ more positively. This article is not, however, another defence of ‘New Complexity’, a task undertaken by Stuart Duncan amongst others.<sup>5</sup> Instead, I want to consider how ‘clarity’ is often valorized against a binary ‘other’ of ‘complexity’ in examples of British contemporary orchestral music, although it is not my aim to establish the extent

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<sup>1</sup> Felipe Ribeiro, James Correa, Catarina Domenici, ‘An Interview with Brian Ferneyhough’ <[http://www.academia.edu/5539160/An\\_Interview\\_with\\_Brian\\_Ferneyhough](http://www.academia.edu/5539160/An_Interview_with_Brian_Ferneyhough)>, (accessed 21 September 2015), p.1.

<sup>2</sup> Stuart Duncan, ‘To Infinity and Beyond: A Reflection on Notation, 1980s Darmstadt, and Interpretational Approaches to the Music of New Complexity’. <<http://www.searchnewmusic.org/duncan.pdf>> (accessed 16 July 2015), p.1.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Rye, ‘BBC Proms: this season’s casualties’. *The Telegraph* website. <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/3666613/BBC-Proms-this-seasons-casualties.html>> (accessed 31 March 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Colin Clarke, ‘Seen and Heard Concert Review’, *Musicweb International* website. <<http://www.musicweb-international.com/SandH/2008/Jul-Dec08/hayden0612.htm>> (accessed 4 June 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Stuart Duncan, ‘To Infinity and Beyond: A Reflection on Notation, 1980s Darmstadt, and Interpretational Approaches to the Music of New Complexity’. <<http://www.searchnewmusic.org/duncan.pdf>> (accessed 16 July 2015).

to which the examples discussed later in this article may be the origins of this peculiarly British musical phenomenon.

The complexity-clarity binary becomes prevalent in discussions of contemporary orchestral music in part as a function of the orchestra's sheer size, offering a continuum between the massed sonorities and dense polyphonies, which are in general characteristic of expressionist traditions, and the more transparent renderings of harmony and line, which are in general, typical of more neo-classical approaches to orchestration. As with most binaries, this opposition is something of an oversimplification and not universally applicable to the particularities of individual works - Schoenberg's orchestration is often more transparent than Hindemith's, for example - but it nevertheless alludes to a duality of *aesthetic* traditions that has persisted in a significant proportion of post-war British orchestral music. The neo-classical approach, with its neo-tonal or synthetic modal harmonies and focus on 'melodic invention'<sup>6</sup> is generally more characteristic of the post-Britten tradition of contemporary British composers, such as Thomas Adès, Julian Anderson, George Benjamin and Oliver Knussen (all published by Faber Music), than it is of composers associated with 'complexity' such as Richard Barrett, James Dillon, Brian Ferneyhough, Michael Finnissy, Roger Redgate and others, whose work has more to do with the traditions of the continental European post-war avant-garde.

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<sup>6</sup> George Benjamin, Interview with Risto Nieminen, *George Benjamin in association with IRCAM*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), p.12.

Like ‘complexity’, ‘clarity’ is a vague and empty signifier, neither a neutral term without aesthetic implications, nor necessarily tied to a specific aesthetic. The valorisation of ‘clarity’ is not limited to music of the Faber group, nor uniformly applied within it. A cursory look at examples of some relatively recent British orchestral works reveals that a category of ‘clarity’ can apply to synthetic modalities and more atonal harmonic contexts in addition to neo-tonal approaches, extending across music with different aesthetic intentions. For example, the meticulous chromatic partitioning of registers present in the orchestral stratifications of Birtwistle’s *Earth Dances* (1986)<sup>7</sup> represents an inscription of ‘clarity’ within the fabric of the work. The link between Birtwistle and ‘Stravinskian’ neo-classicism (as one aspect of modernism), argued by Jonathan Cross, amongst others, is especially prevalent in some of iconic ensemble works that Birtwistle wrote for the London Sinfonietta. The dissonant mechanisms of *Carmen arcadiae mechanicae perpetuum* (1977), for example, are highly transparent in the specificity of their instrumentations, vertical separation and sectional formal partitioning.<sup>8</sup> In a different musical context, the orchestrations of the spectrally derived harmonies of Harvey’s *Body Mandala* (2006) have clarity in terms of an immediacy of perceptibility. A similar point can be made about the non-narrative, monochromatic diatonic modalities of Howard Skempton’s *Lento* (1990), so an ‘aesthetic of transparency’ might also be attributable to elements of the English

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Adlington, *The Music of Harrison Birtwistle*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp.180-186.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Cross, *The Stravinsky Legacy*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp.70-78

(post)experimentalist tradition,<sup>9</sup> as well as to examples of British post-minimalism such as the starkly rendered vertical structures of Steve Martland's *Babi Yar* (1989), with its dialectic between harmonic density and clarity of orchestration. If these pieces have something in common, it is their essentially vertically conceived harmonic approaches and an immediately identifiable aural separation of constituent musical elements. However, although clarity may be seen as applicable to many different contexts, it is more productive to view 'clarity' as a relative and descriptive *rhetorical* term rather than as some kind of technical category: 'clarity' is more about signifying what it is *not* from an aesthetic point of view and we will observe some more context-specific examples below.

A correlation between the more neo-classical aesthetic tendencies associated with 'clarity' and career 'success' is not straightforward. Established English composers with (at times) overtly modernist sympathies, such as Birtwistle, Harvey and Maxwell Davies, have had more orchestral commissions (as one measure of 'success') than the younger generation of Faber composers, although such a comparison must acknowledge that this older generation established themselves in very different socio-economic and cultural conditions. James Macmillan is another successful (in terms of orchestral commissions) non-Faber composer, whose output appears to valorize 'clarity'. His often eclectic, poly-stylistic approaches can include diatonic modalities and

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<sup>9</sup> Keith Potter, *Howard Skempton: Some Clues for a Post-Experimental "Movement"*, *The Musical Times*, cxxxiii (1991), pp. 126–30.

a transparency of texture, particularly apparent in his vocal writing where the focus is on the clear delivery of Catholic texts (e.g. *Credo* (2011) for chorus and orchestra). Macmillan's career must also be seen within the specific context of his self-representation within Scottish new music culture.

Arnold Whittall's definition of 'mainstream' composers as those who '[...]' embrace a tension between an unwillingness to completely reject the past and a desire to be avant-garde [...]'<sup>10</sup> is a useful way of distinguishing important aesthetic differences between composers as regards their attitudes to modernism, and relationships to established musical categories, but it applies to only a relatively small part of British orchestral activities. Hettie Malcomson's ethnographic study of those British composers formerly associated with the New Voices (NV) scheme of the now defunct British Music Information Centre (or BMIC) uses Whittall's definition<sup>11</sup> to explain the identification of the Faber Music composers as 'mainstream' by the New Voices composers, in contradistinction to themselves:<sup>12</sup>

'For many NV composers, mainstream music is epitomized by the 'house composers' of Faber Music, a publisher founded in 1965 with the financial support of Benjamin Britten. Since the 1980s, however, Faber and other London publishing houses have taken on only a handful of additional

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<sup>10</sup> Arnold Whittall, *Musical Composition in the Twentieth Century*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.388.

<sup>11</sup> The British composers published by Faber Music have included Tom Adès, Julian Anderson, George Benjamin, Jonathan Harvey, Oliver Knussen, Colin Matthews, David Matthews, Nicholas Maw, John Woolrich, and a few recent additions such as Tansy Davies.

<sup>12</sup> The original members of the BMIC New Voices (and Contemporary Voices) scheme included Joanna Bailie, Joe Cutler, Tansy Davies, Sam Hayden, Bryn Harrison, Morgan Hayes, Ed Hughes, Paul Newland, Gwyn Pritchard, James Saunders, Matthew Shlomowitz, Jo Thomas, Andrew Toovey, James Weeks and Paul Whitty.

composers, despite the ever-rising numbers of those composing and being performed.’<sup>13</sup>

There was a material difference between NV composers and Faber Music composers. NV was not a publishing house *per se* (a company contracted to cover the costs of producing, distributing and promoting scores by particular composers). Rather, NV composers paid subscriptions *to* the BMIC for something more akin to a score production and distribution service. Faber Music has significantly expanded its ‘house’ composers in recent years (often beyond the UK, to other Anglophone countries) although the new signings are often composers who guarantee immediate royalties, rather than investing in future potential. However, Malcomson’s article presents a rather one-sided view of this context: it would have been interesting to hear the Faber Music composers’ responses to their identification as ‘mainstream’ by the NV composers, and their own views of their positions within British contemporary musical culture. The self-identification of NV composers against the perceived ‘mainstream’ of Faber music is a relative formulation, and not generalisable beyond a very specific context.

If a valorization of ‘clarity’ may be *implied* within the work of a diverse group of composers and aesthetics, it is nevertheless an oversimplification to equate it with a singular British ‘mainstream’, within or beyond the Faber Music ‘house’

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<sup>13</sup> Hettie Malcomson, ‘Composing Individuals: Ethnographic Reflections on Success and Prestige in the British New Music Network’, *Twentieth-Century Music* 10/1, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) pp.115–136.

composers, who are themselves a diverse group. The former NV composers also encompassed 'complexist', post-minimalist and experimentalist tendencies, amongst others, and categorical boundaries are often very porous. Rather than risk such over-extrapolation, I want to focus more narrowly, on specific works, and statements from certain composers, that could be symptomatic of the complexity-clarity binary, a dialectic implied *within* the aesthetic and material differences of certain works.

It might be useful to reduce the context by defining 'contemporary' British orchestral music as beginning in the mid-1960s when Faber Music was formed. Discussion might be further reduced to works commissioned and performed by publicly-funded orchestras such as the BBCSO or BBCSSO, and to specific UK new music festivals such as *Tectonics*, *Total Immersion* or HCMF, and performances at specific venues. Nevertheless, it is still problematic to attempt to define a singular category of 'mainstream' British orchestral new music given the number of variables. One could identify many 'mainstreams', given the variety of orchestras and their associated activities. For some concert audiences 'mainstream' might be dominated by the late-18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century canonic repertoire but a few scores, such as Thomas Adès's *Asyla* (1997) or James McMillan's *Veni, Veni, Emmanuel* (1992), have entered this repertoire in a way that the works of Barrett, Dillon, Ferneyhough and Finnissy have not.



A definition of ‘complex music’ is likewise difficult, although Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf’s attempt is useful, categorising music whose compositional approaches involve a ‘de-essentialization’ of the musical work, favouring the multi-dimensional, the ephemeral, provisional, ‘immanentist’, or ‘rhizomatic’ (Deleuze).<sup>14</sup> Following Adorno, such music resists commodification by rejecting the reification of works as singular identities of presence associated with ‘authorial’ scores (representations) corresponding to ‘definitive’ performances (actions),<sup>15</sup> in favour of what Richard Barrett calls performance ‘singularities’.<sup>16</sup> Mahnkopf’s definition embraces the different modernisms of ‘New Complexity’ (or ‘complexism’), spectralism, stochastic music, Lachenmann’s *musique concrète instrumentale* and late Nono’s live electronic music,<sup>17</sup> contradicting the selective German-centric conception of modernism asserted by Richard Taruskin.<sup>18</sup> As with ‘clarity’, ‘complexity’ is more productively viewed as a general *approach* to material, beyond particular stylistic tropes or notational tendencies, the notational ‘excess’ of ‘complexism’ being but one strategy for achieving ‘impermanence’. ‘Complex music’ may be read in terms of ‘resistance’ to commodified culture, as music in a perpetual state of becoming:

‘Its concretion is a readiness to deal with things that have not yet been

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<sup>14</sup> Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf, ‘Complex Music: An Attempt at a Definition’, in *Polyphony and Complexity*, New Music and Aesthetics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Vol.1 (Hofheim: Wolke Verlag, 2002), p.63.

<sup>15</sup> Clark, *Aesthetic Negativity and Aesthetic Traits*, p.52.

<sup>16</sup> Mentioned in conversation between the author and Belgian guitarist, Nico Couk, during the 2015 *Festival Images Sonores*, Liège, 14 November 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Mahnkopf, ‘Complex Music: An Attempt at a Definition’, p.55.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Taruskin, *Oxford History of Western Music*, (Oxford: OUP, 2009).

classified, approved, subsumed under fixed categories.’<sup>19</sup>

Since orchestral programming still emphasises 19<sup>th</sup>-century musical aesthetics,<sup>20</sup> we might assume that the orchestra remains a problematic domain for ‘progressive’ contemporary composers. Events such as Ilan Volkov’s excellent Tectonics Festival (Glasgow, 2015) prove there are exceptions, however, even if his programming reflects a more ‘experimentalist’ aesthetic.<sup>21</sup> It is something of a paradox that composers with more radical intentions keep returning to, or ‘occupying’<sup>22</sup> to use Lachenmann’s term, the orchestra, in spite of a history of negative reception from musicians and audiences, such as the UK premiere of James Dillon’s *Via Sacra* (1999) by the Royal Scottish National Orchestra conducted by Alexander Lazarev at the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall in 2005. Dillon blamed the poor performance on the conductor who showed ‘no interest in his work, or in contemporary music of any kind’ and a ‘lack of respect’ for the work.<sup>23</sup> Paul Kelbie described how such an apathetic attitude (an attitude not necessarily reserved for ‘complex’ music) was inevitably transferred to the performers, resulting in a performance described as ‘intermittently shoddy’:

‘Audience members reported seeing one of the musicians yawn before the

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<sup>19</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, (New York: Continuum, 1989), p.179.

<sup>20</sup> Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, p.104.

<sup>21</sup> *Tectonics Festival* website. <<http://www.tectonicsfestival.com/glasgow/>> (accessed 3 June 2015).

<sup>22</sup> Helmut Lachenmann, pre-concert conversation with Julian Anderson, The Chapel, Kings College London, p.16 February 2015. London. Event organized by the IMR. <<http://music.sas.ac.uk/lachenmann/>> (accessed 4 June 2015).

<sup>23</sup> Phil Miller, *Herald Scotland* website <<http://www.heraldscotland.com/sport/spl/aberdeen/orchestra-showed-lack-of-respect-for-my-work-says-angry-composer-bbc-pulled-broadcast-of-via-sacra-played-by-rsno-1.59214>> (accessed 31 March 2015).

piece began. Others told a Scottish newspaper that they were shocked by the performance on 5 March, which appeared uninterested and even careless.

One told *The Herald*: "It seemed to me there was an obvious lack of interest from the orchestra. It was plain to see they were not taking it seriously. I was appalled."<sup>24</sup>

Other audience comments documented in *The Herald* disputed this claim, but their attitudes towards the piece often misconceived Dillon's aesthetic intentions:

'So, James Dillon believes the RSNO was "dismissive" of his *Via Sacra* and delivered a poor performance (March 24). As a patron of the orchestra and a music-lover for many years, I wonder how anyone except Mr Dillon or a graduate in music would be expected to tell. [...] While at times the piece presented some interesting effects and sound textures, these in themselves do not music make.'<sup>25</sup>

Another comment criticized *Via Sacra* in comparison to Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* (1927), programmed in the same concert, as if the two should be judged by the same aesthetic criteria. Here, value judgements formed around tonal music are misapplied to post-tonal music, the binary of 'classical' clarity versus

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<sup>24</sup> Paul Kelbie, 'Composer's homecoming ruined by 'apathetic' orchestra'. *The Independent* website. <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/news/composers-homecoming-ruined-by-apathetic-orchestra-6149812.html>> (accessed 27 March 2015).

<sup>25</sup> 'Audience reports on *Via Sacra*'. *Herald Scotland* website. <<http://www.heraldscotland.com/sport/spl/aberdeen/audience-reports-on-via-sacra-1.59177>> (accessed 31 March 2015).

‘random’ complexity appearing to underpin such opinions:

‘Listening to it was [...] a random, discordant, boring piece of meaningless twaddle that made the subsequent Stravinsky, modern yet classical, a masterpiece of writing, [...] a delight to hear and perform.’<sup>26</sup>

Another problematic first performance of a ‘complex’ work was the incomplete premiere of my *Substratum* (2006) at the 2007 BBC Proms, by the BBC Symphony Orchestra, under David Robertson,<sup>27</sup> a conductor with a strong reputation as a promoter of new music. The work subsequently received a successful complete performance in 2008 at the Barbican Centre,<sup>28</sup> so the problems with the premiere could be attributed to practical issues: inadequate rehearsal time for a huge programme which also included Bernstein’s Second Symphony, "The Age of Anxiety" (1949) and Ives’s Fourth Symphony (1910-24).

Problems with premieres might suggest that the disjunct between radical compositional aesthetics and the innate conservatism of the orchestral institution, identified by Adorno in the late 1960s, still exist:

‘There is a glaring discrepancy between the requirements of composition

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<sup>26</sup> Audience reports on *Via Sacra*. *Herald Scotland* website. <<http://www.heraldscotland.com/sport/spl/aberdeen/audience-reports-on-via-sacra-1.59177>> (accessed 31 March 2015).

<sup>27</sup> BBC Proms 2007. <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/events/r2mxn3/series>> (accessed 21/9/2015).

<sup>28</sup> Barbican event listings website <<http://www.barbican.org.uk/music/event-detail.asp?ID=7346>> (accessed 5 November 2015).

and the archaic inventory of the orchestras, an inventory defined by social conventions and extremely shy of innovations – not to mention the reactionary modes of playing.’<sup>29</sup>

Given the ambivalence of orchestral programming towards modernist traditions, Richard Barrett has a surprisingly positive view of the potential of the orchestra for collective human action, in contrast to Adorno’s pessimism:

‘I’m interested in the orchestra because it presents a double face to the world. One of those faces is as a very conservative institution, which is hidebound by rules, and regulations that are very hard to shake. But the other side of the orchestra is that it’s one of the few examples of human endeavour in which a comparatively large number of people work closely together in pursuit of a common aim. And that’s the way I want to think of the orchestra: at its best, it’s a kind of microcosm of a society which is in balance, as opposed to the one we actually live in.’<sup>30</sup>

The negative historical reception of ‘complex’ music in Britain which, as Roddy Hawkins argues, should be read in the context of social, cultural and political upheavals in the UK during the 1970s and 80s,<sup>31</sup> may have receded in recent years. The premiere of Dillon’s *Nine Rivers* cycle in 2010 was a happier

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<sup>29</sup> Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, p.117.

<sup>30</sup> Richard Barrett, Interview with Tom Service. *The Guardian* website. <<http://www.theguardian.com/music/2005/feb/10/classicalmusicandopera1>> (accessed 27 March 2015).

<sup>31</sup> Roddy Hawkins, Abstract for *Finnissy, Ferneyhough and the New Complexity in Britain: Composition, Performance, Reception* (forthcoming). The University of Manchester website. <<http://www.manchester.ac.uk/research/roddy.hawkins/research>> (accessed 31 March 2015).

return to City Halls, Glasgow.<sup>32</sup> The successful premiere of Richard Barrett's *NO: Resistance and Vision Part 1* (2005)<sup>33</sup> contrasted with the incomplete premiere of *Vanity* (1990-94) in 1994.<sup>34</sup> Ferneyhough was featured in the *Total Immersion* day in February 2011 at The Barbican (London), so he too may be 'recuperated' into the British orchestral scene.<sup>35</sup> Ivan Hewett's positive review of Ferneyhough's orchestral work *La terre est un homme* (1979) suggests that the reception of 'complexity' by orchestral players and critics has improved but his description of the piece as 'excessive' still implies a binary with 'efficiency', echoing the trope of complexity-clarity:

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<sup>32</sup> Andrew Clements, 'Nine Rivers- review'. The Guardian website.

<http://www.theguardian.com/music/2010/nov/16/nine-rivers-review> (accessed 27 March 2015).

<sup>33</sup> Richard Barrett, Interview with Tom Service. *The Guardian* website.

<http://www.theguardian.com/music/2005/feb/10/classicalmusicandopera1> (accessed 27 March 2015).

<sup>34</sup> UMP Website. <http://www.ump.co.uk/Barrett/rb-vanity.htm> (accessed 31/3/2015).

<sup>35</sup> *5:4* website, <http://5against4.com/2013/01/14/ferneyhough-week-la-terre-est-un-homme/> (accessed 27/3/2015).

‘[the] performers threw themselves fearlessly into the music, and seemed to have an innate grasp of its agile, allusive nature. This is an extraordinary change from 30 years ago, when Ferneyhough’s music could not count on simple good will...Listeners, too, have grown used to the idiom (at least, those willing to give the music a go). But it was the lucidity and intelligence of the performances that made it seem enticing as well as graspable. They brought out the physicality of those leaping, scrubbing gestures, and also the luminous moments of sudden stillness. [...] *La terre est un homme*, an orchestral piece said to have been sabotaged by the players at its 1979 premiere, was one of [those pieces which built up fierce waves of energy over larger spans of time] and a revelation it was, too. Decried at its premiere as an undifferentiated “wall of sound”, its pullulating swarms of notes still seemed excessive, but in an invigorating way.’<sup>36</sup>

Yet the term ‘practical’ is not neutral, given the differing attitudes of players towards Ferneyhough’s notation: for some it is now familiar and normal, for others it remains incomprehensible. It is clear that the *Total Immersion* performance of *La terre* could not have been achieved without a committed and professional attitude from the players, whether or not they believed that the composer knew what he was doing!

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<sup>36</sup> Ivan Hewett, ‘Total Immersion Day: Brian Ferneyhough, Barbican, review’. *The Telegraph* website. <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/classicalconcertreviews/8352857/Total-Immersion-Day-Brian-Ferneyhough-Barbican-review.html>> (accessed 29/3/2015).

So much for ‘complexity’, but what of ‘clarity’? It would be a mistake to attribute the origins of the British valorization of ‘clarity’ to particular individuals since it is a much broader cultural question. Certainly there was less perceived necessity in Britain for the post-war modernist atonal reassessment that occurred on the European continent (the culture of Ferneyhough’s antecedents). Britten’s opera *Peter Grimes* (1945) is a pertinent example of the culture of orchestral ‘clarity’ and Britten himself explained how he rejected a Wagnerian approach of ‘endless variation’ in favour of a neo-classical, non-developmental and sectional approach to form:

‘I am especially interested in the general architectural and formal problems of opera, and decided to reject the Wagnerian theory of "permanent melody" for the classical practice of separate numbers that crystallize and hold the emotion of a dramatic situation at chosen moments.’<sup>37</sup>

The extent to which Britten’s Wagnerian-classical binary is true is less important than the consequences it had for Britten and his Faber Music successors. Such neoclassicism – what Adorno called ‘[...] the counter principle to the atonality culminating in twelve-tone technique [...]’<sup>38</sup> – led Britten away from the polyphonic expressionist antecedents of ‘complexism’ exemplified by Berg’s *Three Pieces for Orchestra* (1913-15). The stratified

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<sup>37</sup> Benjamin Britten, ‘Britten’s introduction to Peter Grimes’, *The Guardian* website. <<http://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/nov/19/benjamin-britten-1945-introduction-to-peter-grimes>> (accessed 26 March 2015).

<sup>38</sup> Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, p.175.



orchestration of 'Dawn', the first of the *Four Sea Interludes* (Op.33a) from *Peter Grimes*, is maintained via consistent static modalities, registers and instrumentation, typical of Britten at this time.<sup>39</sup> Its formal and perceptual 'clarity' features three clearly identifiable materials: the spare opening flute-doubling-violin line, the arpeggiated thirds of the clarinet, strings and harp texture (an impressionistic evocation of wind) and the triadic brass chorale. Britten's neoclassical harmonic approach, summarized by Whittall, had direct implications for his approach to form, orchestration and his reliance on dramatic structures for larger scale development:

'The tonal harmony is typical of the period, balancing functional and non-functional progressions and retaining that clear distinction between discord and concord which has remained Britten's principal expressive and structural advice'.<sup>40</sup>

A survey of Faber Music's UK 'house' composers is beyond the scope of this paper. They have very different relationships to modernism and tonality, and much inconsistency within their own individual outputs, so their group identity should not be essentialized. For this discussion, George Benjamin and Thomas Adès have been chosen, rather than composers with more obvious aesthetic and biographical connections with Britten, to examine the hypothesis that their contributions to the post-Britten tradition are *symptomatic* of a valorization of

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<sup>39</sup> Arnold Whittall, *Music Since the First World War*, (London: Dent, 1988), p.110.

<sup>40</sup> Arnold Whittall, *Music Since the First World War*, (London: Dent, 1988), p.110.

orchestral ‘clarity’. A larger survey, extending beyond the Faber group, would be required to see how representative they are of a more general tendency.

Benjamin’s identification with post-war French traditions (particularly Messiaen) might suggest he is not the most obvious candidate for the Britten inheritance. Like Benjamin, Anderson and Harvey also had significant relationships with post-war French music, especially Spectralism, a tradition that ideologically (re)asserted the primacy of the *perception* of sound. The spectralist valorization of perception is a conception not so far from the valorization of ‘clarity’, and is thus transferable into British new music culture, resulting in a process-sound binary, in parallel to complexity-clarity.

However, in his interview with Risto Nieminen, George Benjamin distances himself from what he sees as Tristan Murail’s more formalistic version of Spectralism, rejecting the idea of ‘processes’ (whether perceptible or otherwise): ‘He [Murail], is passionate about processes and I am against. I don’t like the obvious or didactic.’<sup>41</sup> Here, Benjamin constructs another binary distinction between ‘processes’ (or ‘systems’), which he calls ‘didactic’, and ‘fantastical spontaneity’ of ‘the aural imagination’, valorizing the latter over the former.<sup>42</sup> The difference between the two categories is the self-awareness (or otherwise) of the structural principles being utilized, since composing ‘spontaneously’ means composing without consciously foregrounding the

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<sup>41</sup> George Benjamin, Interview with Risto Nieminen, *George Benjamin in association with IRCAM*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), p.12.

<sup>42</sup> George Benjamin, Interview with Risto Nieminen, *George Benjamin in association with IRCAM*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), p.12.

compositional constraints being utilized. Yet this does not mean they don't exist; in Benjamin's systems-spontaneity binary, his individual aesthetic choice slips into a more generalized value judgement.

Benjamin's aesthetics share some basic conceptions with Britten, seeing the fundamental problem of (in Benjamin's case) post-tonal music as the search for coherent interactions of melody and harmony. Like Britten, Benjamin's music '[. . .] retains the desire to control and shape a directed musical line, or to propose as a fundamental factor a concept of stability – such as the harmonic series – which the music will then challenge, and enrich, but not destroy'.<sup>43</sup>

Here, Benjamin conforms to Whittall's useful but somewhat misleading category of 'mainstream' music ('mainstream' within a very limited context of contemporary British composers). Nevertheless, Whittall's formulation usefully identifies a symptomatic ambivalence towards modernism, when composers retreat from the potential overthrowing of established musical categories. Benjamin is unwilling to reject the idea of harmony as the constructive principle of music *per se*, underpinning his beloved 'melodic invention'. He is critical of Murail for rejecting melody, evidence, according to Whittall, of a more overtly radical aesthetic:

'[. . .] I have always thought that it is impossible to suppress melody in music. For him [Murail], melody was not really important and where it does

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<sup>43</sup> Arnold Whittall. *Musical Composition in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), p.383.

exist, it is a sort of secondary effect of harmonic processes. For me, melodic invention is essential. It was at that time [1981] that I became aware of one of the great problems in twentieth-century music: how to integrate the linear and vertical aspects.’<sup>44</sup>

Benjamin projects *his* problem as *the* problem, as if *his* conception of material should be *every* composer’s primary concern, rather than acknowledging the aesthetic specificity of his need to ‘integrate the linear and vertical aspects’. Like Britten, Benjamin wants a ‘comprehensible [harmonic] clarity’ that has direct implications for orchestration, and the impressionistic evocation of thunder in his early orchestral work, *Ringed by the Flat Horizon* (1980) is reminiscent of Britten’s first *Sea Interlude*. Benjamin discusses the relationship of harmony with the bass, and *his* concern for ‘clarity’, asserting *his* individual aesthetic choices as if they were generalized value judgements about music *per se*:

‘[...] if you don’t have octaves, according to serial rules, and you want to write a dark passage in the bass, you pick three notes below the viola’s C and you get a sonic confusion which the ear finds extremely difficult to discern. If you want this confusion, a kind of acoustic chaos, that’s fine – it’s fantastic for thunder (I exploited it throughout my first orchestral piece, *Ringed by the Flat Horizon*.) However, if you want a ‘*comprehensible*’

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<sup>44</sup> George Benjamin, Interview with Risto Nieminen, *George Benjamin in association with IRCAM*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), p.12.

*clarity*, the use of a high register (and octave doublings) will be needed.’<sup>45</sup>

George Benjamin’s valorization of his aesthetic implies a negative assessment of traditions of new music that do not conform to his requirements of ‘clarity’. All aesthetic choices imply binary ‘others’ but not all aesthetic choices assert such quasi-universalism. Benjamin prefers for the *sound* of the French tradition - from Debussy and Stravinsky to Messiaen, Boulez and Spectralism,<sup>46</sup> in contrast with the German-orientated narrative from Wagner to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Viennese School, Boulez and Ferneyhough. The proposition that the British complexity-clarity dialectic contains the spectre of Adorno’s dialectic of Schoenberg as ‘progressive’ and Stravinsky as ‘regressive’ from *Philosophie der neuen Musik*<sup>47</sup> is an idea worth further consideration.

With the possible exception of Jonathan Harvey, Faber’s ‘house’ composers have rarely strayed from common practice notation and from the use of single pitches as the building blocks of harmony, conceptions that are qualitatively different from ‘complexism’, where pitch is one part of a non-hierarchical network of multiple compositional strategies. George Benjamin’s sympathies are clear: he dismisses Adorno’s ‘aesthetic negativity’<sup>48</sup> and calls Adorno’s arguments about Stravinsky ‘absurd’.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, although potentially

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<sup>45</sup> Benjamin, *George Benjamin*, p.18 (emphasis added).

<sup>46</sup> Benjamin, *George Benjamin*, p.35.

<sup>47</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, Anne G. Mitchell & Wesley V. Blomster (trans.), (London: Sheed & Ward: 1987).

<sup>48</sup> Jonathan Owen Clark, *Aesthetic Negativity and Aesthetic Traits*, *Critical Horizons: A Journal of Philosophy and Social Theory*, Volume 16, Issue 1, (London: Taylor and Francis: 2015), pp.52-69.

<sup>49</sup> George Benjamin, Interview with Risto Nieminen, *George Benjamin in association with IRCAM*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), p.35.

reductive, the persistence of dialectical thinking, such as found in the writings of composers Ferneyhough and Mahnkopf and theorists Andrew Bowie<sup>50</sup> and J.P.E. Harper-Scott,<sup>51</sup> should not be so easily dismissed, given that Adornian conceptions of material appear to be echoed in the complexity-clarity binary.<sup>52</sup> If the idea of modernism is abandoned through a postmodern denial of ‘progressive’ and ‘conservative’ culture, then the idea of the ‘new’ is abandoned, even if a singular avant-gardist narrative is controversial (even Mahnkopf acknowledges ‘modernisms’). Ideological differences beyond individuals must be acknowledged, even if it would also be wrong to reduce the particularities of an individual composition to its conditions of production.

If Barrett, Dillon, Ferneyhough, Finnissy, Redgate et al. have been relative ‘outsiders’ of British new music, Adès is an ‘insider’, one of the most successful of the younger generation of the Faber group, in terms of high-profile performances of large-scale works, media coverage and adulation from critics. Nevertheless, as Christopher Fox argues, Adès’s music should be disentangled from his position as supposed heir to Britten:

‘Adès is, after all, the most celebrated British composer of his generation, a prodigiously gifted musician whose credentials as composer, pianist,

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<sup>50</sup> Andrew Bowie, *Philosophical Variations: Music as 'Philosophical Language'*, *Summertalk*, vol. 5, (NSU Press, 2010).

<sup>51</sup> J.P.E. Harper Scott, *The Quilting Points of Musical Modernism: Revolution, Reaction, and William Walton* (Cambridge and New York: CUP, 2012).

<sup>52</sup> Justin Schell, Review of *Philosophy of New Music* by Adorno, T.W., and: *Roll Over Adorno: Critical Theory, Popular Culture, Audiovisual Media*, by Miklitsch, R., from *Cultural Critique*, No. 70, (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 201-207. Project MUSE website. <[http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/cultural\\_critique/v070/70.schell.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/cultural_critique/v070/70.schell.html)> (accessed 4 June 2015).

conductor and artistic planner make him the most eligible successor yet to be thrust into the position of pre-eminence in the country's musical life that Benjamin Britten once occupied. This may be part of the problem. The phenomenon of Adès's celebrity has achieved a self-perpetuating critical mass in which the detail of this piece or that performance can seem almost incidental.<sup>53</sup>

The extent to which 'para-textual' aspects of Adès's career *can* be separated from his music is an open question and Fox notes how Adès is extremely skilful with stylistic allusions and tonal references that may be perceived either as ironic or taken at face value. Certainly, Adès's music presents less of an aesthetic disjunct to the canonic repertoire than 'complexist' composers with more overt modernist leanings. Fox cites Whittall's argument that Adès's music 'avoids the consistent textural fragmentation and formal disjunction of an Expressionist aesthetic and instead blends vividness of detail with a clear sense of compelling overall design'.<sup>54</sup> Adès avoids the tropes of polyphonic 'complexism', whose origins are traceable to expressionist atonalism, and favours the neo-classical path taken by Britten. The valorization of orchestral 'clarity' reappears in a review of Adès's *Totentanz* (2013) by Martin Bernheimer:

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<sup>53</sup> Christopher Fox, 'Tempestuous Times: The Recent Music of Thomas Adès', *The Musical Times*, Vol. 145, No. 1888 (Autumn, 2004), pp.41-56.

<sup>54</sup> Arnold Whittall, 'James Dillon, Thomas Ades, and the pleasures of allusion', in Peter O'Hagan, ed.: *Aspects of British music of the 1990s* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 3-27, quoted in Christopher Fox, 'Tempestuous Times: The Recent Music of Thomas Adès', *The Musical Times*, Vol. 145, No. 1888 (Autumn, 2004), p.43.

‘Adès toys neatly with contrasting images of terror and resignation, manipulating a huge orchestral apparatus with *virtuosic clarity* amid percussive bombast.’<sup>55</sup>

Adès’s approach to orchestration, persistence with neo-tonal thinking, and harmonic clarity also invite comparisons with Britten. In contrast to Benjamin’s more ambiguous Francophile post-tonal harmonic approaches, Adès often composes music that overtly references tonal functions, albeit perhaps ironically. However, if the perception of ironic distance from ‘tonality’ is lost, one is left with functional tonality. Adès uses enough timbral novelty, ‘irrational’ time signatures and knowing musical kleptomania, ranging from Brahms to Techno, to maintain a veneer of ‘modernism’ over a synthetic tonal language, whilst being tonal enough for audiences more used to the classical repertoire, somewhat reminiscent of the subtly subversive neo-classical critique of Stravinsky’s *Symphony in C* (1940). Just as Benjamin cannot reject the principles of harmony or ‘melodic invention’ as fundamental structural principles, Adès cannot reject the principle of tonality, although he speaks of ‘his’ tonality as if an individual ‘take’ on tonality can overcome an anti-modernist conception.

Following J.P.E. Harper-Scott, we might propose Adès as presenting Badiou’s ‘reactive’ (or ‘realistic’) subjective response to the revolutionary ‘Event’ of

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<sup>55</sup> Martin Bernheimer, ‘New York Philharmonic/Adès, Avery Fisher Hall, New York — review’. Financial Times website (emphasis added). <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/52c693cc-c96d-11e4-a2d9-00144feab7de.html#axzz3c5zveOal>> (accessed 29 March 2015) (emphasis added).



atonalism that began with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Viennese School, contrasting with the 'faithful' subjective response of Ferneyhough (and 'complexism') in which atonalism is embraced,<sup>56</sup> and traditional conceptions of tonality, harmony and melody are overthrown by gesture, density and contour. Adès does not deny the 'new truth' of the 'emancipation of the dissonance', but acknowledges and absorbs it in a 'pragmatic' manner. In an interview with Tom Service, Adès proposes his work as part of an incomplete revisionist narrative of musical development originating from Berlioz:

'Adès, incidentally, identifies historical precursors for his musical thinking, what he calls the "irrationally functional harmony" that goes at least as far back as Berlioz, he says, but was not properly followed up by today's composers.'<sup>57</sup>

Adès build large-scale orchestral structures based on recurring permutations of disarmingly simple quasi-diatonic intervallic cells, as in the opening of *America A Prophecy* (1999) where expert use of doublings maintains the clarity of orchestral layers,<sup>58</sup> Adès's apparent ironic subversion of spectacular American post-minimalist orchestral showpieces such as John Adams' *Short Ride in a Fast Machine* (1986)) is an ambivalent critique, neither wholeheartedly rejecting nor embracing the principle of tonality, a trend

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<sup>56</sup> J.P.E. Harper Scott, *The Quilting Points of Musical Modernism: Revolution, Reaction, and William Walton* (Cambridge and New York: CUP, 2012), p.172.

<sup>57</sup> Service, T., 'A guide to Thomas Adès's music'. *The Guardian* website. <<http://www.theguardian.com/music/tomserviceblog/2012/oct/01/thomas-ades-contemporary-music-guide>> (accessed 26 March 2015).

<sup>58</sup> Christopher Fox, 'Tempestuous Times', pp.43-45.

continued in the quasi-minimalist diatonic openings of more recent scores such as *Polaris* (2010). For American minimalism ‘proper’, there is no such ambiguity, which for Harper-Scott, represents Badiou’s ‘obscure’ subjective response to atonalism by denying the validity of the principle completely.<sup>59</sup> The real-time aural apprehension of formal unfolding during performance (Steve Reich’s form as ‘gradual process’)<sup>60</sup> requires absolute clarity as the paradigm of perception.

Nevertheless, a negative reception from classical music institutions has not been reserved for ‘complex’ music, as Reich experienced during a performance of his *Four Organs* (1970) in 1973 at Carnegie Hall.<sup>61</sup> But the neo-liberal ‘recuperation’<sup>62</sup> of minimal music into the classical concert hall is exemplified by Reich’s *The Four Sections* (1987), its hyper-clear organization into defined orchestral groups and modal harmonic areas echoing the conception of material found in Britten’s Op.33a. Robert Fink has drawn parallels between repetition, as a foundational aspect of late capitalist consumer culture (evident in mass-media advertising), and the structural principle of (post)minimalist music,<sup>63</sup> where immediate perception is elided with immediate consumption. Such reification contrasts with the re-conception of the orchestra, characteristic of ‘complexism’, as a dynamic continuum between individual instrumental

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<sup>59</sup> J.P.E. Harper Scott, *The Quilting Points of Musical Modernism: Revolution, Reaction, and William Walton* (Cambridge and New York: CUP, 2012), p.172.

<sup>60</sup> Steve Reich, ‘Music as a Gradual Process’ in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, Christoph Cox & Daniel Warner (eds.), (New York: Continuum, 2007), pp.304-312.

<sup>61</sup> Sholto Byrnes, ‘Steve Reich: Pulse of life’. *The Independent* website <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/steve-reich-pulse-of-life-417348.html>>(accessed 31 March 2015).

<sup>62</sup> Guy Debord., *The Society of the Spectacle*, new edition, (London: Rebel Press, 1992).

<sup>63</sup> Robert Fink, *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice*, (University of California Press, 2005).

elements and their combinations as larger shifting subgroups, layers and masses.

Having identified several composers encompassing the complexity-clarity dialectic, it is pertinent to ask whether there might be a psychological basis for such discrepant valorizations. If we accept Bergeron and Lopes's thesis that live music is more 'expressive' as a combined visual and auditory experience,<sup>64</sup> it could be argued that orchestral 'clarity' heightens 'expressive' perception by aiding identification of the origin of the sound, experienced both sonically and visually. In contrast, fixed-media electroacoustic music, 'performed' through loudspeakers without visual aspects, has long-established the idea of sounds alienated from their sites of production as fertile ground for composition. 'Acousmatic' music exploits the potentials of the absence of visual or physical gestures to which the listener can immediately identify sonic origins (Schaeffer's 'reduced' listening),<sup>65</sup> so sounds ranging from 'field' recordings to those produced synthetically can relate purely by association of 'spectro-morphology'.<sup>66</sup> The ubiquity of recorded media has itself established the disassociation of the sound from its 'origin'. The contemporary music listener (in the most general sense) has no problem accepting sonic elements of recorded music (including electronic sounds common in contemporary popular cultures) whose origins are unclear.

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<sup>64</sup> Vincent Bergeron and Dominic McIver Lopes, 'Hearing and Seeing Musical Expression' in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* Vol. 78, No. 1 (Jan., 2009), pp.1-16.

<sup>65</sup> Pierre Schaeffer, 'Acousmatics', in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (eds.), (New York, London: Continuum, 2004), pp.76-77.

<sup>66</sup> Denis Smalley. 'Spectro-morphology and structuring processes', *The Language of Electroacoustic Music*, Simon Emmerson, (ed), (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1986), p.33.

There has been an interesting recent counter-tendency to *reconnect* digital music with visual-gestural aspects of live performance, either using physical controllers or sensors with real-time synthesis software to render 'virtual' digital instruments analogous to 'traditional' acoustic instruments, or, through 'Live coding', where music programming is projected visually during the 'performance'.<sup>67</sup> The necessity for the perception of human interaction with a physical object to define sonic origins can be seen as symptomatic of an 'aesthetic of transparency' in the live electronic musical domain, which, for Bergeron and Lopes, would make the musical experience more 'expressive'. This provides a clue to why there may be an issue for some with a quasi-acousmatic idea in the context of live orchestral music: if the visual-gestural origins of individual sonic elements are not clear (e.g. a bow movement, a string *pizzicato*, a percussion mallet impact, a finger on a key, an exhalation of breath etc), Bergeron and Lopes's theory implies that the music becomes less 'expressive' with the alienation of sound from its origin. This may in turn be used to explain why criticising music as too dense can be an implicit negative valorization of 'complexity', since the listener cannot immediately aurally disentangle the constituent polyphonic elements from the sonic totality. However, the assumption that this should be *the* goal of listening is questionable: it is *a* goal of listening, but should not be assumed to apply to music with different aesthetic aims, such as those associated with 'complexity'.

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<sup>67</sup> Ge Wang, 'A history of programming and music', in Nick Collins and Julio d'Escrivan (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Electronic Music*, New Music and Aesthetics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Vol.1 (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), 68.

Bergeron and Lopes's theory does not appear to take account of music, whether acoustic, electronic, or both, where the sounds are *deliberately* alienated from their sources as part of the aesthetic intention, but is one possible avenue of enquiry.

Psychoacoustics tells us that there is a limit to the number of simultaneous musical elements that can be perceived separately and the perceptual segmentation of music into smaller units has its limits.<sup>68</sup> Once speed, pitch proximity, density, and multiple directionality reach a certain threshold, they become resolved into a complex totality or *Gestalt*. At least since Varèse, innovations in electronic music have influenced how many post-war avant-garde composers conceived acoustic orchestral composition, with timbre and texture becoming primary structural elements: the early stochastic clouds of Xenakis (*Metastasis* (1953-54) and *Pithoprakta* (1955-56)), the clusters and layers of early Penderecki (*Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima* (1960)) or the micro-polyphonies of Ligeti (*Atmosphères* (1961) and *Lontano* (1967)). Such works feature sonic particles, individual physical acts of sound production that are 'trivial' in themselves (e.g. a single tone, pizzicato, glissando or other such articulation class) but perceptually significant when combined as sonic masses. Traditional orchestral hierarchies were also undermined as individual players becoming equally (un)important and sublimated to the mass. Such post-serial reactions de-individualized the nature

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<sup>68</sup> Tristan Jehan, PhD Thesis, 'Creating Music by Listening', Chapter 3, 3.4 'Onset Detection' <<http://web.media.mit.edu/~tristan/phd/dissertation/chapter3.html>> (accessed November 19 2015).

of orchestral material, the overall sonic result becoming disassociated from the individual sonic act: stochastic music ‘zoomed out’ to encompass larger sound masses, whereas spectralism ‘zoomed in’ on the details of ‘microsound’.<sup>69</sup>

Controversy seems to arise when ‘de-individualized’ constituent elements appear 'non-trivial' – with higher-level morphology, gestural identity and autonomy – whilst also being combined in larger polyphonic totalities. In Ferneyhough’s *La terre est un homme* (1979) the ever-transforming contoured surfaces of temporary instrumental allegiances render individually performed strands difficult to perceive, always on the edge of becoming resolved as *Gestalts*. What is perceived is the *result* of complex processes, rather than the processes themselves and orchestral players may object when the perception of their individual endeavors is ‘lost’ within larger subgroups,<sup>70</sup> since the tradition of 19<sup>th</sup>-century virtuosity is that it should be shown off rather than subsumed. But such a complaint misunderstands the aesthetic intentions of *La terre*, where the listener must negotiate the ebb and flow of densities resulting from the polyphonies of individual strands, multiple aural paths through the sonic forest, rather than search for an imaginary ‘authentic’ auditory experience.

The ‘de-individualization’ of material, often manifest as a reconfiguration of instrumental hierarchies within an ensemble, is also a feature of minimal music, especially in its earlier more austere formalist phase. The collective

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<sup>69</sup> Roads, Curtis. *Microsound*, New edition (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

<sup>70</sup> A point made by composer Matthew Shlomowitz in a personal conversation on the subject with the author.

‘composite’ melodies and rhythms of transparent, minimalist processes are perceived directly by the listener, but the aural experiences of *Gestalts* are not necessarily attributable to the *actions* of individual performers. Hence, objections to perceptual ‘de-individualization’ are not reserved for the aesthetics of ‘complexism’.

*La terre* exists in an ever-shifting ‘hinterland’ between perceptions of simultaneous constituent elements, and a level of density that becomes textural. Louis Fitch points out how an ‘accretion’ of initially identifiable overlapping subgroups, defined by particular rhythmical characteristics, articulation classes and pitch patterns, exists on the verge of being subsumed into a ‘superpolyphony’ of larger layers.<sup>71</sup> According to Ferneyhough, such layers have identities whose autonomy should be maintained, and not regarded in the same way as the anonymous events of stochastic music:

‘There have been well-meaning performances of [*La terre*], particularly with less-adept orchestras, where the conductor has attempted to conjure up some monolithic, overall sound, to make the work somehow more than the sum of its parts. What happens on such occasions is that the individual life-processes are blotted out and degraded to the status of undifferentiated particles in some mistaken statistical process. The best performances have always been those paying undivided attention to the coherence of linear energy flow and transparency sufficient to permit the individuality of the

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<sup>71</sup> Lois Fitch, *Brian Ferneyhough*, (Bristol: Intellect, 2013), p.312.

layers to assert themselves.<sup>72</sup>

The emergence of subgroups from, and submergence within the masses is analogous to our ability to focus on individual voices amongst a crowd whilst perceiving its totality. *La terre* does not present a singular perceptual experience but demands a different kind of active listening (or ‘meta-listening’),<sup>73</sup> where the sonic totality is always a little beyond the listener, an ‘Adornian position of transcendence of the subject through alienation’<sup>74</sup>, according to Simon Cummings. The perceptual loss of sonic origins of constituent elements in *La terre* in some ways parallels that of ‘acousmatic’ music, but more problematic because the ‘de-individualization’ of material is associated with orchestral performers.

George Benjamin explicitly valorizes clear melodic development, the perception of which helps the listener (and individual performer) to know where they are in the musical form. However, beyond a certain level of density, and without clear harmonic functions, the perception and meaning of an individual line become ambiguous and an individual listener can become lost. They may also feel alienated, expecting a model of ‘communication’ in which the ‘content’ of the score is transmitted directly, via the performance, to the listener. As Frank Cox explains, the direct communication of a ‘message’ from

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<sup>72</sup> Brian Ferneyhough, *Brian Ferneyhough: Collected Writings*, Boros, J. and Toop, R., (eds.), (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998), 327, quoted in Fitch, *Ferneyhough*, p.302.

<sup>73</sup> 5:4 website. ‘Ferneyhough Week – La terre est un homme’. <<http://5against4.com/2013/01/14/ferneyhough-week-la-terre-est-un-homme/>> (accessed 25 March 2015).

<sup>74</sup> 5:4 website. ‘Ferneyhough Week – La terre est un homme’. <<http://5against4.com/2013/01/14/ferneyhough-week-la-terre-est-un-homme/>> (accessed 25 March 2015).



individual player, via notation, to the listener is a fallacy:

‘The assumed direct communicative chain between conception, notation, responsible interpretation (including not only technical performative standards but factors such as performative energy and intuition), and reception/perception should be recast as translation rather than direct (one-to-one) correspondence, the latter model tending to reduce everything to the quantifiable – i.e., primarily technical/mechanical level.’<sup>75</sup>

The persistence of 19<sup>th</sup>-century ideas about the artist ‘genius’ propagate the idea of a linear progression from the composer’s sublime thoughts, through their representation in notation, to their perfect rendering in performance, ‘communicating’ those thoughts directly to the listener. Such assumptions also contribute to the positive valorization of ‘clarity’, since ‘clarity’ aids ‘communication’ in this model. Going beyond a threshold of density implies that the music is ‘unheard’ by the composer and thus ‘over-complex’ so that the ‘message’ is lost, contributing to the negative valorization of ‘complexity’. The idea of a one-to-one mapping between score, performance and reception is challenged by semiotic analysis, which critiques the idea of notation-as-representation, associated with the aesthetics of (orchestral) clarity. The linear relationship between Producer, Message and Receiver is replaced by ‘Poietic’

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<sup>75</sup> Frank Cox, ‘Notes Toward a Performance Practice for Complex Music’, in Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf (ed.), *Polyphony and Complexity*, New Music and Aesthetics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Vol.1 (Hofheim: Wolke Verlag, 2002), p.103.

and 'Esthetic' processes, where Producer and Receiver are both 'interpretants' in relation to the 'Trace' (or work)<sup>76</sup> and active mediation takes place at every stage of creation, production and reception.

Radical modernist traditions have rethought such relationships between performance, sound production and perception. In Lachenmann's *musique concrète instrumentale*, included in Mahnkopf's model of 'complex music', 'extended' techniques explore every conceivable aspect of the instrument<sup>77</sup> to form the basis of a musical syntax. By foregrounding the very act of making sound,<sup>78</sup> such composers have striven to go beyond what can be imagined conventionally in sound; in the context of the orchestra this presents a challenge to its institutionalized values as a model of social order and hierarchy. We have observed the ambivalence towards such overt modernist attitudes in the orchestral works of Adès and the views of Benjamin, the symptomatic valorizations of 'clarity', evident within their works and statements about their works, contrasting directly with the radical 'occupation' of the orchestra by composers associated with 'complexity'. The reproduction of existing categories, the familiar and reassuring, rather than the still-to-be-imagined, is a dialectic every (British) composer confronts, in particular when writing for orchestra, where aural transparency is privileged, at least by part of contemporary music culture.

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<sup>76</sup> Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp.16-17.

<sup>77</sup> Mahnkopf, 'Complex Music: An Attempt at a Definition', p.55.

<sup>78</sup> Ross Feller, 'Resistant Strains of Postmodernism: The Music of Helmut Lachenmann and Brian Ferneyhough', in Judy Lochhead & Joseph Auner, (eds.), *Postmodern Music / Postmodern Thought*, New Music and Aesthetics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Vol.1 (London: Routledge, 2002), p.254.

In conclusion, we have seen how the complexity-clarity binary certainly underpins the ideas of Benjamin and works of Adès discussed in this article. We have also observed how the complexity-clarity dialectic is to an extent informed by conceptions of material originating from electronic and electroacoustic music, such as the ambiguities of sonic origin and the ‘de-individualization’ of material. Such ideas can become problematic for the perception of ‘clarity’, according to aesthetic expectations associated with neo-classicism, when they enter the orchestral domain, as is case in some of the orchestral works of Dillon and Ferneyhough. The symptomatic valorization of ‘clarity’ over its binary ‘other’ of ‘complexity’ risks over-generalizing value judgements associated with particular aesthetic decisions, rather than acknowledging the validity of different aesthetic intentions, such as those associated with ‘complexism’. It is also interesting to note how ‘spectralism’ (which is included in Mahnkopf’s conception of ‘complex music’) has to an extent been recuperated into contemporary British orchestral music because of its ideological emphasis on the perception of sound. Such symptoms may well be evidence of a larger cultural tendency in British contemporary orchestral music, which implicitly privileges more neoclassical conceptions of material, form and approaches to orchestration over those associated with ‘complexism’, but a larger study would be needed to substantiate such a claim. Although the historical tendency towards the negative reception of ‘complex music’ in Britain might have waned to an extent in recent years, many examples of

contemporary British orchestral music remain symptomatic of the complexity-clarity binary and the implicit valorization of 'clarity'.

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