

Musical Metaphysics and the Resonance of Tradition: An interview with composer Peter Fribbins – Benjamin Dwyer, 2013

BD: The piano concerto as a form has been enjoying something of a comeback over the past two decades or so - Magnus Lindberg, György Ligeti, George Benjamin and Horațiu Rădulescu come immediately to mind. Did you see your own concerto¹ directed by a desire to renovate the established form or as a continuum of a tradition?

PF: In many ways, both of these things: one of the aspects I find fascinating in using old musical forms (and which I share with my old composition teacher Hans Werner Henze), is their historical, aesthetic and expressive resonance: 'Old forms, like classical ideals of beauty, seem to me no longer attainable, but they still may be seen in the distance; they stimulate memory, like dreams, but the path to them is filled with the great darkness of our age; this path to them is the most difficult and impossible. It seems to me the only folly worth living for.' (1963).² Through my use of these 'received genres' I find that, like Henze, I can incorporate my own musical personality and voice, as homage, commentary, renewal, propagation. This is of course the opposite of Helmut Lachenmann's view, the commonly expressed modernist orthodoxy that adopting the old forms is some kind of 'tautologous' expression.³

BD: Do you incorporate in your work any theories relating to the use of tradition in the arts?

PF: British composers tend to be somewhat suspicious of compositional theories and dogma, and in some ways I see this as a strength of British late 20th-century music. However, I am certainly interested in the metaphysical and spiritual through the ages: for instance my *String Quartet No. 1 'I Have the Serpent Brought'*⁴ (2003) draws upon lines by the metaphysical poet John Donne from the early 1600s, just as my piano concerto draws upon lines by Omar Khayyám from c.1100. I suppose if I were pressed on this, I could say that for me there is also a metaphysical aspect signified in this act of using the old forms: it subtly acknowledges our own humanity, and our place in that continuum – after all, we all come from something, and then frame the present and future through our own presence and individual personality, and then go about interpreting and 'realising' that inheritance. In this way, the creative process is an isomorphic act; reflective of the way we use what we inherit, consciously and subconsciously. For me, the use of old established musical forms not only formalises that process, but also invokes and evokes resonances and expressive dimensions that I can then work with. Writers like George Steiner articulate something of this sensibility, although from the previous generation, so with rather different resonances: 'It is not the literal past that rules us, save, possibly, in a biological sense. It is images of the past. These are often as highly structured and selective as myths. Images and symbolic constructs of the past are imprinted, almost in the manner of genetic information, on our sensibility.'⁵

¹ Peter Fribbins: Concerto for Piano & Orchestra. Recorded Brekalo, Servenikas, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra (GMCD 7381, 2012)

² As quoted in *Music and Politics, Collected Writings 1953-1981* (London: Faber & Faber, 1982)

³ Commonly quoted, e.g. *Healing the Rift* Ivan Hewett (Continuum, 2003) p.66

⁴ Peter Fribbins: String Quartet No.1 'I Have the Serpent Brought'. Recorded Allegri Quartet (GMCD 7343, 2010)

⁵ *In Bluebeard's Castle* (Steiner, 1971)

BD: As you say, the *Piano Concerto* is prefaced with lines by the Persian Omar Khayyám (1048-1131) as translated by FitzGerald. To what extent did this external feature impact your creative decision-making processes?

PF: The idea of the human continuum, for good or bad, is of course also very much part of the Sufi philosophy, its art and poetry, and is something that similarly resonates strongly in my music – albeit in a western European context – music which also seeks to be part of a tradition, a stylistic inheritance and continuum. The poem's lines brought something of that sense of continuum more strongly into my consciousness, so the sense of unending journey, the unstoppable inevitability of the progress of the contrapuntal writing of the concerto's opening, and indeed the length and shape of the first movement's twelve-minute span, all derive from the intractable resonances of those lines, and particularly: 'Lift not thy hands to It for help – for It rolls impotently on as Thou or I'.

BD: Your scoring in the *Piano Concerto* (double wind and reduced strings: 8,7,6,5,3) would seem to indicate a concern for clarity and balance. Was such a reduction in forces inhibiting, and were your musical aesthetics set in new directions here?

PF: My main interests in using this orchestration were twofold. Firstly, an awareness that all too often in the 'great' piano concertos of the past the piano is swamped by the orchestra, especially in its middle register, and I wanted to create more of a 'concertante' relationship in which the piano, and the individuality of the performer, could be heard clearly in the performance, rather than the kind of 'duel to the death', which you sometimes seem to get between soloist and performer in concertos in the 19th-century tradition.

Secondly, I suppose a personal challenge, which in a sense was a deliberate critique of the modernist tradition that is central to the generation of composers who come before me, was: could I write a large orchestral work that still had contemporary value and resonance without the mid to late 20th-century extended techniques, instrumental doublings (e.g. bass or Eb clarinets, alto flute, cor anglais, etc.), or colouristic extensions to the traditional instrumental pallet (e.g. multiphonics, sound effects, unusual percussion instruments), which form so much a part of the contemporary compositional sound world.

BD: So you distrust effects, colouristic techniques, extended techniques, etc., that take the musical material away from what you consider the more valid processes of melody, harmony, counterpoint? Intriguingly, your position here would seem to contradict Christopher Dromey's 'neomodernist' theory, if I read it correctly.⁶

PF: Not entirely, since I still feel there is great excitement, colour and energy to be gained from the use of some of the modernist mid 20th-century techniques. But I do find, at least in my own work, that they seem insufficient to carry and articulate the meaning and expression that I am seeking. Let me return to Lachenmann again: in 1999, I went to see him in Dresden, and he seemed, momentarily, quite confused by my work, since its reliance on some of the older techniques was obviously so far from his own aesthetic. At that time, I deliberately sought to meet composers who would challenge me in some way, or provoke my thinking, just so I could resolve, in my own mind, that my creative path was the right one. Contradicting the rather severe image that he often seems to have in the musical literature, I have to say I found him to be respectful, urbane, insightful and supportive, and he seemed to make no particular claims for his own modernist path. Indeed, he was complimentary of my

⁶ Christopher Dromey, *Prospects for Neomodernism in the Music of Matthew Taylor and Peter Fribbins* (International Journal of Contemporary Composition, Vol. 7: 2013).

own work, and then asked me, quite directly, why I had come to see him. I said I had an interest in incorporating greater colour and extended technique in my music, and that his expertise in this domain was well known, and he commented: 'Peter, extended techniques are dead.' He suggested I would be better back in England refining my own path, working through, and from within, my own tradition. He was also very positive about the burgeoning new music scene in Britain in the 1990s. This became, curiously, one of the most positive and affirmative meetings of my musical creative life.

BD: Surely this is closer to something that defines your music and aesthetics, and especially the use of tonality. What might the justifications be of renewing a tonal system that was dismantled at the beginning of the 20th century? Are there examples in history of such renovation? Do you consider elements such as colour or extended techniques to not have sufficient weight to carry musical semantics? It all seems somehow to be underpinned by a belief that functional tonality needs to be reinstated.

PF: I don't feel that functional tonality needs reinstatement, since it never disappeared. In the mid 20th century, as diatonic tonality mostly disappeared from western art music, it emerged even more strongly in popular music, and arguably to a much larger audience. Some of the more positive effects of post-modernism in art music, I think, derive from popular music (although superficiality has been an unwelcome by-product too). Its potency can hardly be ignored, and one of the interesting features of the popular music canon is that an almost limitless variety is achieved through diatonic tonality via the personality and personal signature of the artist.

I should also say that in my own work I came to the classical tradition only through personal discovery at the age of 11 or 12, after having been brought up in a British household in the 1970s in which popular music was all that was played. So tonality was everywhere around me, with its clear expressive power. Then when I studied composition at the Royal Academy of Music in London in the late 1980s, the use of tonality, or at least extended tonality of my own music, implied something of a provocative, even polemical act: that is to say, in contrast to many of the stylistic orthodoxies of the mid-late 20th-century lingua-franca in western classical music, musical content – melodies themes, ideas, harmonies, counterpoint and discourse – could *still* be centrally important, relevant and potent in our time, and that colour could be a secondary resource. In a sense, this is perhaps one of the most 'original' aspects of my work, although it is doubtless not immediately obvious.

In musicology, the issue continues to have great resonance, but increasingly there is work supporting and validating this approach. The book 'Reviving the Muse: Essays after Modernism' edited by Peter Davison, is one such excellent text.⁷ Peter also commissioned my 'Aquarelle' for piano to celebrate the 150th anniversary of Debussy's birth in 2012.⁸ There is also much to admire in John Borstlap's recent book in which he discusses the 'renaissance' of tonality in new music: 'The Classical Revolution: Thoughts on New Music in the 21st Century.'⁹ About my own work, John has recently commented: 'This music is beautiful, strong, and highly original. Especially the 'Zong Affair' I liked much (crazy title!) – that is an extraordinary work. Also the cello and piano piece 'that which echoes...' is very original and strange, and full of invention (2013).

⁷ Claridge Press, 2001

⁸ Peter Fribbins: *Aquarelle*. Premiered Liverpool, England, 2012; Published Music Haven, 2012

⁹ Scarecrow Press, 2012

BD: In his article on your work, Christopher Dromey writes about your innate desire for the ‘connoisseurship of elaborating things and making things rather opulent and beautiful’?¹⁰ Was this difficult to achieve in the *Piano Concerto* given its fairly limited orchestral resources?

PF: Any achieved opulence and beauty in the work therefore comes, I would suggest, more through manipulation and treatment of the musical themes and materials, e.g., through certain textures, figurations, or elaboration of the material, rather than in any approaches that might disturb or undermine the balance of sonorities or instrumental voices. In this way, I suspect my interest in elaboration as an expressive tool places me outside of the earlier mainstream English tradition of composers like Alwyn, Britten, Rawsthorne, et al., with their tendency to strip away anything not vital to the clarity and purpose of the musical line. My approach is the opposite, and perhaps more European in influence (although perhaps nearer to Tippett if I had to suggest a fellow English counterpart). Of British composers from my own generation, I suppose there are others who tend to be more elaborate in use of textures, but through the combination of the way I use musical gesture and extended tonality, I think my music sounds very different.

BD: Your musical aesthetics may come under the rubric of ‘maximalised Romanticism’.¹¹ Your perspective is therefore one that directly engages with the formal and gestural elements of functional tonality. Pärt, Rihm, Rochberg, late Penderecki all renovate the past while maintaining close associations with its structural elements. Ligeti has rejected approaches that look back to previous styles:

We are now standing before the ruins of this modern music...I can see the crisis in present-day composition: atonal writing and everything that followed - serial music and other consequences of the avant-gardism of the 1960s. We have reached a dead end! And it's just the same with that other idea, returning to modality or tonality and writing in earlier music styles - neo-Vivaldi or neo-Mahler - as Arvo Pärt or John Adams do...'¹²

How have you solved the issue of approaching the past while managing, in your own words, ‘contemporary resonance and relevance’? In what specific ways do you think that your accommodation to modernism, which, at the same time incorporates and refers to old musical style, gestures, meaning and discourse, has brought something new to your compositional practice and thus to our potential for seeing the past differently?

PF: Each generation constructs the present by re-interpreting the past. Obviously Ligeti’s past (born in Hungary in 1923), is very different from my past (born in London in 1969), so we were inevitably led down different paths and to different ways of engaging with tradition. The generation before Ligeti brought the world to its knees through the destruction of the second world war, so it is perhaps inevitable that composers of his generation would similarly reject or move away from the musical and cultural values and orthodoxies that led the world to that crisis, and which affected their own lives in such a profound and destructive way, or at least they ended up with a very particular relationship to that culture. However, coming at least a whole generation after that, my generation of composers seems able to see the past in a very different way, perhaps with another perspective, and of course not necessarily connecting things up so negatively.

¹⁰ Christopher Dromey, *ibid.*

¹¹ Christopher Dromey, *ibid.*

¹² Marina Lobanova, *György Ligeti: Style, Ideas, Poetics* (Berlin: Verlag Ernst Kuhn, 2002), p.362

In this way, I feel the 19th-century musical tradition up to c.1920 more remotely and generally positively, whereas I tend to see much of mid 20th-century modernism as problematic: sometimes very exciting and liberating, but at the same time somewhat alienating for audiences, and at its worst obscure, formulaic, grey, impersonal and inexpressive. My relative comfort with the 19th-century musical tradition means therefore that I can incorporate elements of this language into my own musical style in a potentially more equivocal, balanced manner whereas a composer who was born at the end of that epoch might well find that more difficult.

I also acknowledge that, in terms of the western musical tradition, 19th-century music represents an astonishing aesthetic human achievement, and one that, crucially, still speaks to audiences in the concert hall, and to me too. For these reasons, I think I am able instinctively to adopt and adapt old 19th- (and late 18th)-century forms into my own musical language, albeit coloured with plentiful 20th-century modernist techniques, especially devices of rhythmic variety and complexity (which in my view is one of the most important expressive resources developed in 20th-century music), and dissonant counterpoint (especially in my own music devices such as melodic motion in parallel minor 9^{ths}), which through elaboration can usefully morph into expressive and dramatic textures.

BD: In *Dances and Laments*¹³, the very starkness of the form (solo violin and cello) must have had a profound impact on your compositional approach. In what ways did the strict parameters of the medium impact your creative decision-making processes?

PF: One of the main issues to be solved was in maintaining musical textures and the narrative structure through the whole work (something I'm always keen to achieve, since it offers psychological shape and drama), without having being able to bring in other colours and instrumental resources – hence quite fundamental issues, such as allowing one of the instruments to take a short break without the music collapsing. Strategies here included double and triple string stopping, to allow a contrapuntal discourse to continue in only one instrument, and allow 'active' silences, in which the psychological motion of the music continues, even though there is no external sound.

BD: Did such restricted means redirect an established and stable compositional stance? If *Dances and Laments* allowed you to obtain new insights into your own compositional processes, how were such insights creatively articulated?

PF: Yes, but perhaps more 'adapt' than 'redirect' – one of the results was in having five short linked movements, rather than say three longer ones, so I could replace the changing of timbre or colour, as one would do in a piece with greater instrumental resource, with the motific and character change of a new movement. This was the first time I had used a set of miniatures as a structural device for more than twenty years (since my wind quintet *In Xanadu* in the early 1990s), but it provided just the solution I required to make the music work. The combined effect of my slightly modified instrumental writing together with the different formal approach made the work more concentrated, more focused and somewhat ascetic: in other words, the practical proof that 'valid and complex forms can emerge when grand narratives are not possible or credible' (Jonathan Impett, 2013).

BD: *Dances and Laments* brings up the issue of past forms again and the means by which you recalibrate them. Obvious examples of such renovation would be Ligeti's 'lamento'

¹³ Peter Fribbins: *Dances & Laments*, for Violin & Cello. Recorded Graffin & Demarquette (GMCD 7397, 2013)

signature, or Britten's reverse variation forms, or both composers' reworking of the passacaglia genre, for example. To what extent did the history of either form impact your choices and in what new ways did your composition and juxtaposition shed new light on these forms?

PF: Certainly variation and passacaglia (and chaconne) are all forms that I love, and also, as you imply, later composers who modify or adapt these (e.g. Debussy's variation approach), and the idea of perpetual variation is something I increasingly use in my work to obtain organicism, structural coherence, and maintain focus and tension. These are therefore technical practical strategies as well as resonances from earlier practice, which in my own work hark back as far as Henry Purcell in the 1680s.

BD: *Dances and Laments* was premiered in St Nazaire, France, in an abandoned wartime Nazi submarine base, which constitutes the town's main auditorium, to what extent did your knowledge of the initial performance space direct your choices in relation to both form and content?

PF: To be frank, I didn't know this was to be the performance venue when I composed the work. However, I did know the violinist Philippe Graffin, and his playing, and that certainly informed my writing. His playing is expressive and characterful, but also sometimes unpredictable and impulsive (in a positive and exciting way), and even 'edgy'. I am quite sure this meant that certain sections and movements became more extended and developed than others. Writing for a person rather than just an instrument I always find much more satisfying.

BD: Interesting: can you be more specific? Can connections be made between your relationship to, understanding of, and acknowledgement of this performer's 'signature' and your aesthetic as a composer? Are there 19th-century precedents, particularly in relation to the notion of the 'performer' that developed in the 19th century?

PF: Yes, I think so: I think the way I have forged fruitful artistic relationships with certain performers is very much in that tradition. I know you might like me to be more precise, but I think I can't go any further here, since I feel it would be unfair to Philippe: he still regularly performs the work, so any comments might well be limiting or give undue weight to something in his reading or interpretation – I never like getting in the way of performers and their own aesthetic relationship to the music. Furthermore, I think more specific commentary in this area might also unbalance the way the listener hears the piece, or listens to Philippe's recent CD recording of the piece – by which I mean the listener's freedom to hear my music, and the unfettering of their own imagination and aural landscape, is a key part of my aesthetic, and I suppose harks back to great classical ideals, especially via the lineage of J.S. Bach, Mozart, Schubert, Brahms, and articulated so eloquently by Hanslick, that music is (or can be) elevated more artistically when what is being expressed is indeterminate.¹⁴

BD: This does seem to link your music to more 19th-century aesthetic and philosophical ideas: can you say more about this?

PF: Well it does I suppose, but only as a starting point: by which I mean I admire 19th-century culture, its expressive power, and also, perhaps crucially, its relative expressive and spiritual ambition compared to much of the intellectual feebleness and vacuity of post-modernism. At the same time, I don't think I'm a 'reactionary' – after all I was born in the late 20th century and am keenly interested in its artistic and philosophical concepts and ideas, indeed of the

¹⁴ Vom Musikalisch-Schönen [On the Musically Beautiful] (E. Hanslick:1854/1885)

ideas of my time. But going back to Hanslick and others, surely music's linguistic and communicative imprecision is its key expressive strength: not only does it allow musical expression to go beyond utilitarian language, but at its best it conjures a spiritual potential or connection, freeing us from the prison of rational thought and human limitation. Or to go further – into more metaphysical realms, through Jung's work, harking back to our earlier Sufi discussion perhaps, and on to Buddhism and religious belief – towards the tantalising possibility of eliminating 'samsara' and momentarily supporting some sort of personal spiritual enlightenment. At its best, music can neutralise the limitations of dualism and offer us the ultimate gift or state of monism – this is, I admit, one of the goals of my music.

BD: *The Zong Affair*¹⁵ is your response to Turner's painting *The Slave Ship*. The tradition of composers engaging with painting has been a seminal aspect of the modernist movement. We just have to think of Feldman (after Rothko) and Gerald Barry and Kevin Volans (after American abstract expressionism in general: Rothko, Pollock, de Kooning, Barnett Newman, Philip Guston). These composers have in many cases adopted compositional approaches where, as in photography, music is constructed within frames and unfolded as a series of compartmentalized 'moments'. However, your musical aesthetics would seem to circumvent such modernist development and reach back to examples such as *Pictures at an Exhibition* or the programmatic scene-painting of the late Romantics. Where do you position yourself in this context?

PF: I have always been fascinated in the extra-musical implications of music: dance and physical movement in Stravinsky, nature and natural phenomena in Debussy, the metaphysical in late Beethoven, the spiritual in Messiaen. Indeed, it seems to me that the best music is never 'about' music, but either consciously or unconsciously draws upon external foci, and I would like to think that my piece sits broadly in that tradition. This links strongly to the comments I made earlier about the spiritual journey that comes via the best music: the use of some external presence or reference in the music, for me, enables this kind of transformative process.

BD: What happens to your compositional processes when a visual work is established from the beginning as a central theme for your work? If bouncing off a visual artifact impacts your creative decision-making processes, how does this recalibrate your compositional semantics and syntax?

PF: Mine is not a musical narrative of the painting, and I suppose therefore my approach is different to Mussorsky's 'Pictures' and other 19th-century approaches: instead I use the painting as a focus to access a very particular musical sound world and musical materials. I suppose in this way there is a sort of synesthetic relationship with the picture, or at least – elaborating upon my view that the best music always conjures and relates to something 'beyond' itself – that the music can be a sort of aural alchemy to join together things. This view of things is key in my work generally, that everything can be holistically joined in some way, and the aesthetic of the music, at its best, enables a particular view, experience or insight that intrinsically cannot be separated (hence, I use 'alchemy' in the old experiential and metaphysical sense, as a way of experiencing and feeling the world in the pre-scientific rational Newtonian universe). I suppose there are also some links to the concept of

¹⁵ Peter Fribbins: *The Zong Affair* for mixed septet. Recorded Turner Ensemble (GMCD 7397, 2013)

ekphrasis, and I'm aware of your own interesting work on 'aural ekphrasis', especially with your piece *Scenes from Crow* after the work of Ted Hughes.¹⁶

BD: Through a powerful mix of energy, movement and colour, Turner's image is clearly disturbing and deeply resonant of its theme; indeed it could very well be described as a political commentary on it. What happens to your music when you attempt to capture such powerful visual imagery? Did your close engagement with the Turner painting redirect your own work in significant ways; and if so, how were these differences articulated?

PF: I think mainly reflective in the creation of musical material and the way this was treated or incorporated by the instruments. On the face of it, these septet forces, the same that Beethoven used in his Op.20 Septet, could easily produce something equally as mellifluous: however, given the searing subject and effect of the painting, I start with a contemporary eighteenth-century English folk song (because that somehow aesthetically, geographically and historically 'locates' the story), and then immediately 'disembody' it (via an octave displacement technique), to give a sense of the disturbing, frozen narrative of the picture.

Conveniently, this also provided a calmness that I could then dramatically undermine with dark, angular writing in the lower strings (especially double bass) in the music that followed, and screaming effects in the woodwind. Later on in the piece, a ghostly, even chilling duet develops between the viola and horn, 'framed' (a technique I first used in *A Haydn Prelude* for piano), with pedals in the violin and double bass, very high and very low, respectively, in order to give a strange context or commentary or 'presence'. There is simply no way this piece could be as it turned out without the painting casting a powerful influence on my compositional processes and decisions.

BD: Turner's painting captures the drama of a terrible event surrounding *The Zong*, a slave trading ship. When the ship ran low on water following navigational mistakes, the crew threw some of the slaves into the sea, who subsequently drowned. The slave-trading syndicate that owned the ship made claims to the insurers and when this was refused an infamous court case ensued. There are clearly profound issues around colonialism, power structures and tyranny to be drawn from the background to this painting. How did such thematic material impact your work? Did your perspective as a 'maximalised Romantic' provide you with particular aesthetic tools to capture such fraught material, after all, you did title your composition *The Zong Affair*, which brings attention directly to the background story of Turner's painting?

PF: This is a very interesting question. I suppose I am interested in politics, but not keen to allow this into my music, partly since I think it tends to make music (and art) parochial, fixed, dated, and undermines the potential articulation of broader universal and spiritual content and connection, which is surely always more important. I decided to opt for the title *The Zong Affair* because it seemed more neutral and broader than Turner's title *The Slaveship*, which seemed to bring associations that were too precise and fixed, whilst at the same time offering something intriguing. The starting point for me then, from the creative perspective, was more my artistic and aesthetic engagement as a man: passion, empathy and the human aspects of life, events and experiences. It is in this, perhaps more basic way, that I engaged with the story and the various background issues.

In terms of musical technical devices utilised, in the context of my engagement with the painting, I used all the devices I could at my disposal, including 19th-century rhetorical ones, as well as more colouristic 20th-century ones. For me, one of the key aspects of being a

¹⁶ Benjamin Dwyer: 'Scenes from Crow' for large amplified ensemble, tape and video (2009)

composer in the 21st century is not that one is undermined through everything having been done before (even though it doubtless has), but that we are able to readily access and plunder all those tried and tested devices from more than a millennium, and utilise these for our expressive use. My main task is to ensure I pick wisely in order to make the best effect, and that I am true to my own artistic vision and voice.

BD: *The Zong Affair* was commissioned by the Turner Ensemble, and so we can see that both the medium and theme of the work was, to a certain extent, prescribed for you. In what way did these prescriptions impact your compositional process? Is there a secondary debate here about protection of individual voice?

PF: There may well be an issue here I suppose, connected to the freedom of the artist in being able to make their own choices, but I have to say that these sorts of imposed situations I usually enjoy, since they can also represent challenges which I relish in solving, and whose restrictions, in turn, can provide a useful framework for expressive and dramatic opportunity, either timbral or architectural.

BD: *A Haydn Prelude*¹⁷ was written to celebrate the 70th birthday of the leading British composer and pianist, John McCabe. Apart from his prominence as a composer, McCabe also made the first ever complete recording of Haydn's piano sonatas in the 1980s, so it is easy to see the connections here to Haydn. Were there specific aspects of his recordings and what he brought to his interpretations that were significant to you as a composer? Did McCabe's own close compositional relationship to Haydn (*Variations*, for example) point you in certain direction?

PF: I wasn't thinking of specific aspects of John's own creative engagement with Haydn in particular, but a more generalised homage I suppose, to both John McCabe and Haydn, with the sense that generation after generation have found something meaningful and personal in Haydn and those late 18th / early 19th century Austro-Hapsburg composers, and that I could too.

BD: The use of quotations from two of Haydn's piano sonatas into your own score obviously provided you with the opportunity to directly engage with this most classical of composers. You talk about the work in terms of 'poetic contextualisation'; what new compositional processes were brought to bear in the cross-fertilization of differentiated musical 'signatures' (yours, Haydn's, perhaps also McCabe's)? What were the specific creative decision-making processes that facilitated you to mutually present and somehow collaborate and speak with these disparate voices on a number of simultaneous levels?

In what way did you modify your style and alter the balance of constituent elements in order to make these implicit references to old musical gestures, meaning and discourse, suddenly more 'explicit' and what strategies did you employ to preserve your own distinctive personal musical voice?

PF: Given the traditional formal musical discourse of the original Haydn material, and its highly metrical dance-like character, I ensured the material I composed around it was very different to create a sort of 'frame', and expressive commentary. So my music was rhythmically more fluid, almost atemporal, in contrast to the strictly measured metre of the Haydn source. My music was also harmonically more complex, and non-diatonic to contrast with the diatonicism of the source material; and it exploited different registers, deliberately avoiding the register of the Haydn quotations.

¹⁷ Peter Fribbins: *A Haydn Prelude* for piano solo. Recorded Anthony Hewitt (GMCD 7381, 2012)

The use of opposites in this way seemed to create an interesting overall sound world and multi-dimensional structure. Yet at the same time, the musical notes of my own material were chosen not to just be different, but to be complementary and resonate with the Haydn. For instance, where the first Haydn source is in B major, I elected to 'preludise' it with a much more fluid sound world around C, and incorporating falling, wistful musical gestures, not far away, in a sense, from the romantic post-Wagnerian language of late 19th century German music – the music that eventually developed from Haydn and his contemporaries in the 1st Viennese School. At the same time, I suppose I also instinctively incorporate my own personal distillation of the English filter of this German romanticism, via the voicings and elegiac gestures of Parry, Elgar and later British composer leading up to McCabe. And more besides, too: the porous and layered nature of the musical references brought to bear, some more tangential and fleeting than others, and filtered through my own voice, would be highly complex and lengthy to articulate exhaustively. And one shouldn't forget that Haydn's own work also represented, in his time, its own type of 'post-modernist' commentary and distillation of earlier style and practice, especially the various inherited baroque traditions. So the layers, inherent tropes, palimpsests become manifest, kaleidoscopic even.

BD: In what specific ways do you think that *A Haydn Prelude* constitutes a new type of music? Do you think that these strategies constitute a new way to engage with the past?

PF: Potentially so. Given the specific Haydn sources, some of the historical resonances implicit in my own musical style were suddenly brought much nearer to a real historical source, the effect being (for want of a better term) somewhat eerie, as the music seems to phase in and out of historical focus. There are certainly composers in the past who have tried techniques that are not dissimilar, for example Berio, Tippett, Schnittke, but the approach in their work, coming from a more central 'modernist' 20th-century tradition, was much more polarised in relation to the context around real or implied historical sources. My own approach seems more organic and integrated with my own personal style and voice, and thus, I would suggest, more 21st century, potentially more British or English in aesthetic outlook, and certainly of my generation.

BD: You suggest that *A Haydn Prelude* provides a useful 'distilled' example of your distinctive compositional voice and approach, which has been developed over the last twenty years. Could you offer a precise definition of what constitutes your signature as a composer? Your work has been described as 'neomodernist' and as a type of 'maximalised Romanticism', terms that seem themselves to be somewhat at variance with each other. Thus, as a composer that consciously engages with the past, what ultimately defines your relationship to it? Speaking from a 21st-century perspective that has already seen every artistic revolution, how do you see your music as a vital and relevant artistic statement?

PF: Is a composer ever in the best position to address this question about their work, I wonder. Ethically, I think this is problematic, since a composer cannot really ever have an appropriately balanced perspective on their own work, especially in summing up their own aesthetic contribution. Secondly the question, by definition, is surely better addressed by the receiver, i.e. an insightful ['inhearful'?] listener. I can however probably offer some meaningful insights from 'inside' the piece, and in this context, and to sum up, I am aware that the time and place in which I work has allowed me to have some perspective on the past, especially on 19th-century music, and enabled me to make some of those techniques my own, articulated via my own voice, and directed and reflected through some of the modernist 20th-century techniques that I more immediately inherit from the generation of my parents.

Benjamin Dwyer & Peter Fribbins, October 2013