

ASPECTS OF BRITISH  
MUSIC OF THE 1990S

PETER O'HAGAN

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# ASPECTS OF BRITISH MUSIC OF THE 1990s



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# Aspects of British Music of the 1990s

Edited by

PETER O'HAGAN

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**Sebastian Forbes** studied at the Royal Academy of Music and then at Cambridge University, and is Professor and Director of Music at the University of Surrey. In addition to a wide range of teaching activities (including PhD by Composition), his varied musical activities have encompassed conducting and studio production. He is principally a composer, represented by over four decades of commissioned and prize-winning works. Among recent examples are Reflections (IAO Conference, Oxford, 1998), and String Quartet No. 5 and Sonata for 15 (15 solo strings), composed with the aid of research leave funded by the AHRB (Arts and Humanities Research Board). In progress is Duo for clarinet and piano.

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**Edwin Roxburgh**’s music has been performed, broadcast and televised in many countries, most recently his Clarinet Concerto with Gervase de Peyer and the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra which the composer conducted. Commissions include the orchestral work *Montage* for the Proms in 1977, the oratorio *The Rock* for the Three Choirs Festival in 1980 and several films in the BBC’s ‘The World About Us’ television series. In 1978 he was awarded a Collard Fellowship and in 1980 he was awarded the Cobbett Medal for services to chamber music. He is currently the Associate Composer of the London Festival Orchestra. The Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and the Philharmonia are among the orchestras he has conducted. His music is published by UMP, Ricordi and Maecenas.

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# Introduction

Peter O'Hagan

This book is the product of a conference held early in 1999 at University of Surrey Roehampton. The intention was to bring together composers and academics in a forum in which issues of musical style and language could be addressed in context. The conference formed part of the final day of a series of concerts featuring British music of the last decade, in which several first performances took place, and it was rounded off by a concert given by the Arditti String Quartet devoted to music by four of the composers featured in this book – Thomas Adès, Harrison Birtwistle, James Dillon and Jonathan Harvey.

Perhaps it is a reflection of the bewildering stylistic plurality of the contemporary musical scene that the musicological certainties which categorized so much of the music of the preceding decades are increasingly challenged. Thus, Arnold Whittall's keynote address, in its subtly argued introduction to a consideration of recent music by James Dillon and Thomas Adès, called into question the pursuit of identifying stylistic influences as being, at least in part, a speculative activity. Implicit in the identification of 'influence' – and its obverse, 'originality' – is a unitary concept of musical history, which seems increasingly irrelevant to the more stylistically diverse decade on which the present volume is focused. If the decay of traditional tonality in the first decade of the century was accompanied by a shattering of the concept of stylistic progress, then it is also the case that the century's most radical figure, Schoenberg, was gradually absorbed into both romantic and neoclassical views of musical history – a process which Schoenberg did nothing to discourage in his own writings. It was the fate of his pupil, Webern, to be analysed and reinterpreted by the post-war generation in an audacious attempt both to legitimize their innovations while at the same time seeking to place their own music in a historical context. Such concerns seem strangely removed from those of many present day composers, as typified by Harrison Birtwistle's resistance to acknowledging even the background presence of Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge* in his own 'Todesfuge' during the course of an interview with Robert Adlington. Arnold Whittall's identification of allusion, as distinct from influence, as being of prime importance in much recent British music is demonstrated by the range of musical allusions he uncovers in Adès' *Arcadiana* and Dillon's Third String Quartet. The point is confirmed both by Dillon's acknowledgement in interview of the background presence of Scottish folk music and his reluctance to concede any direct

Bartókian references. As Whittall cautions in his conclusion: ‘when musicologists – analysts – come to consider the particular composition, the allusions they uncover are as much to do with their own predispositions as with those of the composer’.

These observations are particularly pertinent given the richness and diversity of allusion which is characteristic of much British music from the 1960s onwards, and which to some extent replaces the imperative of an earlier generation to seek a specifically English historical context in which to work. Thus Maxwell Davies’s appropriation of technical procedures derived from English medieval music appeared at the time to place him alongside such senior figures as Britten in his acknowledged indebtedness to Purcell’s word-setting, and Tippett’s absorption of the Elizabethan madrigal style. The violent expressionism of such works as *Eight Songs for a Mad King* appeared less disconcerting when placed in this context, despite the ironic allusions to such diverse sources as the foxtrot and the Victorian oratorio tradition. In Tippett’s music of the 1970s, allusion plays an increasingly prominent role, *The Knot Garden*, for example, teeming with references to jazz on the one hand and to Beethoven and Schubert on the other. If Maxwell Davies’s later music has shown a tendency to reclaim, on his own terms, the ground of the classical symphony and concerto, the 1970s is also a decade of more specific allusions to the German classical and romantic tradition, especially in the music of two of the most prominent emerging composers of those years, Robin Holloway and Nicholas Maw. The music of the succeeding generation of British composers has shown a continuing willingness to embrace a wide range of external sources. As Justin Connolly has pointed out,<sup>1</sup> the incorporation of elements of Schumann and Debussy in Oliver Knussen’s *Ophelia Dances*, and Mark Anthony Turnage’s allusions in *Before Dark* to Britten’s *Turn of the Screw*, are paralleled by Simon Bainbridge’s appropriation of minimalist techniques in *Concertante and Moto Perpetuo* and Jonathan Lloyd’s uninhibited use of popular dance idioms in *Three Dances*.

That the stylistic diversity characteristic of the last two decades of the twentieth century is not without its dangers is suggested by the content of two of the papers during the first session of the Roehampton Conference. Julian Johnson began by observing the stylistic plurality of the contemporary musical scene, and developed his argument into a critique of the erosion of values implicit in much current thinking about music. This theme was developed by Edwin Roxburgh, and broadened into a discussion in which the state of music education and the vexed issue of funding of the Arts was discussed in the context of his own *Galileo* project. There has been no attempt to edit the polemical tone of these papers when preparing them for publication: the issues they confront are contentious ones and are inextricably linked with the stylistic tendencies of the decade.

The conference ended with a round-table discussion chaired by Arnold Whittall, to which Thomas Adès, Jonathan Harvey and James Dillon contributed. It was not possible to make a transcript of this discussion, and in the present volume

it is replaced by a series of interviews with composers featured in the conference. In addition to these contributions, an interview was sought with Thomas Adès, but the extent of his other commitments made it impossible to arrange this by the time the volume was ready to go to press.

Although interviewees were encouraged to take an individual, rather than a prescriptive approach, similar concerns are revealed in this series of conversations. Thus, as James Dillon states with characteristic directness: 'I have no interest in being consistent, only radical ... there will always be a degree of self-organization in a musical form', a view echoed in Jonathan Harvey's remark: 'Having worked very hard to learn a craft I want this feeling now of breaking out, of just doing nothing according to any rules I know.' Edwin Roxburgh affirms the primacy of the imagination in the assertion: 'Composition is an adventure of discovery as much as invention', while at the same time qualifying his stance with the acknowledgement of the necessity that, 'the material itself is consistent within its structure'.

It is at first sight paradoxical that, at a time when many composers are uninhibitedly embracing a wide range of external sources, considerations of internal structure remain of prime concern to the five composers interviewed in this book. Thus in the course of a discussion of musical form in his *Sonata-Rondo*, Sebastian Forbes distinguishes the various techniques of internal allusion from pure repetition. The processes analysed by Forbes are closely paralleled in James Dillon's discussion of the transformation of two distinct pitch arrangements, a technique with a potential to act as a substitute for the key modulation of traditional tonality. Such transformation is a recurring theme in Jonathan Harvey's discussion of his recent music:

the process of treating these isolated objects becomes a formal one because as the work progresses they're actually made to lose this Cagean object-nature and to split apart and decompose and begin to bleed into each other and become connected in long lines as if they're melted down and made into something, like metal made into a beautiful bowl.

In this context, Julian Johnson's penetrating study of Jonathan Harvey's recent music identifies another area of musical allusion – the relationship of a work to the rest of the composer's oeuvre. Not only are there the references to the sound world of Webern's Op. 9 and 10 – openly acknowledged by Harvey in interview as a major source of inspiration – but, on another level, the references to, and quotations from, his own music. No observer of the contemporary musical scene can fail to be struck by the extent to which self-allusion has become an increasingly important element in the music of composers to whom stylistic consistency is a major concern. Such internal allusions, characteristic of many major contemporary figures, are at first sight in opposition to the stylistic diversity of the music of the last decade. Yet, the two tendencies are to some extent complementary. One thinks of Maxwell Davies's fondness for a range of musical allusions, matched by his tendency to compose groups of thematically related works, while

Harrison Birtwistle's defining operatic masterpiece of the 1980s, *The Mask of Orpheus*, continues to resonate in other vocal and instrumental works of the same period. As Birtwistle put it in another context: 'I've always found writing music an evolutionary process ... that things tend to happen, and in one way, it's ... one piece that's evolving'.<sup>2</sup>

It will be evident from the above that this volume, in concentrating on the work of six composers during the last decade of the twentieth century, does not attempt anything more than a partial survey of British music during the period. The stylistic pluralities, identified by several speakers at the conference as an integral part of the contemporary musical scene, would demand a volume far beyond the scale and intentions of the present one. The presence of the Arditti Quartet, and its accomplishments in bringing into the public arena some of the most challenging and complex of contemporary scores, helped to provide parameters for the choice of music on which the conference focused. Having stated that, it is also evident from the series of interviews in this book that none of the composers can be labelled in a way which would admit ready categorization. Nevertheless, the issues raised here both with regard to the environment in which composers work and their relationship to the creative process itself are universal ones. If the volume assists in stimulating further discussion of these issues, it will have served its purpose.

## Notes

- 1 Introduction to 'Music in our Time', BBC Radio 3, 5 April 1984.
- 2 Harrison Birtwistle in conversation with Anthony Burton, broadcast during the Interval of a concert from The Maltings, Snape as part of the 1991 Aldeburgh Festival, BBC Radio 3. 19 June 1991.