

## How my music is made: 'tantôt libre, tantôt recherché.' Nicola LeFanu

As I compose, in 'real time', my pencil is guided by my intuition. I do not know from what hinterland of the imagination the next aural ideas will come. But as each moment takes shape, it does so within a larger context which, however obscurely perceived, has been present from the beginning. A half-conscious sense of what this new work may be overall, together with glimpses of its myriad tiny details, is there at its conception. Sketching seems like training the inner ear, just as an athlete trains for a race. At first, my playing with shapes and colours, with rhythms, pitches and timbres, seems somewhat arbitrary or mechanical: a limbering up. Then as the imagination quickens, my ear comes into focus. Suddenly I can hear as if I had absolute pitch, and the sketches or studies needed for this particular piece and no other, come sharply into relief. I feel a bit like a poet who has discovered the imagery for a poem, and the form in which it will be cast, and now has to find the words that will express it. Sometimes they are elusive and the search requires tenacity; sometimes they flow, like a benison.

In this chapter I explore the way in which harmony creates the structure of my music. Harmony operates through space (register) and time (rhythm) to shape and pace my compositions, both in instrumental concert works and in dramatic works for the opera theatre. As my music examples illustrate, harmony is implicit in melodic line as well as explicit in 'vertical' sonorities.

My harmony is always functional: it is best described as modal, since its use of pitch centres and pitch sets creates clear hierarchies. It is not tonal, though my thinking has always been influenced by my understanding of long-term tonal voice-leading. Similarly, though never strictly serial, my music could not have been written without my knowledge of (and love for) the music of Berg and Webern. European modernism in art, literature and music has been the single strongest influence on my work.

My pitch sets are chosen so that they encapsulate the sound world I have imagined for a particular work. I use them to create a network of relationships. I extend and develop musical ideas or images through transformation, not through direct or sequential repetition. I like to make sets which enable me to move out from chromatic harmony, either to a diatonic harmony or to a microtonal language. To use a visual analogy, I am creating different harmonic planes in order to suggest perspective.

I am a practitioner, not a theorist: theoretical or systematic process is inimical to me. However, intuitive composing is not a case of bumbling around in the dark. The imagination must be nurtured through performance, analysis and whatever kinds of study and pre-compositional sketching are appropriate. It is for this reason that I like to cite Beethoven's prefix to the *Grosse Fuge*: 'tantôt libre, tantôt recherché.' For me, it captures the essence of what it is to compose - a quest, a search, in which all the forces of the intelligence are harnessed, to fire the imagination.

*But Stars Remaining* for solo soprano, written in 1971 for Jane Manning, embodies my understanding of the word 'melody' as well as exemplifying a voice-leading which is easy to hear. An unaccompanied scena, it is a literal monody, whereas the works that followed it, though monodic in structure, were conceived for large forces - ensemble or orchestra. *But Stars*, setting lines





Of the analysis above, not one whit was present in my mind when *But Stars Remaining* was composed one summer weekend. It was written purely intuitively, without preconceived intentions as to its use of register to create a complex line. It was the fruit, perhaps, of earlier studies: exploration of serial and post serial techniques in *Chiaroscuro* for solo piano (1970); the double variations of the *Oboe Quartet* (1968), in which rhythm becomes released from metre; the several dramatis personae contained within the one line of my oboe *Soliloquy* (1966). With hindsight, if *But Stars* was a fruit, it was one with a number of seeds. It was followed by several substantial works: two for symphony orchestra, *The Hidden Landscape* (BBC Proms, 1973) and *Columbia Falls* (CBSO, 1975), and my first opera, *Dawnpath* (New Opera Company, 1977). Structurally, each of these can be understood as a monody, though one expressed through multi-faceted textures created by sixty or seventy musicians rather than a lone singer.

In between the two big orchestral pieces I wrote *The Same Day Dawns* (Fromm Foundation, Boston 1974), a chamber work for voice and small ensemble. I felt a need to go back to the drawing board, just as an artist returns to pencil or charcoal after working on a large canvas. I wanted, too, to explore musical forms that were not goal-directed. Where the orchestral works are directional, moving inexorably to climax and resolution, I wanted to find out what happens when the music is elliptical, avoiding dialectic, avoiding any kind of rhetoric. If there is a narrative, it is no longer a linear one.

The words I chose were brief and fragmentary; all are translations, so their origin in ancient Asian texts is doubly remote from us. There is no progression from one to another, nor any consequentiality in the choice of which settings return unchanged, which reappear in new guises and which pass fleetingly, never heard again. In these songs of distance and desire, time is the time of dreams: it passes without measure, a moment expanding or contracting beyond rationality.

That harmony is implicit in melodic line is readily apparent in *The Same Day Dawns*. 'The time I went...' opens up a single chord, moving from its lowest components to a focal high G<sub>5</sub>. (Eg 4).

$\text{♩} = c 160$  (nearer singing than speech) *p sempre* moving on ..... back to tempo

Soprano  
 Alto flute  
 Howl glass  
 quince - drum

\* choose lowest and highest pitches so that both are resonant.

ab - ly the win - ter night's ri - ver wind was so

*in tempo* Slightly Slower *mp* *p*  
 cold that the sandalings are cry - ing cry - ing cry

*pp* fairly brief silence

The texture is heterophonic, and the material essentially diatonic. As such, it is the complement to the chromatic collection (a hexachord built on F#) which underpins 'The still drone', the setting which initially precedes it, later follows it. Their complementarity allows of either position, formally. Harmonic movement is created as we pass from one setting to the next. But it also exists on another level: in 'The still drone' the chromatic line etched by the voice continually changes our perception of the chord prolonged underneath.

Since each song is a miniature, the music is pared down to be as economic as possible: every event has its role in creating a tiny structure that must be at once self-contained, yet open. Heterophony is the predominant texture, since this allows for rhythmic and melodic fluidity while retaining the harmonic

clarity necessary for such 'bare essential' forms. In 'O my lord jasmine', movement is created through a succession of tetrads; usually pitches maintain their registral position in these miniatures, to create definition in the voice-leading, but here the initial central Eb<sub>4</sub> is gradually transformed into the wide Eb octaves that form the cadence. (Eg 5).

Handwritten musical score for 'O my lord jasmine'. The score includes parts for Soprano, Violin, Bass clarinet, Vibraphone, Percussion, and Marimba. The tempo is marked  $\text{♩} = 58$ . The Soprano part begins with the lyrics 'O my lord jasmine'. The Marimba part is marked 'marimba in independent tempo:  $\text{♩} = 72$ '. The score includes dynamic markings such as *mp*, *p*, and *mf*, and performance instructions like 'very warm tone', 'can vib', 'ped', and 'soft sticks'. The Marimba part features a triplet of eighth notes.

Handwritten musical score for 'The Same Day Dawns'. The score includes vocal lines and instrumental accompaniment. The tempo is marked  $\text{♩} = 72$ . The vocal lines include the lyrics 'show him to me', 'my lord', 'white as', and 'jasmine'. The score includes dynamic markings such as *mf*, *mp*, and *p*. The score includes performance instructions like 'attacca' at the end. The score features complex rhythmic patterns, including triplets and sixteenth notes.

A further kind of harmonic movement comes in the instrumental sections cast as mobiles. Here, we have multiple glimpses of a single harmonic field. If *Same Day Dawns* is predominantly a lyric work, its harmony understood through melody, here is its inverse side: consecutive line is absent. Each musician has a group of fragments which they use, in any order, to build up successive passages. The unfolding of time is comprehended through the articulation of a vertical sonority, rapidly changing at the surface, slow moving underneath.

*The Same Day Dawns* enabled me to return to orchestral composition with a broader technical vocabulary. This enriched technique meant that I was ready to explore ways of creating movement on a much larger scale. In *Columbia Falls* I worked for the first time with pitch sets that would enable me to move from a fully chromatic vocabulary to a diatonic one; and enable working with pitch hierarchies that would allow of a much more diverse harmony that nevertheless retained its coherence.



Register could also be used so that the entire musical space was saturated like an enveloping mist, blurring all familiar outlines. In *Columbia Falls*, I avoided a complete chromatic saturation, using instead different glimpses of the latent harmonic field so that it might be partially revealed, now in diatonic guise, now more highly coloured. Like using a band-pass filter, a new area of the underlying resonance could thus be brought into relief. Whatever emerged from these dense sonorities would take the next step in the long term voice-leading, as if an endless melody was unfolding; not a melody to be understood only in single notes, but one that could encompass the widest or most intricate textures in its expression.

*The Old Woman of Beare* (1981, Lontano/Macnaghten Concerts) was a work in which I was able to bring together both the dramatic and lyrical aspects of my music. Although this monodrama (for soprano and large ensemble) is a narrative work, the deliberate confusion of tenses in the text suggested a cyclic approach rather than a directly progressive one. I made my own libretto from this famous Irish mediaeval text, drawing heavily on the beautiful version by Brendan Kennelly. The poem is written in the first person: recalling her youth from the vantage point of extreme old age, the old woman transcends time, creating the present out of the past. Living on Ireland's wild Atlantic coast, all her imagery is drawn from the sea; from the ever-recurring cycle of the tides, surging at equinox or retreating to leave a trail of flotsam. It is both a literal imagery and a metaphorical one, as she relives her turbulent sexual history. In my vocal line there are no boundaries between speech and song: melody reaches from the half-heard contour of a whisper to the highly charged articulated rhythm of fully projected singing<sup>2</sup>. As the work concludes, the fragmentary diatonic line is close to that of folksong.

Eg 7

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<sup>2</sup> an example is reproduced in *Contemporary Music Review* vol 11 (1994) pp186-187

The image shows a musical score for measures 334-337. The score is written for a variety of instruments and voice. The top system includes Flute (Fl.), Horn (Hn.), Percussion 1 (Hourglass drum), Percussion 2 (Maracas), and Voice. The bottom system includes Violin (Vin.), Viola (Via.), and Cello. The score is in 4/4 time and features a variety of dynamics and articulations. The voice part has the lyrics "the sea grows smaller now". The Harp part has a specific instruction: "Harp takes independent tempo, very slightly quicker than". The score is marked with measures 334, 335, 336, and 337.

The tide-cycle imagery of the text was ideal for the harmonic language I wanted to create; on one level, highly directional and chromatic; on another, moving cyclically through a slowly evolving harmonic field. No longer is the harmony predominantly to be understood in terms of its fundamental, heard 'from the bass up'; there is much more use of harmonies understood from the centre outwards, radiating asymmetrically (never symmetrically) from a pivotal axis. I allied the movement of the pitch to a contracting rhythmic cycle: in a familiar paradox, this liberated me, broadening the harmonic language both in regard to colour and to procedure.

Although *The Old Woman of Beare* still uses pitch material generated from a single 12 note set, it is also a work in which the harmony can be understood modally. The pitch E acts as a focal pitch for much of the piece, moving in and out of stability as it changes its tessitura. Towards the end, it moves to C, first the 'cello open C<sub>2</sub>, and then through middle C<sub>4</sub> to C<sub>5</sub> as the work dissolves in

an open cadence: its mode can have no final, since the Old Woman is drifting, cast up on a metaphorical strand as she awaits her death.<sup>3</sup>

My previous years of composing, and the studies I had made, enabled *The Old Woman of Beare* to be written in a matter of weeks, and it was followed by the song cycle *A Penny for A Song*, written even more quickly, and without prior sketches: born directly from the experience of the large ensemble work, these songs could be written straight down, intuitively, though their formal shapes and imagery are from a quite different world. Together, these pieces from the summer of 1981 mark a watershed in my work. From then on, modality played a larger part; from this time too, music from outside my immediate tradition makes its presence felt. *The Old Woman of Beare* has a debt to Korean p'ansori; discovering the colotomic structure of gamelan, and experiencing its tuning, had also left their mark. The 'winter journey' song in *A Penny for A Song* reconstructs Chopin while acknowledging Schubert; my cantata *Like a Wave of the Sea* (Nottingham, 1981) is threaded through with English Tudor music, although such a visitation of the past did not happen in a thoroughgoing manner until *Light Passing* (2004).

More significant at this stage was the extension of my chromatic language in two contrasting directions: into microtonality on the one hand, and into a diatonic modality on the other. My undergraduate exploration of microtones in the nineteen sixties had been comparatively superficial, inspired by first hearing Lutoslawski's *Trois Poemes d'Henri Michaux*, and *Jeux Venitiennes*. Nor, in the years immediately following, was I aware of what was happening with my contemporaneous generation in France: Murail, Grisey; the French music I knew was Messaien, Boulez and Jolas. The possibility of adding a microtonal gamut opened up again for me in 1983 after hearing the playing of John Edward Kelly and the Rascher Saxophone Quartet. The ease and delicacy of their tuning was extraordinary. It allowed me, in the quartet I wrote for them, (*Moon over Western Ridge, Mootwingee* 1984) to create an harmonic world that was much simpler than that I was used to, but no less rich in possibility. From a modal, Aeolian homophony the music could shift perspective as it was inflected, first chromatically, and then by quarter tones. I found it entrancing to create shadows and ambiguities around the simple skeletal modality, and explored this again later in my *Saxophone Concerto* (1989). In the meantime, the greater transparency and range of reference this gave my language proved invaluable as I moved towards a more consistent engagement with opera.

*The Story of Mary O'Neill* (BBC Radio 3, 1986), a radio opera for voices alone, provided an ideal opportunity to discover how this extended harmonic palette could be used to unfold a dramatic narrative. The opera begins in the nineteenth century as the O'Neills emigrate from famine-struck Ireland to South America; it takes up the tale of Mary and her descendants, to the present day. In its reflections on colonialism, the opera needed to overturn our understanding of 'primitive' and 'civilised', 'raw' and 'cooked', and thus it is the music of the Irish and Guarani characters that is the most evolved, in contrast to the well-intentioned English. While the musical debts are there - Berio, Nono, Messaien's *Cinq Rechants* - the melodic contours and the harmonic resonance they create are, I think, very much my own.

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<sup>3</sup> The last part of the piece appears in 'A Contemporary Anthology of Music by Women', ed James R Bristow (Indiana University Press, 1997) pp130-154.

**Eg 8** (taken from an early sketch)

*♩. = 40 Like a lullaby. Rubato, ssa + gentle*

Voice 5 (alto)

rob-bo, robbo rob-bo      al ga robbo, alga rob-bo rob-bo

al ga rob-bo rob-bo      alga robbo, alga rob-bo rob-bo

rob-bo robbo rob-bo rob-bo

*Blood Wedding* (WPT, London 1992), the most substantial of my six operas, took my technique a stage further, even though I chose to cast the Lorca in a traditional operatic mode. In Lorca's tragedy the anguish of forbidden love, the unbearable tenderness of transgression, are played out in a dry and unrelenting landscape: a stony confinement both literal and metaphorical. Fired by the knife-edged clarity of Lorca's text, I needed a musical language that could be both spare and transparent, or claustrophobically dense. Moving between the most diatonic modality and a fully chromatic vocabulary, I secured the harmonic rhythm through the longest term voice-leading I had yet attempted, expressed across two hours in a Fibonacci-derived set of proportions.

However, Lorca's play undergoes a sea-change when the scene changes to the forest in Act three. Where previously all has been dialogue, cut and thrust, the long scena for the personified Moon takes us into the world of Romance, of poetic fantasy:

Cisne redondo en el río  
ojo de las catedrales,  
alba fingida en las hojas  
soy; ¡no podrán escaparse!

(Round swan on the river/cathedrals' eye/I am the false dawn on the leaves/they shan't escape!)

This was the part of the play with which Lorca said he was most satisfied, and at this point in the opera, microtonality appears for the first time. Our sense of gravity is dislodged; as moonlight splinters through the dark forest, lighting up the fleeing lovers, so the music moves into the cracks of its former harmony. I cast the Moon as a countertenor, and in Clapton's inspired performance the probing microtones of the melodic line were as eerie as I had intended.<sup>4</sup> My musical language for this opera, with its unashamed debts to Dallapiccola, if not Janacek, had been inescapably penetrated by the microtonality.

The most brilliant stroke of Deborah Levy, the librettist, lay in the last scene, and made the work's feminist deconstruction unambiguous, for those open to it. Unlike Lorca, Levy's final tableau is for women alone: each generation

<sup>4</sup> *Canción*, a concert work taken from this scene of the opera can be heard on Naxos 8.557389; Clapton/Goldberg Quartet.

trapped in a web of its own making. I set this as an extended passacaglia, through which I threaded a strophic folksong. In the wide ranging tessitura of the chromatic harmonies of the passacaglia (an expanding cycle of thirteen chords) I could gradually bring closure to the voice-leading begun two hours earlier. In my diatonic folksong, written in a quasi Phrygian mode on F# and sung by the child, the successive verses take us away from cadence: there is no reason why the pattern of love and loss should not repeat to eternity. Only in the open fifths of the lullaby from Act 1, briefly echoed, is there a possibility of optimism; a glimpse of reconciliation between these polarised moral and musical worlds.

It was some twelve years and many works later that I once again confronted the challenge of reconciling different worlds in a dramatic work, and this time in a more radical way. *Light Passing* (BBC/NCEM, 2004) is an opera on the life of Clement VI (1291 - 1352), Pope in Avignon at the time of the Black Death. From the start, John Edmunds' libretto envisaged 'real' fourteenth century music being heard throughout the contemporary score, just as the words of the Latin liturgy and other medieval texts underpinned his own words.

John Edmunds sent me his libretto, at the suggestion of John Potter, in February 2002. In preparation for composing the score, I immersed myself in the music that Clement and his contemporaries at Avignon would have known. I re-learnt plainsong notation, and spent summer 2002 with plainchant melodies in my head, along with journeys of discovery in the polyphonic repertoire. I marvelled at the sophistication of Philippe de Vitry, the leading composer in fourteenth century Avignon, and I sang Machaut with friends. Meanwhile, I was re-reading Petrarch and Boccaccio; the late mediaeval era was coming alive for me in all its vividness and paradox.

Since Clement's Papal coronation took place at Whitsun, and he identified his papacy with light - with the descent of the spirit at Pentecost - I decided that the two best-known of the Whitsun hymns would run through my score: *Veni Sancte Spiritus* and *Veni Creator*. Beautiful, easily memorable tunes, they are well suited to a chorus of untrained voices (my opera is written for a small group of professional soloists and instrumentalists, with an amateur chorus.) Moreover, these Whitsun melodies provided endlessly fruitful material which I could transform in my own score. (For example, modal, diatonic pitch contours become chromatic when they are inverted symmetrically.)

I could identify appropriate polyphony both by text (eg Gloria: *Clemens Deus artifex, tota clemencia,*) or by historical documentation: de Vitry's so-called 'coronation' motet *Petre Clemens* is extant. My choices were always guided by my musical instinct; in relating my own music to the mediaeval, I was particularly interested in proportion. Thus I chose the initial Kyrie, *Clemens Pater*, because I was fascinated by its perfect 'golden mean' proportions. Its metric structure is fashioned according to the Fibonacci series and I kept to it as I composed Clement's opening soliloquy which runs through it. Similarly I preserved the proportions of the de Vitry *Petre Clemens* motet; its isorhythmic structure underpins the entire Coronation scene, drawing together plainchant, secular music and my own music, in which we glimpse Clement's imagined thoughts.

Pitch material, metric practice and polyphonic practice all led to ways in which my own musical language was transformed by the mediaeval material. Instead of working with harmonic fields, I worked with line, and with

accretions of lines. Transcriptions were sometimes literal, sometimes transformed. One music may be hidden within another: as the plague sweeps up the flagellants, the *Dies Irae* gradually invades their melodic line. Often, I threaded fragments of fourteenth century music into my instrumental music. *Veni Creator* runs right through the last scene in this way, hidden in the ensemble, only emerging in the voices as Clement is dying.

Throughout, I wanted to ensure that the mediaeval music was an essential part of both the dramatic and musical fabric. Thus at the crux of the opera, when Clement, despairing, even doubts his faith, so my music fragments and destroys the plainchant materials that have underpinned it.

### Eg 9

Poco meno mosso ♩ = 116

M80

The musical score for Eg 9 is a multi-staff orchestral arrangement. It begins with the tempo marking 'Poco meno mosso' and a quarter note equal to 116 beats per minute. A box labeled 'M80' is present at the top left. The score includes parts for Clemens (Clemens), Flute (Fl.), Bassoon (Bsn.), Trumpet (Tpt.), Percussion (Perc.), Harp (Hp.), and Violin (Vic.). The Clemens part is mostly silent. The other instruments play a complex, rhythmic pattern with dynamic markings of *f* and *ff*. The percussion part includes a section marked '3 Skulls'. The harp and violin parts also feature intricate patterns with dynamic markings.

Following this, to make the transition to the final scene of Clement's death, I placed de Vitry's motet 'Adesto sancta trinitas, musice modulantibus'. Its music made it particularly suited, but even more so its text, with its musical references and its plea: 'Firmissime fidem teneamus' - 'let us hold firmly to faith...'

It is still possible to visit Clement's superb palace at Avignon and to stand, as I have, in his study-bedchamber, lavishly decorated with the pastoral scenes he loved. He was a brilliant man: scholar, theologian, an intellectual with a questing and restless spirit. Above all, he stood for tolerance in the face of religious bigotry. The issues that plagued Clement are still those that we seek answers for today: why the bigotry? why the violence? why the inhumanity? Like him, we live in turbulent and uncertain times: like him, we need to stand up for tolerance and justice. For me, the over-riding reason to conjure up Clement and his distant era in *Light Passing* was so as to illuminate our new century.

At the beginning of my career in the nineteen sixties, in my teens and early twenties, harmony was already a source of fascination, and it was not a problematic term. The framework in which I discussed it with my contemporaries was that of the European avant-garde. Stockausen's 'How

'Time Passes' was seminal for many of us. I was particularly at home with Italian music, especially Berio, as well as music from central Europe - Lutoslawski and early Ligeti (Kurtág, I did not discover until later on). A work like Ligeti's *Lontano* made manifest the seamless relationship between linear voice-leading, harmony and timbre. Equally, I was engrossed by Messiaen's sound world: the radiance of his harmonic language, and the way it was expressed ('rhythm, the primordial element'). The music I listened to most was that of the composers close at hand: initially Goehr - hearing *The Deluge* when I was a schoolgirl was a catalyst; then Maxwell Davies and Birtwistle, then Gilbert and Lumsdaine. My contemporaries were no less important to me - music by Gillian Whitehead, Michael Finnissy. All these composers, like others I have mentioned, were a part of the marvellously fertile musical climate in the nineteen sixties; they were not a direct influence on my work, but a great source of nourishment and inspiration. My studies in the States with Earl Kim reinforced this focus on European music, paradoxically, but also made me aware of the most deep-seated role model. Kim's inimitable music can never be pigeon-holed into a 'school' and so it was with my mother Elizabeth Maconchy, who pursued an independent path all her life.

It is curious to look back across forty years and reflect on the fortunes of the concept of harmony since the sixties. Was it minimalism that swept aside the notion that harmony was an ever-evolving concept, one that it was worth, indeed necessary, to keep exploring? Perhaps it was the overwhelming tide of populism that surged through the nineties. Terms such as 'serious music' became taboo; indeed, 'intellectual' began to be used as a pejorative word, much as 'intelligentsia' (or 'degenerate music') were used by totalitarian regimes of the thirties. In such a context, concepts inherited from European modernism were not likely to thrive.

At the present time, early in the twenty-first century, I am optimistic, for I know a new, much younger generation of composers who have left these dilemmas behind. They move happily between genres and are not afraid to speak of 'art music', nor do they turn their backs on the intellectual activity which some call 'elitist' or 'cerebral'. Beethoven's prefix, (*libre..recherché*) acknowledges the need for a freely roaming imagination to be supported by a searching intelligence. The search is not for a knowledge that can be expressed in words, but one that will be embodied in music. When I compose, I think in music, not in words; so this chapter can only offer pointers towards that path in which it is my delight to roam, seeking my music.

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