

Plight

I was pleased with the outcome of my solo viola work, *Spinning Gears*, composed in 2016, and wanted to return to the instrument to explore its capabilities further. Whilst the concept and process I devised for *Spinning Gears* provided much compositional potential, I felt that my writing lacked ambitiousness, and my aim was to compose a more idiomatic piece. Turning to the works that served as starting point for my initial research into the viola's capabilities, I noticed immediately that the instrument's range provided more opportunity for a composer than I had taken advantage of, and from reappraising Arvo Pärt's *Fratres* (1977) and Paul Hindemith's *Viola Sonata Op. 25 No. 1* (1923), learned of its capability for arpeggiation and bariolage bowing. I decided that the first aim for my next piece would be to develop a sound that would allow me to make the instrument sound as large as possible, and quickly found that I could achieve this through a combination of employing its full range and making use of the bow's ability to rapidly alternate between registers.

As I approached the particulars of the piece, I began considering the aspects of *Spinning Gears*—in which a short theme is transformed into a second, unrelated theme by way of rhythmic and pitch-shuffling processes—that I had been pleased with. I decided that there was much still to be explored in the musical relationship between unrelated, even opposed, forces, and settled on extending this concept. My studies elsewhere played a role in this decision. As a result of taking various modules in which I was able to gain a familiarity with the nineteenth-century Classical canon during my degree studies, I had previously come to possess a fairly reductionist view of the history of musical ideas. It was my belief that with the advent of sonata form, musical forms that had existed prior to the mid-to-late eighteenth

century had been combined to give a structure that provided the greatest possible means of expression in instrumental music, after which musicians began to search for alternate means of ordering sound. Sonata form, as I understood it, was revolutionary due to the opportunities for allowing contrasting musical ideas to be successfully integrated and reconciled it provided both composers and listeners with. In extending my understanding of music history, however, I was forced to reconsider this view. The 'striking of an optimum balance between conflicting ideals' that Charles Rosen described as the source of the Classical style¹⁵ could be said to occur in Bach's use of *ritornello*, for example, as in the *Sinfonia* to BWV 18 where attempts at the reconciliation of an imperfect, segmentable *ritornello* occur throughout.¹⁶ It seemed that the notion of contrast and reconciliation was not as unique to the Classical and Romantic style as I had assumed. I learned that the Surrealists in the medium of visual arts even employed juxtaposition as a means of forcing the viewer into considering the connection between two or more unrelated or opposed images, and reflected upon the fact that even the simple act of placing two objects or ideas alongside one another can establish a relationship between them.¹⁷ I decided that I would base my piece on this thought and any implications that it may hold for musical form, and returned to *Spinning Gears*' opposing musical-ideas concept.

My previous research had enlightened me to the work of Danish composer Per Nørgård and the 'infinity' series upon which much of his work is based. The

¹⁵ Charles Rosen, *The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven*, New Edition (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), p. 43.

¹⁶ Laurence Dreyfus, *Bach and the Patterns of Invention* (London: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 53–56.

¹⁷ Louise Tythacott, *Surrealism and the Exotic* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 67; James Clifford, 'On Ethnographic Surrealism', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 23, no. 4 (October 1981), p. 540.

series, discovered by the composer in 1959, allows a series of pitches that can be expanded to infinity to be extracted from any two notes. A piece such as *Voyage into the Golden Screen* (1969), for example, contains a melodic line made up the first 1,024 of a series extracted from the notes A and A sharp, whilst *Symphony No. 3* (1975) is built in its entirety upon many of the series' more interesting features, such as the self-similarity and implied tonal hierarchies that can be observed within it through basic manipulation.¹⁸ In order for juxtaposition to be apparent to the listener in my piece, the contrasting ideas this time would need to be more forceful, and rather than settling for opposing thematic ideas, aimed to create a structure that was itself defined by an incongruity of style, process or objective. Earlier in the year I composed a short percussion piece in which I experimented with simultaneous processes, and saw potential in this concept for giving me grounds to experiment with the infinity series. I assessed my possibilities for approaching the series broadly as being either one based in a mechanical expansion of its values, or one involving a creative process based on a selection of its pitches, and settled on the idea of a juxtaposition of processes, where these two methods are pitted against each other. Passages that are freely composed and based on a small section of the series would be interrupted by a mechanical expansion toward infinity, in a collision not just of tonality but in my role as composer. With this in mind, I settled on the title 'Plight', and conceived of the piece as comprising some kind of struggle between two opposing forces.

¹⁸ Erling Kullberg, 'Voyage into the Golden Screen', *pernoergaard.dk* [Webpage]. Available at: <http://www.pernoergaard.dk/eng/udvalgte/111.html> (Accessed 4th May 2017); Erling Kullberg, 'Symphony No. 3', *pernoergaard.dk* [Webpage]. Available at: <http://www.pernoergaard.dk/eng/udvalgte/140.html> (Accessed 4th May 2017).

Integral to the infinity series is the choice made for its first two notes, as every combination of two notes yields its own unique series.¹⁹ I wanted to highlight the importance of this choice and the remarkable notion that a single decision can have implications that continue to infinity. At the opening of Symphony No. 3, Nørgård similarly draws attention to these facts by beginning with a single note, from which the activity of the rest of the work spawns.²⁰ To make the implication that placing any two notes next to one another represents a choice with far-reaching consequences more explicit, I wanted to begin with a note that was as close to a pure fundamental as was possible, and thus the opening bars contain a unison G played *sul tasto* in order to inhibit its production of overtones and produce a sound as close to a singularity as is possible (Example 1).²¹ As the performer *glissandos* into a minor-second interval, giving the notes G and A flat, and bowing position is returned to the conventional position, the first two notes of the series are determined. I imagined this as a ‘disruption’ to the unison, and with the introduction of this new note the events of the piece are set in motion. I intended to incorporate bowing position as an integral component in the development of the piece, and, since relying on text instructions would have taken up considerable space in my score, included an additional staff that could provide instructions in a manner that the eye could more easily trace. Composer Garth Knox’s solo viola studies suite *Viola Spaces* (2009), particularly number eight, *Up, Down, Sideways, Round*, provided insight into the creative ways in which non-static bowing positions can be employed, and I have

¹⁹ Jørgen Mortensen, ‘Introduction’, *pernoergaard.dk* [Webpage]. Available at:

<http://www.pernoergaard.dk/eng/strukturer/uendelig/uintro.html> (Accessed 4th May 2017).

²⁰ Erling Kulberg, ‘Symphony No. 31st Movement: “Outer Movement”’, *pernoergaard.dk* [Webpage]. Available at: <http://www.pernoergaard.dk/eng/udvalgte/140a.html> (Accessed 4th May 2017).

²¹ Ertuğrul Sevsay, *The Cambridge Guide to Orchestration* [eBook], (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), Chapter 1: String Instruments.

Example 1: *Plight* bb. 1–7.

Musical score for Example 1, *Plight* bb. 1–7. The score is written on a single staff with a 3/8 time signature. It is divided into two sections. The first section is marked *mp delicato* and *sul III, IV*. The second section is marked *poco agitato* and includes *poco vib.* (indicated by a wavy line) and *gliss. non vib.* (indicated by a dashed line).

Example 2: Pitches 1–6 of infinity series based on G and A flat, and Olivier Messiaen's mode of limited transposition no. 4 based on G.

Two staves of musical notation showing pitch series. The first staff shows a sequence of six notes: G, A-flat, B-sharp, C, D, E-flat. The second staff shows a sequence of six notes: G, A-flat, B-sharp, C, D, E-flat, with a sharp sign above the final note.

Example 3: Opening phrase of section one.

Musical score for Example 3, opening phrase of section one. The score is written on a single staff with a 3/4 time signature and a key signature of one flat. It features a melodic line with a wavy line above it, a triplet of notes, and dynamic markings *mf* and *f*.

made use of a 'sliding' motion throughout.²² Consulting the score for Andrew Greenwald's 2010 violin composition *Sofrut* provided me with a catalogue of extended string technique notation, and from this I was able to develop my own symbol to indicate bow overpressure.²³

The first six pitches of an infinity series based on G and A flat generated using Norgard's method are shown in Example 2. These pitches are the basis of my first section, and I interpreted them as belonging to a version of Olivier Messiaen's fourth mode of limited transposition as the piece attempts to 'make sense' of the material generated by the actions of the introduction.²⁴ I sought a phrase that would allow me to bring my aim of making the viola sound as large as possible into manifestation, and found a solution in Krzysztof Penderecki's Cadenza for Solo Viola. Penderecki's writing contains several passages that span all four of the instrument's strings in rapid succession, and likewise my opening phrase makes use of the instrument's range and the bow's rhythmic capabilities (Example 3). I attended the UK premiere of Alistair Zaldua's solo bass clarinet composition *Something is Other Than it is* (2014) during my second year of study, and was fascinated by points it raised on the act of translation and the context it places potential compositional issues into²⁵. On a far smaller scale, I sought to explore the possibilities of reconfiguration and rhythmic translation, and section one comprises various transformations and permutations of

²² Garth Knox, *Viola Spaces No 8 – Up, Down, Sideways, Round – Garth Knox*, 18th January 2009. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c4y7IADJ5oc> (Accessed 15th May 2017).

²³ Andrew Greenwald, *Sofrut*, 2010. Available at: http://www.andrewgreenwald.net/scores/sofrut_done.pdf (Accessed 15th May 2017).

²⁴ Olivier Messiaen, *The Technique of My Musical Language*, trans. John Satterfield (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1956), p. 61.

²⁵ Alistair Zaldua, *The Concept of the Meta-Instrument and its Implementation in Pre-Composition* (2014). PhD thesis. Goldsmiths, University of London. Available at: https://research.gold.ac.uk/12313/1/MUS_thesis_ZalduaA_2015.pdf (Accessed 4th May 2017), pp. 105–110, 113.

the opening phrase (Example 4). At b. 44, however, the seventh note of the series, which had heretofore remained unheard, interrupts the phrase, and my second section begins to unfold. It was important that the juxtaposition between the two sections be pronounced, and as such I employed a technique that I developed during my second-year composition *Nausea* that involves interrupting a phrase at an irregular point to give the effect of it being 'cut off'. The fact that my phrase contained an acciaccatura could be exploited to this end, as placing it immediately before the notes of my second section made for a convincing interruption (Example 5).

At the appearance of the first additional note of the series, the variations of my theme increase in length as the freely-composed section attempts to resolve and fend off the expansion. I wanted to give the listener the impression that the first section was end-orientated in some way, in order that whatever process it was subject to should, in effect, remain unfinished, and as a result the variations become more uniform from b. 71 (Example 6). I wanted to remove as much compositional choice as possible from the construction of the unfolding series expansion, and recalled the progress made by Olivier Messiaen in using pitch position to determine note value in his piano etude *Mode de valeurs et d'intensites*.²⁶ In this vein, I considered what additional information the series could bequeath, and was able to derive an organisational element from the pitches themselves by using their position in relation to the first note of the series, G, to determine the number of times they are to be struck. A flat and F sharp are one step above and below G, for example, and are therefore each struck once when they appear. As notes are added to the second

²⁶ Elliot Schwartz and Daniel Godfrey, *Music Since 1945: Issues, Materials, and Literature* (Belmont: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 1993), pp. 46–47.

Example 4: Opening phrase and examples of its variants.

Three musical staves illustrating variants of an opening phrase. The first staff shows a phrase starting with a half note G4, quarter notes A4, B4, and C5, followed by a triplet of D5, E5, and F5, and ending with a quarter note G5. Dynamics range from *mf* to *f*. The second staff shows a phrase starting with a quarter note G4, quarter notes A4, B4, and C5, followed by a triplet of D5, E5, and F5, and ending with a quarter note G5. Dynamics range from *mf* to *f*. The third staff shows a phrase starting with a half note G4, quarter notes A4, B4, and C5, followed by a quarter rest, a quarter note D5, and a triplet of E5, F5, and G5. Dynamics range from *f* to *quasi marcia*.

Example 5: bb. 43–44. Placing the acciaccatura on D that is contained in the main theme before instances of the second section makes for an ‘interruption’ effect.

Slightly faster

43

Musical score for Example 5, measures 43 and 44. Measure 43 is in 2/8 time and contains a half note G4, quarter notes A4, B4, and C5. Measure 44 is in 3/8 time and contains an acciaccatura on D5 followed by quarter notes G4, A4, B4, and C5. The dynamic is *sub. mp*.

Example 6: Variations of section one become more uniform, mainly concerning a downward semiquaver-arpeggiation toward the instruments open C string during the second half of the piece.

b. 71

b. 74

b. 75

section, this systematic process contributes to the construction of an expanding passage that displaces the freely-composed material altogether in the final section.

For the struggle at the core of the piece, and as a means of accounting for the impossibility of the series' eventual destination of infinity, I had in mind something comparable in spirit to much of Brian Ferneyhough's music, in which the performer is taken beyond their capabilities by being asked to perform something that is close to

being, if not entirely, beyond human ability.²⁷ I achieved this by first expanding the series to encompass its first 54 terms, and then instructing the performer to *accelerando* past their fastest possible tempo and into an unplayable speed.

Following this, a short coda re-emphasises the two notes that initiated the piece in a subdued manner, this time played as harmonics as an antithesis of kinds to the *sul tasto* introduction. I was very pleased with the outcome, and during the work's debut performance, found that the abrupt, disjointed juxtaposition made for a somewhat acerbic experience that gave it a distinct character. I found watching a skilled performer surpassing their capabilities during the final section, in which their concentration and physical exertion were painfully apparent, incredibly stirring, and was pleased that a number of audience members were similarly moved enough to want to approach the violist and enquire about this passage. I would like to explore juxtaposition further in my future work, and develop additional ways of mimicking the effects phrases being 'cut off' through the use of conventional notation.

²⁷ Tanja Orning, 'The Ethics of Performance Practice in Complex Music After 1945', *Transformations of Musical Modernism*, ed. Erling G. Guldbrandsen and Julian Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 311.

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