

“Unless we take a chance, we die in art”¹

***hcmf commission and
the Blue Touch Paper programme***

Enough to be art

When I first wrote to Wolfgang Rihm² in 2006 to ask whether I could study with him, I sent him some scores and a CD. He wrote back to say thank you and yes he'd be happy to be my teacher, and that my pieces were “enough to be art”. What did he mean? I thought maybe it was bad English (my German wasn't so good then and I'd written to him in English), but now I think he had a point.

I'd sent him pieces I'd written whilst studying for my Masters degree and in the subsequent two years. Though I think there are a couple of pieces I still stand by, most of what I wrote then is probably better left forgotten.

Are you a composer once you've collected your Bachelors, your Masters, your PhD? Once you've been to that composition course, studied with this composer, with that composer, won this prize and awarded that scholarship?

The first piece where I sensed I was getting closer to a certain kind of honesty in my music was *RE-sonare*, written in the summer of 2006. Since then, and despite some disappointments along the way, there has been a steady progression to ironing out and filtering out what I don't need and only using what is absolute necessary in my music.

For six months last year I worked on two pieces *Oscillare* for six voices, accordion and tape recorder; and *Words* for baritone and ensemble.

Oscillare was initially a project instigated by the spnm though it took on a life of its own as a commission from the **Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival**. It all started with a conversation with Graham McKenzie, the artistic director. I was surprised at how much freedom he wanted to give me - he would like a piece of about 30 minutes du-

ration and who would I like to write for? Maybe other composers (the ones who are mid-career?) work like this all the time but I had never known the luxury of having such a generous amount of freedom for a piece I knew would definitely be performed.

The time it took for me to evolve my thoughts from this initial conversation to a point where I was confident about what I wanted to do was long and there were various casualties and aborted ideas along the way.

How do we know if we are writing what we want to write and not what we think we should be writing?

This is almost the same process that I experienced whilst taking part on the **Blue Touch Paper** project with the London Sinfonietta. The premise of the Blue Touch Paper project was to give autonomy to the composer. You were given ‘credits’ which could be used in the form of sessions with individual players or larger workshops. In addition the composer chose a mentor with whom they would like to work. I chose Beat Furrer to be my mentor and I used up my credits with two full workshops with Sinfonietta players and a conductor. Having the opportunity to try out ideas in an en-

¹ Feldman, Morton. *Give my regards to Eighth Street: the collected writings of Morton Feldman*, ed. B.H. Friedman (Cambridge, MA: Exact Change, 2004)

² Personal communication, April 2006.

closed environment proved very valuable. Before a workshop a couple of years ago I had more than a sneaking suspicion that what I'd written wasn't that great. The workshop confirmed this and I was happy to throw it in the bin. I just wasn't ready to write that piece then.

Because in the beginning of the **BTP** project there was little pressure to actually complete a piece, I lagged behind a bit, always putting off the inevitable. It was only after we started talking about when a final piece might be performed, that I actually started to compose properly. But the groundwork was already there because I'd had all this time to get nearer and nearer to what I wanted to write. This extended gestation period is all the more important for me because my first ideas are rarely musical ones.

It takes time to compose and yes you learn a lot by doing, but some of the doing involves waiting. Agnes Martin writes "To feel insufficient, to experience disappointment and defeat in waiting for inspiration is the natural state of mind of an artist"¹. Waiting for the inspiration. It isn't a passive or static waiting. It's part of the process.

Does training help you to create art? How do we know if what we have made is music, is art? And whose judgement is the most important – academics, other composers, the audience, our own?

I think the most important training of all is learning to have the confidence to trust your creativity and to be, though it is impossible, fearless. I feel that with these two pieces I'm clambering closer to where I want to be, to what I want to be writing.

Agnes Martin also wrote that knowing your own response to your art is crucial. Learning how you react to it is vital because you have to be able to stand behind your work. If you don't, it needs to be thrown away². This is what I learned whilst writing these pieces.

¹ Martin, Agnes. "Reflections" in *Writings*, ed. Dieter Schwarz (Ostfilden, Germany: Cants Verlag, 1991) p.32.

² Martin, Agnes. "What is real?" in *Writings*, ed. Dieter Schwarz (Ostfilden, Germany: Cants Verlag, 1991)

Naomi Pinnock (born 1979) comes from Cleckheaton, West Yorkshire. She studied in London at King's College London with Harrison Birtwistle, at the Royal Academy of Music with Brian Elias, and with Wolfgang Rihm at the Hochschule für Musik Karlsruhe.

Pinnock has received, amongst others, commissions and performances at/from the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, ECLAT Festival Stuttgart, Heidelberger Frühling Festival, ZKM Karlsruhe, Festival Musica Strasbourg, Festival les Musiques Marseille, Spitalfields Festival London, London Sinfonietta, Neue Vocalsolisten Stuttgart, Les Percussions de Strasbourg, Ensemble Linea and Rambert Dance Company. In 2010 she was the winner of the Berlin-Rheinsberger Kompositionspreis.