

Something New, Something Old, Something Else

Philip Thomas - piano

Markus Trunk ***Riten der Böötier* (2005)**
James Saunders ***relative distance* (2009) UK PREMIERE**
Martin Arnold ***Rat-drifting* (1999)**

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Chris Newman ***High Blood B* (2005)**
John Cage ***Two Pieces* 1946**
Jürg Frey ***In memoriam Cornelius Cardew* (1993)**
Markus Trunk ***"ah, he likes to write, likes to get writing done, likes to get things on paper"* (2009) WORLD PREMIERE**

This concert is the first of two given as part of the five40five series, grouped together under the title *Something New, Something Old, Something Else*. The primary intention is that a major new work is commissioned from a composer whose music I find to be radical, original and ultimately inspiring. Then, an older work by the same composer is chosen to go alongside the new work and the programme is completed with works by other composers, from any musical period or style, that might demonstrate connections, traces, influences, or even disparities. These works have been selected after discussions between the composers and myself.

The two composers who have written new works for this project – Markus Trunk for tonight's concert and Laurence Crane for the concert on 15th July - are composers whose music I respond to at a very intuitive level. The material they select to work with has a very immediate, direct impact and what they then choose to do with that material is both curious and surprising. I have known them and their music for about 7 years and it is a great pleasure and privilege to be able to commission new works from them.

Markus Trunk has now written five works for solo piano and these form a substantial proportion of his output. The piano is also one of the more traditional outlets for his compositional imagination, in contrast to pieces for steel pan ensemble, piano and glockenspiel, amplified banjo, electric guitar and double bass, and 'any number of doors, sound, and light sources'. The unique soundworlds Trunk offers the listener is one of the more obvious appealing factors of his music, but the piano seems to be a medium which reveals his compositional concerns in a most transparent way. His piano writing is clear and focused, with barely anything that could be considered 'extended technique'. Whilst the term 'pianistic' can often be more of a hindrance than use, it is a term I would apply to Trunk's piano music and it is clear that he is comfortable with, and enjoys, the medium. There is much that the pianist can work with to explore a wide variety of touch and timbre and it is always rewarding to play. There is a simplicity in the writing – particularly in *Riten der Böötier* – which serves to expose the natural sonorities of the piano and remind one of the beauty and technology of the instrument.

Two of the qualities which I admire most about Trunk's music – and which are present in all his compositions known to me – are *directness* and *courage*. At times the music can be *alarmingly* direct, presenting the listener with material which could be considered naïve, or even banal. This has the potential to shock at first and the listener is faced with the option to persist and

engage with the material or to turn off. If the former is chosen the listener will be rewarded, for Trunk has a natural gift to turn the straightforward into the curious. Naturally, his music never actually reaches the banal but through characteristics such as rhythmic oddities, subtle deviations of harmony and colour, and a finely tuned attention to pitch and sonority, Trunk succeeds in engaging the ears and mind, no matter whether the music is contemplative or playful, fast or slow.

ah, he loves to write... is a work which is remarkably direct in its musical language and scale. Both its conception and its content reveal the intellect and work of a composer who is not afraid to take risks (see Trunk's programme note for this piece below). Many of his works are likewise founded upon risk and at times this sits uncomfortably with concert-music expectations. For example, there may be a tendency toward silence or fragility, or alternately the music may seem to refuse to let go of an idea or pause for breath. These are features of Trunk's music which are both exciting and dangerous and serve to distinguish his music from much of current so-called 'new music'. Trunk is an original composer but, more importantly, one who writes truly engaging music, combining a refined beauty with a hard-edged physicality.

Riten der Böötier (Rites of the Boeotians)

The fragments of the Plataeae Manuscript, in a transcription for solo piano (2005)

Archaic cultures, real or imagined, hold great fascination for many artists. In particular, many composers seem to have been intrigued by visions of ancient Greece – see Debussy's *Six épigraphes antiques* and *Danseuses de Delphes*, Satie's *Gnossiennes* and *Gymnopédies* and Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*.

However, these works aren't attempts at reconstruction, and neither is my piece. They should, in analogy to the literary genre of science fiction, really be classed as *music history fiction*. (Thanks to Daniel Wolf for supplying me with this term.) Their evocative titles usually provide the composer with a cover under which to experiment with musical conventions; coincidentally, much the same goes for the concept of the "fragment".

In many ways, *Rites of the Boeotians* represents a journey into my own past rather than the cradle of Europe; for one thing, the pieces were conceived at the same piano as my very first compositions, an Edwardian-era upright at my parents' house. This is where I had my first piano lessons, and soon after started to pen my own creations – predominantly suites of quirky piano miniatures with fantastical titles... I am certain that that instrument's particular sonority and delicate touch are responsible for any apparent subtleties in *Rites of the Boeotians*. [Markus Trunk]

James Saunders' *relative distance* assigns specified sounds (the composer writes) to hand-drawn circle/line notations, such that their relative position on the page determines the frequency and distribution in time of individual events. For the past 9 years Saunders has been concerned with a series of works which have been grouped together as part of the 'untitled' series (titles have taken the form of the date of performance). *relative distance* is thus a marked departure for the composer and notationally it is very different from the 'untitled' pieces. However, the composer's concerns remain consistent – a tendency

toward 'small' sounds, barely audible at times, an inclusion of atmospheric sounds not as an interruption but as an accepted part of the piece, and a desire to create performance situations which are different on each occasion.

Martin Arnold's *Rat-drifting* takes its name from the colloquial term "rat-running". "Rat-running" is "the practice of driving through residential side streets to avoid congested main roads." It's a happy metaphor for a kind of music-making: it has all that "off-the-beaten-track" stuff going for it but, more significantly, it suggests taking an activity to a place where it isn't intended, using something in a way it isn't meant for, and unintentionally disturbing someplace comfortable (the disturbance being merely a byproduct of an activity that has another set of preoccupations). It also has the completely undesirable connotation of someone trying anything to get to a destination more quickly. This idea of being highly motivated to reach a goal has nothing in common with my music; thus, we're drifting not running. With "drifting," I was thinking about the Situationist International's idea of drifting, the *dérive*, a term they coined to suggest a "technique of transient passage through varied ambiances. The *dérive* entails playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects; which completely distinguishes it from the classical notions of the journey and the stroll. [Martin Arnold]

High Blood B was written in 2005, and is the result of taking an 18th century piano sonata, & repositioning it vis-a-vis itself, to create a new kind of musical syntax, a new kind of coming-together of harmony out of a familiar background; thus it is possible to discern how distanced the piece is from its source material - like a model for the phenomenon of memory, the now being an internalisation of the then. [Chris Newman]

In the mid-1940's John Cage was seeking new methods to limit his compositional choices. These *Two Pieces (1946)* are the first examples of a new technique often referred to as the 'gamut' technique (developed further in pieces such as *The Seasons* and *String Quartet in Four Parts*). This essentially involves a limited selection of material (chords, single notes, brief fragments of melody) each unit of which retains its identity as Cage 'slots' it within a fixed durational structure, essentially unchanged or varied. The continuity is dependent upon Cage's taste, each section generally focusing around one or two of these ideas.

The choice of material reflects Cage's preferences for sevenths and ninths intervals and one can detect the influence the *sounds* (though not the methods) the music of Schoenberg and Webern had upon Cage (as it did upon Feldman also). The first piece also reveals the increasing importance the role of silence was to play in Cage's compositions and ideas. In this piece, spaces of up to five bars at a time are left unfilled by notated material.

Jürg Frey is a Swiss composer concerned with presenting musical material with the minimum of intervention, allowing instead the soundworld of any given piece to become the focus rather than the forced manipulation of those sounds to some preconceived end. *In memoriam Cornelius Cardew* is a brief tribute to the renowned experimental English composer who died in 1981.

ah, he likes to write, likes to get writing done, likes to get things on paper
for piano solo (2009)

This work was written in the manner of a diary. Without much of an overall system or plan, I started out afresh on each day of writing, more or less improvising within the confines of a number of closely defined parameters. Stopping myself from re-writing or developing what I had produced on the previous day was both difficult and liberating. In the end, not everything made it into the finished score, but, with one exception, the individual segments still appear in the order in which they were written.

The title of the piece is a quote from a journal entry made in 1969 by Robert Lax, in which he mockingly speaks of himself in the third person. Lax was an American writer who lived abroad and in relative isolation for most of his life. It appears that writing was a necessity for him, whereas having a career as a poet, or even defining himself as one, was of little importance.

It is perhaps in the format of the diary that Lax found his ideal medium, free from the constraints of having to produce something akin to literature, or art. It offered an environment where his thoughts could take on whatever form suited them best, be it that of matter-of-fact description, mischievous commentary, philosophical reflection, or indeed poetry. In his hands, these varied responses to each day's events combine to form a continuous inner dialogue.

I'd love to be as unconcerned about what form my work takes, about what constitutes a piece, whether I am being coherent – indeed whether any of it qualifies as “music”. [Markus Trunk]

Markus Trunk was born 1962 in Mannheim, Germany. He studied composition in Karlsruhe (with Mathias Spahlinger and Walter Zimmermann) and the United States (with Alvin Lucier). He has been resident in London since 1996 and received a PhD in Musical Composition from Birmingham University under the supervision of Vic Hoyland.

He has had performances in many European countries and at the ISCM World Music Days, the Bang on a Can Festival (New York) and the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival. *On a clear day* for large orchestra, a commission from Hessischer Rundfunk Frankfurt, received its UK premiere in a performance by the BBC Symphony Orchestra. *twin/double* was premiered in 2007 by the Bozzini Quartet and broadcast by Radio 3. 2008 saw the first performances of *when air too still* and *Parhelion*, in interpretations by Exaudi and Apartment House.

He is the recipient of fellowships and funding from the DAAD, the foundation Heinrich Strobel Stiftung and the British Academy. He is also a member of the British Music Information Centre's New Voices scheme and a co-organiser of “Music we'd like to hear”, an ongoing series of curated concerts of experimental music in London.

Philip Thomas (b.1972, North Devon) specialises in performing new and experimental music, including both notated and improvised music. He places much emphasis on each concert being a unique event, designing imaginative programmes that provoke and suggest connections. Philip's most recent solo projects have included a survey of the piano music of Christian Wolff, including the European premiere of his latest work for solo piano ‘Long Piano (Peace March 11)’ at the 2007 Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, alongside premieres of new works by Stephen Chase, Tim Parkinson and Michael

Parsons; concerts of music composed by improvisers, including premieres of new works by Mick Beck, Chris Burn and Simon H.Fell. Future plans include a programme of recent music by young American experimental composers. Philip's debut solo CD 'Comprovisation' was released in 2007 on the Bruce's Fingers label (BF66). Based upon his recent series of concerts featuring music exploring improvisation and notation, it features music by Mick Beck, Chris Burn, John Cage, Simon H Fell, Michael Finnissy and Paul Obermayer. Philip is a regular pianist with leading experimental music group Apartment House. Recent performances with them have included organizing and performing in a re-creation of the 1958 New York Town Hall John Cage retrospective, culminating in a major performance of John Cage's *Concert for Solo and Orchestra* at the 2008 Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival (subsequently broadcast on BBC Radio 3); premieres of new works by Rytis Mazulis together with works by George Maciunas at the 2008 ISCM New Music Days, Vilnius, Lithuania; a concert and live broadcast at the WDR studios, Cologne.

Since 2005 Philip has worked with the renowned pianist Ian Pace in programmes of experimental music for two pianos, including music by Cage, Brown, Wolff, Feldman, and Fox. In 2006 he formed a piano and electronics duo with composer James Saunders which performed at the 2007 Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival and was subsequently broadcast on BBC Radio 3. Philip was also the pianist in residence for the 2008 International Computer Music Conference/Sonorities festival, Belfast, performing with the 'Roots Ensemble'.

Philip was awarded a PhD from Sheffield University in the performance practice of contemporary piano music. Between 2000 and 2005, he was Head of the Sheffield Music School whilst pursuing an active performing and teaching career. He was appointed Lecturer in Performance at the University of Huddersfield in 2005, and Senior Lecturer in 2007.

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