Spinning Gears

Beginning this piece, I had the idea of taking a theme or fragment of a piece of music, and slowly transforming it stage by stage into something of an entirely different character, form or genre. It was important to me that the process be gradual, allowing for an audible narrative and ensuring that a prospective listener would be able to trace the changes, but also heading towards the second theme with conviction, such that each step served its purpose within the transformation process.

This concept came as the product of a number of interests and ambitions I developed after research into several aspects of twentieth century music. Foremost was the process-based music of composers of the 1960s: after being introduced to the work and writings of Steve Reich during my first year of undergraduate study, the role and value of the 'process' in music was something that I reflected on for some time. Whilst Reich himself quickly moved on from this concept, his publication 'Music as a Gradual Process' (Reich 2002, p. 34) gave me much to consider, particularly what function a piece music that results from a form of writing in which the potential for personal expression has been removed might have:

> The use of hidden structural devices in music never appealed to me. Even when all the cards are on the table and everyone hears what is gradually happening in a musical process, there are still enough mysteries to satisfy all. These mysteries are the impersonal, unintended, psychoacoustic by-products of the intended process (Reich 2002, p. 35).

I found in the end that these kinds of self-contained works, in which the composer is no more privy to events that may unfold within a piece than the audience is, were not of a great deal of compositional interest to me. The kind of process that I had in mind was more akin to the

early ensemble works of Reich's contemporary Philip Glass, in which a sequence of events unfold with a similar degree of inevitability but both composer and performer has more creative flexibility. In *Music in Fifths*, the subject is a five-note scalic fragment played in fifths which undergoes a lengthy additive rhythmic transformation. It was here that I found a means of realising my own concept. The process itself aside, the relentlessness of the piece appealed to me, and something of the absence of any form of tempo or timbral change enhances the power of the feeling of a march towards the end result. Whereas in a piece such as *Pendulum Music* by Steve Reich the process is set up and then unfolds in time, Glass' use of cells which are to be repeated an indefinite number of times hands over control to performers, and, importantly for what I had in mind, makes the stages of transformation more explicit. I discovered that Reich's *Four Organs* was of a similar character, also treating a limited set of material (six pitches in this case) with additive rhythms. Reich's instruction to players in his score that organs should be as 'simple as possible', of a similar timbre and with 'identical stops that will produce a clear tone without excess shrill high frequencies with no vibrato whatsoever' (Reich 1969) was a reminder that the effects of variation in timbre and texture in music of this kind can direct attention away from the rhythmic or harmonic events which are intended to be the focus of the piece. With this in mind, I would later use dynamic contrast sparingly, beginning the piece *sempre mezzo forte* and increasing in volume only at the emergence of the second theme.

With a concept to hand and an idea of how the piece should feel and sound, I set to work on the material. My work was halted somewhat after discussing the idea with my tutor, who raised some fascinating points and forced me to ask myself questions about it that had previously not crossed my mind. My initial plan had been the pseudo-political aim of taking either one or two quotations that possessed a degree of extra-musical associations at least partially opposed in some way, and demonstrating that there was a path which could be trod between them, however long-winded or indirect it may be. After reflecting on this, I realised that any quotation or quotations I took would immediately bring with it an implied sense of

purpose in its being there, which would make ambiguity difficult. I believe that this could be a useful tool if it were being used to make a carefully considered statement, but in the absence of having anything definitive to say I felt that the result would have been careless and unconvincing. I learned after completing my piece that Louis Andriessen had done this very thing in his 1971 work *Volkslied*, beginning with the Dutch national anthem and transforming it into the communist anthem 'De Internationale' through varied repetition (Adlington 2013, p. 271). Andriessen's motives are coherent, and everything from the piece's open instrumentation requiring only that musicians be able to read music in order to perform the piece to the selection of material serve his purpose. I had no such clarity of ambition, and therefore reviewed my choice and decided against using quotation.

The next point for me to consider was the relationship between my two themes: through gentle stress testing of my concept, my tutor revealed that simply having two opposing themes at each end of the piece was not as straightforward as it may at first seem. I would have to consider, for example, what type of journey I would be making – would the second theme act gravitationally, pulling the first toward it, in which case the implication would be that theme one is subordinate, or would there be some kind or middle point between the two which serves as a pivot of sorts. One of our discussions turned to landscapes, in which it was pointed out to me that I may have something to gain by considering the way in which natural structures are formed over time, and from this I realised that the analogy of a gravitational force provided the piece with a purpose and direction. I wished to avoid a sense that the first theme was to be somehow resolved by the second, however, and decided on a scheme of deconstructing the opening material and then building the second from its ashes, so to speak.

With these issues considered, I turned my attention to writing for the instrument that I had selected – the viola. Since I intended a very clear thematic focus, I avoided the temptation of exploring too much of the instrument's capabilities, but felt it sensible to make use of its unique capabilities in some form. To assist in this regard, I turned to a number of

compositions which had been recommended to me, notably the fourth movement of Paul Hindemith's Solo Viola Sonata Op. 25 no. 1, and the viola arrangement of Arvo Pärt's *Fratres*. The former makes much use of the instrument's open C string, the sound of which I was most attracted to, but also immediately highlighted the potential for development that an ostinato-based theme would give me. From the latter, I gained a sense of the instrument's capabilities, using the demands placed on a performer by the piece's flurries of arpeggiated chord sequences which pervade the piece from the opening bars as a kind of upper limit to what I could hope to achieve. After much thought and experimentation, I decided on my first theme:

This melodically simple but rhythmically irregular phrase perfectly captured the sound and feeling that I had envisaged, and contrasted sufficiently for my purposes with what I selected as my second theme:

In the transformation process I tackled rhythm first, augmenting to a point of common denomination between the two and then reordering as necessary. With the expansion complete, a short bridge bar precedes the beginning of pitch shuffling in bar 34, after which the music heads towards a convergence of rhythm and pitch at bar 120. I wanted the second theme to emerge in its final form with a sense of the misshapen pieces of the development process locking into place, and my way of achieving of this was to have it first appear in a slightly magnified form. Following an increase in tempo, doubled notes are removed, and the result is played *fortissimo maestoso* to mark the ending in a grand fashion.

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