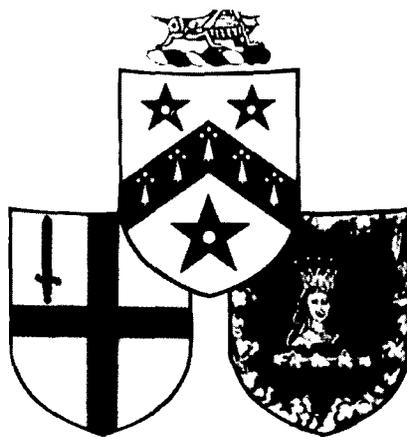


G R E S H A M
COLLEGE



UPS AND DOWNS

by

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UPS AND DOWNS

The three lectures in our autumn series have all been concerned in some way with music and place. In the lecture on Cage's prepared piano, we heard the piano being transformed into an mini orchestra capable of sounds which were influenced by those of African and Balinese music. For Steve Reich, a visit to Africa to study Ghanian drumming was an artistic necessity after he had recognised that the organising principles of his own music had been developing along lines similar to those of African traditions. In the case of Reich, the engagement with African music was primarily for structural reasons - though we did hear examples, from *Drumming* and *Music for Pieces of Wood*, which also had timbral connections. Today's focus is on something a little less easy to determine - the influence of place upon a composer's music; the temptation was there to use the word 'inspiration', and although I am never quite sure what this means or how it happens there were some odd things going on when I wrote my *Undulations and Other Movements*, which I will describe later.

Leaving aside the obvious case of the painter, the idea that one particular environment is more ideal for artistic creation than another seems to me to be a relatively recent notion. In music, the relationship between composer and employer which exists through the late seventeenth and throughout almost all of the eighteenth century meant that composers simply lived and worked where the work was - broadly speaking at court or church. For well-known historical reasons, this relationship changed at the end of the eighteenth century. Beethoven still depended upon the patronage of the likes of Count Waldstein and Prince Lichnowsky, but he also organised his own concerts and sold his own subscription tickets. He was in a position where he had greater choice than his predecessors over his artistic development; as a consequence, and coming from his own particular personality, for the most part his music was challenging (ie 'difficult') to its listeners. And, although the exception rather than the rule, there is one piece by Beethoven which signals the possibility of being 'inspired' by place:

PASTORAL Symphony, excerpt, *Scene by the brook* (mvt 2)

Beethoven's *Pastoral* symphony is one of several works of art from the early nineteenth century which focuses on the beauty of the countryside. Many come from Wordsworth's pen, and we now know that some of the scenes that Constable painted actually ignored less attractive industrial

buildings in the far distance. This was the period in which urbanisation begins in earnest, and town and city populations increased very considerably in the first 25 years of the nineteenth century. The distinction between 'town' and 'country' became greater than ever before, and those who had the choice could experience both. For the composer, the most likely source of work would be in town or city, but increasingly we find composers travelling outside the city for personal regeneration or as a source of artistic stimulation. Schubert, who had become a freelance composer in 1816, travelled for months at a time and his love of the countryside undoubtedly lifted his rather fragile spirits on a number of occasions and got him back to work; Mendelssohn's travels in Scotland also provided him with a wealth of ideas for works, though the fact that he was sea sick and stayed below deck for much of his famous trip around the Hebrides is not, at least to my ears, captured in the well-known overture.

So, it is in the first 25 years or so of the C19th that we find some composers needing more than a desk, a pen, some paper and a deadline to stimulate their work. The reasons for this are many and various - ranging from the simple fact that travel was becoming easier through to such deeper issues as changing attitudes to religion - Schubert (for example) had become interested in Pantheism, and consequently in the power of nature. Perhaps it is also something to do with the need for the music to reflect something personal, something individual; this, of course, is one of the characteristics that we associate with the whole Romantic movement.

Through the nineteenth and into the twentieth century it is easy to find examples of composers who retreated periodically to the rural and the remote to concentrate upon their work. Mahler offers us a very well known example, as, in their different ways do Elgar, Ives, Stravinsky, Webern, Messiaen, Maxwell Davies and Harrison Birtwistle. In the case of Webern, scholars have been so obsessed with counting note rows that it has only been relatively recently that studies of the influence of the Austrian mountain environment upon his music have appeared. Messiaen spent weeks and months listening to and transcribing birdsong, collected in rural France. Debussy, by contrast, painted marvellous musical portraits of the distant and the remote and rarely left Paris; and Gershwin positively revelled in that city. Whilst we can find many examples of composers retreating from town to country, we should not forget that some, particularly in more popular fields, have been positively stimulated by the urban.

And so to the *Ups and Downs* of today's title. This brings an immediate memory - that of lugging a full size electric keyboard up five flights of very narrow stairs to the top of a Parisian apartment block. It was the spring of 1998, and I was stopping off to collect my daughter, en route to the Charente in SW France. The only connection with the illustrious names listed elsewhere in this lecture is that I, too, find it hard to compose in the same environment as my normal day to day working life. In the first instance, I believe this is to do with levels of concentration. Though it is

sometimes necessary, I find it hard to envisage a piece of music and then realise its various details in a piecemeal fashion, a bit here, a bit there. When Schoenberg went to America and ended up teaching American college students in the 1930s, he (apparently) composed his fourth string quartet in the gaps between classes and tutorials. Few of my friends and colleagues who teach in higher education today would be able to even imagine such a thing to be possible, let alone try to work out how it was achieved.

There is then the 'feel good' factor. Liverpool is a lively place to be, and (as has been proved) can be a stimulating artistic environment. Some of this I have already celebrated in earlier music, and I do not imagine that I have written my last piece which is Liverpoolian in origin. I frequently enjoy walks on the riverfront, and, at Goodison Park (the home of Everton FC) pick up all kinds of ideas that are distinctly urban in their inspiration. I work at an institution, which by virtue of its urban position, offers stimulating challenges in higher education. The new CD which features the pieces you will hear shortly is titled *Waterfront*, recognising the fact that all four composers represented are based in Liverpool.

However, for all of this the view from my study window in Liverpool (I'm looking at it as I write this) is not the most attractive urban landscape in the world. There's some nice barbed wire, some of those jagged bits of glass set in concrete that people put on the tops of their rear walls and not much sky. However, in Chatignac, at the home of my friends David and Kate Griffith-Jones, I have been fortunate to sit at a desk looking into an intriguing, rolling countryside, with a lively sky which frequently reminds that the Bay of Biscay is not too far away.

But what am I doing looking out of the window? You don't need to be much of a psychologist to reason that in seeking an 'ideal' situation in which to work, one is perhaps only putting things off. 'Getting away from it all' may actual be an elaborate and potentially expensive escape from the realities of things that need doing. On the wall in my study I have a cartoon in which a writer sits at his desk in the morning, sharpens his pencil, then goes and makes a cup of coffee. He then decides that the coffee is not strong enough, goes and makes some more, sharpens another pencil, goes to find a cushion, alters the heat of the gas fire and so on. Anyone who does any writing will recognise this. Like many people, I find that if I reduce the options for distraction, I do eventually get down to a good concentration level. It doesn't come very easily, I have to admit. Perhaps going to a fairly remote French gite is a good way of making myself both prisoner and gaoler. What follows in an account of a somewhat unexpected experience of the way in which being in a particular place can contribute to the problem-solving which is, in part, the art of composition.

In the spring 1998 I went to the Charente with the particular purpose of getting as far as I could into writing a 15 minute piece for the ensemble Psappa, which I knew was going to be recorded sometime very early in 1999. The ensemble is one of the best new music groups in the country, and they have given many first performances in recent years. I was able to go to France for about a month, so I knew that I was going to have to work pretty intensively if I was going to make headway in a relatively short time. A minute's worth of music every two days might not seem very much, but there are few who would be able to take this for granted.

The biggest problem was that I didn't really know what I was going to write. Teaching composition students, I often use an image which is ascribed to Michaelangelo. Looking at a block of marble, he would say that the sculpture is already in there - all the sculptor has to do is find it. It is at least reassuring to try to put yourself into the position of an archeologist; you embark on a new piece knowing that it is there somewhere, and all you have to do is find it. As I searched for my new piece, I had few leads. There were a number of vague ideas, the main one being that I didn't really want to write a heavy, serious piece; I thought of the new work as being the lighter partner to an earlier quartet (Saxophone, String Trio and Tape) which I had called *About Time* and completed in 1995. *About Time* was based on images I had taken from a novel about Einstein (*Einstein's Dreams*). For various reasons I toyed with the idea of calling the new piece *About time, too*, but this didn't really get me very far.

So, I arrived with my daughter at the Charente, and began to stare into space and on to empty lines of crisp new manuscript and largely blank pages in the notebook. Eventually, after much striding around, walks in the garden and cups of coffee I thought that I would set myself a couple of compositional warm up exercises. In an earlier piece, *At the turn of the Year*, I had used fixed points of reference - specific pitches - throughout the piece and had built up much of the piece from this technique. So, I embarked on a few more 'fixed point' exercises to see if this would unlock any clues. In simple terms, I decided upon a particular pitch and register, and developed material outwards but always fixed around this point. The fixed point at the start of the piano piece *At the Turn of the Year* is a low Bb. It is the first thing you hear, and it chimes away quietly at various points whilst other material slowly develops above it.

extract: Opening of *At the Turn of the Year*

Later in the piece, there's another fixed point; it's ♯ a high G:

extract : *At the Turn of the Year* ; second half, second section

It is interesting now for me to look back at the sketches, as I note that two of the pitches I worked with in 1998 were the same two, Bb and G which I had used in 1991.

The development of ideas for the composition of the new piece now progresses as a series of curious coincidences. I had taken a book to read, *Foucault's Pendulum*, by Umberto Eco. On the third page, there is an exchange between a boy and a girl who are observing a model of the pendulum in Paris (of course).

"What does it do ? Just hang there ?"

"It proves the rotation of the earth. Since the point of suspension doesn't move..."

"Why doesn't it move ?"

"Well, because it's a point... the central point, I mean, the one right in the middle of all the points you see...it's a geometric point; you can't see it..."

... the earth turns but the point doesn't "

From being a warm up activity, the interest in fixed points seemed to be coming at me from other directions, so I carried on. I also began to think of the music I was writing as dance-like, and a few pages of early sketches carry the title *Time dances on*. The dances I had in mind were weird, other worldly.

Working long hours in a sedentary position isn't a particularly good idea, and staring at unsolved problems is even less attractive. For this reason, when writing a piece, I like to take a break midday or so and go for a walk, a bike ride - or a drive if I'm feeling lazy. On one such (lazy) day I went on a short drive around rolling hills. It was bright and sunny (unusually as the weather had been foul) and I had come out to think about the piece, and where it was going. I felt it needed greater substance than the short dance-like sections which were emerging, but I wasn't sure how to go forward. I parked the car at a particularly attractive spot and just took in the view. It is easy to romanticise about such moments after the event, but I swear that the idea came like a bolt out of the blue. I would write a main movement about this countryside, and in particular its rolling shapes. By the time I had returned to the gite, I had the title *Undulations*, and knew the kinds of things I was going to attempt in the movement.

On the same day, my daughter had written to her boyfriend, then a student of mime at the Le Coq school in Paris. His name is Joel Anderson, but on the envelope she had referred to him as Joel 'Ondulation' Anderson. She explained to me that 'Undulation' was one of the mime exercise that the Le Coq students did, and to prove it there was a little drawing of Joel doing his Undulations. For obvious reasons, it was hard to get her to believe that I had just had the idea of the same title for a movement of my new piece.

From this point, the idea of the mime exercise and the portrayal of the landscape merged into one. I began to imagine a wierd collection of mimes performing slow, strange mime/dances, and worked on a number of patterns which were based on rising and falling numbers. These provided me with a series of duets and canons which I began to put together in

different ways. I saw the undulations, the rises and falls, as both linear and vertical. The music would rise and fall in pitch, and the length of notes would become longer then shorter. In addition to these aspects, I realised that whatever else was going to happen, this was to be a main movement in the work, and I wanted it to have a strong expressive character. Bit by bit it all came together, and I finished it early in April:

Extract: *Undulations*

Joel Anderson came to stay with us for a couple of days, and naturally I told him the *Undulations* story. I then asked if there were any other exercises that he did. To my astonishment, he answered 'Fixed Points'. He also demonstrated what kind of movements he used. So, from almost nowhere, a piece was emerging which was a kind of imaginary mime show. As I put together the whole work, I carried in my mind's eye a small troupe of rather sinister mimes, performing solo, duo and ensemble abstract pieces based on *Undulations*, *Fixed Points*, and a new idea I had taken from Joel, *Éclosions* (hatchings or blossomings). To these I added an entrance and a departure; the mimes would be signalled into the performance area by a drum roll.

In the end, I had six separate movements. *Undulations* is fourth, and the two fixed point movements lie either side. The third is for string trio and marimba, and the fixed point is a raucous cello open A string. I thought of both the fixed point movements as being folk-like in character, and both rather manic. The first, like *Undulations*, is constructed (in part at least) from number patterns:

extract: *Fixed point 1*

The second has a howling clarinet, fixed around a top Bb, accompanied by a still, slow moving succession of string chords:

extract: *Fixed Point 2*

The idea of framing the more serious, expressive *Undulations* with lighter movements was followed through; the entrance (*Entrée*) became a slightly jokey bass clarinet but with somewhat sinister undertones, and occasional bouts of jagged, crazy choruses:

excerpt: *Entrée*

After *Undulations*, *Éclosions* is the most contrapuntal of the movements, with a series of superimposed duets being heard at the centre of the movement.

excerpt: *Éclosions*

It should now be clear why my new piece is called *Undulations and Other Movements*. It is odd for me to look back through the sketches and track the way the problem was solved, how - thinking back to the sculpture image - the piece was 'found'. It is heard for the first time at a public concert at the Royal Northern College of Music on 11th November, played by Psappha. The double CD, *Waterfront*, which includes both the pieces you have heard today plus pieces by Robin Hartwell, James Wishart and Jonathan Powles will be available on the same day, and we hope to have some available through Gresham College fairly soon.

GRESHAM COLLEGE

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- to foster academic consideration of contemporary problems;
- to challenge those who live or work in the City of London to engage in intellectual debate on those subjects in which the City has a proper concern; and to provide a window on the City for learned societies, both national and international.

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