



Each year, fifteen young composers are invited to the **Abbaye de Royaumont** to participate in *Voix nouvelles*. The abbaye itself is a restored 13th-Century Cistercian monastery, which is now home to a rich and varied season of cultural programmes, concerts, and the like¹. *Voix nouvelles* is one of these programmes – a three-week-long Summer academy during the course of which participants work with world-class ensembles and a faculty comprising two renowned guest composers alongside the programme’s founder, Brian Ferneyhough. But this much, at least, can be gleaned from their website².

In 2010, the guest composers were Liza Lim and Francesco Filidei, with students hailing from Australia, Brazil, France, Germany, Italy, Peru, the United States and Spain. The ensembles in residence were Strasbourg-based Ensemble Linea, directed by Jean-Philippe Wurtz and the Parisian vocal ensemble Les Cris de Paris³, directed by Geoffroy Jourdain. But all of this can be gleaned from their other website⁴.

While I had participated in my fair share of workshops, readings and composer development programmes in Australia, Royaumont was the first time I had attended anything structured quite like this (Australia has no directly analogous programme). As such, I had absolutely no idea what to expect. I was somewhat daunted by the fact that Royaumont’s list of alumni reads like a who’s who of contemporary music. And, having recently arrived from the Southern hemisphere, I was still getting over some kind of weird post-colonial antipodean inferiority complex grounded in the

vague assumption that everything is somehow better (and everybody somehow much smarter) in Europe. In short, I was surprised and flattered to have been accepted in the first place to such a prestigious academy, and almost crippled by the need to somehow live up to whatever unspecified promise had been seen in my work, while completely unsure of the context in which said ‘living up’ would need to take place. Indeed, all I had really been told about Royaumont was that the food was totally awesome⁵.

I needn’t have worried. Despite what looks, on paper, like a rigorous structure of lectures, lessons and rehearsals, combined with the work entailed by finishing the piece, Royaumont proved a strangely charged blank slate: anything seemed ultimately possible, so long as there was a willingness to make it happen. I was genuinely surprised by the plurality of musical styles present (I’d had some early thoughts that the academy would be populated by hyper-intellectual disciples making some kind of pilgrimage to Ferneyhough Camp), as well as the sheer variety of ages (22 to 32) and personalities involved. The common thread among participants seemed to be a general drive to excellence, whatever that might entail in individual contexts.

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1 including, apparently, weddings.

2 http://www.royaumont.com/fondation_abbaye/Composition_session.1377.o.html, accessed 31 October 2011.

3 who, before their arrival, set some alarm bells ringing among the composers tasked to write for them when it was discovered that they were currently promoting their most recent CD, of encore pieces by Madonna, Britney Spears, etc. Their arrival and first concert went some way towards allaying those fears.

4 <http://royaumont.voixnouvelles.fr/>, accessed 31 October 2011.

5 Johnson, E. Private conversation, May 2010.

The first two weeks featured one-on-one lessons with the faculty. The close positioning in time of lessons with three such very different musicians and intellects allowed these three relationships to bleed into, and contextualise, one another. My lessons with Ferneyhough were surprisingly, but stimulatingly, artisanal: we focussed a great deal on the precise manner in which a given thing was to be realised in performance. This was my first experience with a technically-oriented teacher who wasn't put off by the welter of detailed notation in my scores (as a result of this, in the past my best relationships with teachers had tended be with those more concentrated on the conceptual, philosophical or emotional content of the music). This was certainly the first time that a teacher had suggested, for musical reasons, that I make something more extreme in its demands.

With Lim, the discussion was much more geared towards the conceptual and notational frameworks present within the piece. We talked a lot about the concept of the musical 'object' and the conditions under which the lines between ornament/distortion and the thing being ornamented/distorted start to blur and break down.

Filidei's lessons were unexpectedly emotional and personal. These felt somehow far less like a lesson, and more like two people getting to know one another. For Filidei, it was a matter of how what was on the page connected with me as an emotional, breathing human being, rather than more abstract notions of 'what the piece is doing'.

During the first week, these lessons were interspersed with a varied diet of lectures by the faculty. These ranged from presentations of recent work, through canonical treatments of time to the choreography of William Forsythe. During the second week, each of the student composers presented their work to the other participants in short, but edifying seminars.

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The ensembles arrived at the beginning of the third and final week, to commence an intensive rehearsal process. This part of my Royaumont experience was, perhaps, far from typical. Due to

the extremely short (although typical for such an academy) timeframes at play (the final deadline for the pieces was in the middle of the course itself), there was a certain degree of scepticism as to whether my piece *schattenzeichen*, for bassoon and viola, was even performable (even a superficial look at a page such as that in **Example 1** will make the reasons for this clear). The academy was structured, however, such that there was scope for me to actually really work with the players in order to bring the piece into performance. Effectively, Royaumont's structure allowed me to make a case for my music. In this instance, the performance and rehearsals were facilitated by my taking on conducting duties for the piece. It's worthwhile adding that this would have been impossible without the support of the performers, in particular the violist, Jessica Rona, who was immediately and unreservedly on board with the project, as well the faculty whose depth of experience in a variety of performance and rehearsal situations certainly added weight. The format of the academy, and the highly collegial relationship between composers and performers allowed me room to meet individually with the performers, work with them on markups, rehearsal materials and click-tracks and schedule an additional – wine-fuelled – rehearsal. It was thereby possible to *drag* this piece into performance within the week allotted. Furthermore, the highly collaborative nature of this interaction – necessitated by its performance conditions – actually added a great deal of depth to the nature of the professional relationship, a depth that would not have been present had I been a more-or-less passive observer in rehearsals of a more-or-less transparent score.

This being my first such academy, and with no idea how these normally go, or what I could expect, my attitude to this situation was one of simply 'getting the job done': an attitude frequently required of composers, whether there is a week of rehearsals, or twelve. But since then I have participated in two similarly-structured Summer schools, and have gained a bit of perspective on what this experience actually meant. The first, for which the piece was admittedly finished late, took a look at the score and cancelled my performance, my rehearsals, and expressly forbade me from meeting individually with the players. The second manifested a deep sense of camaraderie between students, fac-

Example 1: *schattenzeichen*, mm.121-123.

ulty, organisers and ensemble, and ‘difficulty’ was never even a question: we were all in it together to attempt to discover something new and exciting. In the former situation, I was actively and effectively prevented from making a case for my piece (whether or not this would have resulted in a performance). It resulted in what I felt to be a near total loss of compositional dignity, as well as preventing me from actually learning anything myself through the process of collaboration. In the latter situation, no case even needed to be made – my work was taken at face value, with more interest shown in the sorts of aesthetic questions it might raise than the undeniable difficulties it posed.

These two separate experiences contextualised the Royaumont one in important ways. Ultimately, I think that performer scepticism is a perfectly natural response in situations where time is so exceptionally short, particularly when presented with something of significant notational complexity. What makes the difference is the degree of professional respect with which the organisation (by which I mean the ensemble, the faculty and the administration) is willing to credit the composer

and, relatedly, the degree of active collaboration (versus simple score transmission) that the organisation is willing to enter into. The practice of making new music is, at its root, a social activity, and the respect and willingness to collaborate shown by musicians who must have been having some kind of minor meltdown of their own was deeply gratifying, and process extremely rewarding.

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Ben Isaacs and I have written elsewhere in this issue about personal interaction in pedagogical contexts, but it’s worth underscoring here that social interaction is at the absolute core of a successful Summer academy. In this case, despite Brian Fernyhough’s fascinating lectures, despite Liza Lim’s ability to completely change the mental hardware with which we approach our practice, despite Francesco Filidei’s bizarre and beautiful sense of the human emotional consequence of musical expression, the most fascinating discussions were invariably those conducted over the dinner table. There were a few contributing factors to this, first and foremost being the aforementioned awesome-

ness of the food. Other factors included the fact that the student presentation times were simply not long enough for a detailed question-and-answer session, necessitating that the conversation started in class continue over lunch. The sheer number of people meant that viewpoints would be many, and their expression vigorous. Finally, Ferneyhough's willingness to categorically espouse a highly marginal view (such as in the now-legendary "some-people-might-disagree,-but-I-just-don't-believe-that-film-can-be-art" argument, or else the "text-setting-has-an-obligation-to-ignore-the-text" argument) proved a sure-fire way of jump-starting a debate. Not to mention the free-flowing wine.

The social acquaintances built over mealtimes refracted into other fields of activity throughout the academy. Such as, self-designated "Team Hardcore" sitting up together, working in Salle 1 until about 4.30 am every night, egging each other on, getting their pieces finished. Or the diabolical plan to effect the gate-crashing of another Royaumont-hosted function in search of champagne, only to discover that everyone still at the party was doing the exact same thing. Or the "guess the composer" initiative, wherein each participant uploaded an unidentifiable previous piece to a central location, and we had to try and work out who had composed what on the resulting playlist. Or the playful-foodfight-with-Filidei-turned-violent-Celebrity-Deathmatch-style-pillow-fight-with-everybody.

These social interactions were the very fabric of the course, and have translated into lasting personal and professional relationships for myself and many others; the sorts of friendships and collaborations that will continue to support, challenge and nourish the participants for years to come.

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