

A vital part of a young composer's development is participation in a variety of workshops, masterclasses and summer courses. Such events take on an almost 'rite-of-passage'-type aura, providing, in some senses, a kind of benchmark as to the type of engagement a young composer has had with his or her colleagues.

There are, however, certain key differences in the composer-performer interaction in such a context, when compared to a more 'typical' professional relationship. The following is a conversation prompted by the authors' experiences of such contexts, including Ben Isaacs' at **Acanthes** and the **hcmf + Nieuw Ensemble Composers** programme, and Robert Dahm's at the **Royaumont Voix Nouvelles** and the **Cybec 21c Young Composers** programmes.

**Robert Dahm:** Your string quartet *I want to write a book like a cloud that changes as it goes he said* was premiered by Quatuor Diotima at **Acanthes** 2010 in Metz. Naturally, I'm a big fan of this work, and have written about it briefly elsewhere<sup>1</sup>. But I'd be interested to hear a bit more about what you were hoping to achieve with this piece – both musically and in terms of your own development as a composer – and why that piece for that context.

**Ben Isaacs:** The piece is a really important one for me. It takes elements of previous pieces that I'm particularly fond of and reconsiders them in a way that I find really exciting. More specifically, I wanted to be less reliant on clear-cut gestures that quite transparently move through thresholds, usually either between silence and sound, or pitched and un-pitched sound. Whilst I'm still very much drawn to the tactile fragility that exists, for example, in the middle of a saxophone crescendo from silence to *pppp*, I wanted the string quartet to be exclusively and obsessively concerned with these 'in between' areas of fragility, with the activity taking place *on* a threshold, rather than *through* one. Hence the constantly slow bow speeds eradicating

any sustained clear pitches, and the monochromatic form.

To answer the second part of your question, though I think the instrumentation strongly influenced the way I adjusted my compositional approach (more to do with timbral homogeneity and the instruments themselves than historical reflection), I don't think the fact that it was written for a summer course had much bearing on the result; I'm fairly sure I would have written the same piece in another context. Having seen the score for your *schattenzeichen* (written for **Royaumont** 2010), with its multiple staves and irregular time signatures, can I assume that you were similarly unconcerned with the piece's initial context? Or was it in fact a liberating experience to write for such accomplished musicians for primarily pedagogical purposes? Perhaps incredibly ambitious scores like *schattenzeichen* can help illuminate important ways in which composition summer courses can function for developing composers.

**RD:** I actually find pedagogical contexts very strange and unpredictable. I've had experiences where the dynamic has been one of bold exploratory collaboration, some where the dynamic has been extremely hierarchical (the performer 'mas-

<sup>1</sup> <http://soundisgrammar.wordpress.com/2010/08/09/i-want-to-write-a-book-like-a-cloud-that-changes-as-it-goes-he-said/>

ter' conveying their wisdom to the humble 'student') and those where the performer was clearly there for the paycheck, and each of these different dynamics results in a vastly different experience of the entire pedagogical process.

I know composers who, when faced with the typically short composition turnaround, limited rehearsal, small audience and uncertain performer commitment of such contexts, tend to write 'safe' pieces. The idea is to maximise the possibility of receiving a good recording of the piece that can then be used to further develop one's budding career. Perhaps foolishly, I've always, at a level of principle, refused to do this. To a certain extent I've always tailored the work's difficulty to the performers I'll be working with, but if anything I've used pedagogical contexts to try out new concepts whose success I'm uncertain of. When this pays off, there's a real sense that working with the musicians is paving the way for future collaborative musical exploration. But if the performer has no real desire to be there, then it can engender a certain amount of resentment.

I had an experience several years ago with the **Cybec 21c Composers Programme**, run by the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, for which I wrote *Noumen*. I think the piece was received fairly well, in the end, but I think many of the players were extremely sceptical at the outset. There was a certain leap of faith required, basically. A leap of faith (a) that I knew what I was doing; and (b) that the piece, while difficult, was worth playing (and, actually, some of the players clearly didn't quite manage the leap, which I don't necessarily mean as a criticism...). The sorts of 'problems' that I've run into with performers have been entirely to do with negotiating this leap of faith: making the case that the performer – who may have decades more experience than I do – just needs to trust the piece in order to let it speak, and then work from there. The successful resolution to the problem is getting us both on the same page, whether that's a change in their thinking, a change in my thinking, or (and these are often the best cases) a little of both.

But this particular leap is one that is complicated by a pedagogical context. All music requires the performer to make such a leap, actually, whether it be Mozart or Mahnkopf: the performer needs

to get inside the psychology of the piece, and to do that they need to trust it, I think. This trust is something that is much more hard-won when the composer is situated at the bottom of some kind of educational hierarchy, and ultimately I don't think that does anybody much good (except, of course, resulting in the all-important recording...).

I'm wondering how has this played out for you with regard to your music? Your music exploits points of instrumental rupture, but without recourse to now-familiar 'Lachenmannian' techniques and notations. Have you encountered resistance to this? How easy did the quartet find it to get inside a music that must have seemed technically very foreign, and notationally quite impenetrable?

**BI:** My workshop experiences have generally been productive, and actually I'm sure that this is at least partially because both the notations I use and techniques they prescribe are less impenetrable than they may initially look and sound. Whilst these may not be particularly idiomatic, they maintain a clear and direct relationship to convention. The 'points of instrumental rupture' you describe are slight but nevertheless significant deviations from standard instrumental technique (for example uncommonly long bow strokes) which result in (very) small-scale areas of fragility. I'd suggest that I approach notation in a similar way, in that I search for ways I can destabilise the seemingly fixed appearance of pitches and rhythms in such a way that their expected function is often largely obscured. This all stems from aesthetic choices rather than a practical ones; I consider the habits and experience of one of my composition's performers to be an integral aspect of its musical material, and a key aspect of its aural manifestation.

Returning to *I want to write...*, the sessions I had with Quatuor Diotima were really enjoyable, and in many ways ideal considering the situation. There was little trouble with the technical aspects of the piece, the players were very committed and responsive, and we were able to focus on gradually honing the overall soundworld, which became richer and more intricate as the sessions progressed. At *Acanthes* not all pieces receive a performance – the programming decisions were made after the second round of workshops, which were also recording sessions – so inevitably the

time was geared towards producing a recordable version after only a couple of hours' work. I think I did prioritise my own input with this in mind (there are a few structural aspects I would choose to point out in future rehearsals), though I think some prioritisation happens in any collaborative situation, and I'm content that the pressure of having to quickly produce a clear end result didn't have a detrimental impact on the amount I learned from the process. (Of course, the recording is also vital for pedagogical purposes; I know from experience that reflecting on workshop sessions without them can be difficult.)

The few difficult situations that have arisen in my workshops have tended to involve the more unconventional notations and techniques that I've occasionally used. This has sometimes involved a simple error in the composition, with the notated material being either impossible or excessively impractical, and sometimes a performer's difficulty in initially grasping the intention and/or desired impact of a certain notation. Either way, these situations take time to resolve, and this is why I'm interested in your experiences with complexly notated work. I've seen a number of workshops of pieces with considerable notational demands that barely move beyond basic translation of the score. Do you consider this when generating new ideas for pedagogical exercises? It occurs to me that workshops are perhaps useful exercises for a composer exploring notation so ambitiously, in that it gives them valuable first-hand experience of a performer grappling with the immediate challenges of their work.

Perhaps you could also relate this to your experience with *Noumen*? At *Acanthes* I found watching the orchestra workshops incredibly frustrating. Time was limited, so inevitably the sessions were rushed, the composer consulted only for yes/no answers and musical details and intricacies often completely (if understandably) disregarded. For me, this is a wholly uninviting situation, given the time and effort writing for orchestra clearly involves. Not only do I find discussions about small musical details enjoyable, they often have the most significant impact on my future work. Naturally, given that my largest piece is for 12 performers, we're talking about an inherently different approach to music making than I'm accustomed to

as a composer. However, a successful pedagogical exercise seems to me to necessitate *some* degree of in-depth exploration. Looking back on *Noumen* (particularly in light of subsequent activity), how would you evaluate your experience with the MSO in terms of personal development compared to time spent during composition and rehearsal?

**RD:** I think it's probably fair to say that most pedagogical situations, through no particularly conscious organisational shortcoming of their own, valorise notational clarity. I think performers and composers alike often mistakenly conflate clarity with simplicity (or, even worse, sight-readability), and occasionally prioritise clarity for the wrong reasons.

*Noumen* wasn't particularly problematic in this regard – it was full of difficult rhythms, and quarter-tones, but there was nothing that fell conceptually outside of the notational tradition of Beethoven, Tchaikovsky and Mahler. My more recent work, though, particularly over the last year, has started to engage a lot more actively with notation itself. I consider notation, at its root, a document that facilitates collaboration. It is an artefact situated at the intersection between the composer and the performer, their shared/differing conceptions of musical tradition, and their shared/differing relationship with the world around them. The score is therefore also situated on all of the faultlines suggested by incompatibilities and impossibilities between these elements. As such, I'd hold that the score does far more than simply prescribe sounds and their disposition: it's also possible for it to exert a mediatory force on the way it is received and interpreted 'downstream'.

(Incidentally, this mediatory quality is one of the things I like a lot about your recent scores. The notation is not overtly complex, *per se*, but it's also not possible to immediately ascertain the basic dialectic of the piece from a single 'broad-brush-stroke' glance: the formal and discursive logic of the work require closer scrutiny from the very outset).

My work is increasingly requiring a certain degree of decoding and synthesis on the part of the performer – they're essentially required to make sense of a free-floating constellation of notational

ephemera. It's kind of an active interpretation, not just of the work as music, but also of the score as codificatory medium. This actually proved a problem at Royaumont, in that producing a score like that required – not just invited, but required – the performers to really go above and beyond. This took place in the form of individual meetings with the players, extra rehearsals, concessions to performance (conductors, page turners, etc), without which the piece simply couldn't have happened under those circumstances. So my Royaumont experience was simultaneously a object lesson in how *not* to approach a summer course, while also producing one of the most intensely focussed collaborative relationships I've yet to experience. Ultimately, I think the gains outweighed the costs.

You're right in saying that things can so easily degenerate into the translation of signs and symbols. I've been part of, and witnessed, a number of workshops where the performers have basically said that composers, wherever possible, should use Lachenmann's nomenclature. But I've seen just as many where the performer, despite the composer having used Lachenmann's nomenclature in precisely the way Lachenmann uses it, has stopped the rehearsal to ask the composer to confirm that the symbols mean what they think they mean. This is pretty much the worst possible use of time in a pedagogical situation, and in such a context it's time that somebody is paying for. If there is blame to be laid, it probably belongs on both sides – there are plenty of composers who are guilty of counter-intuitive notation, and there are plenty of performers who have turned up to a first rehearsal without looking at a piece's frontmatter, and I've certainly been on both ends of that stick.

My best outcomes have been when there has been an opportunity to develop a more personal relationship with the performers concerned, and there is an interesting disjuncture here between the majority of pedagogical programmes and non-pedagogical collaborations. When working with performers outside the confines of a summer course (or similar), a composer typically benefits from a greater amount of performer investment and contact. In other words, the circumstances that produce what I would regard as an ideal pedagogical situation – mutual respect, safety to try new ideas and, most importantly, time – are present in real-

world collaborations in a way that they rarely are in pedagogical contexts, which suffer from short rehearsal times, and a high pressure to get it right. In short, what is missing from most of programmes I've participated in or witnessed rehearsals for has been the act of collaboration itself. I think this accounts, in a way, for what I (somewhat sneeringly) referred to earlier as a valorisation of clarity – the score in such contexts is purely a transmissive document, rather than one facilitating collaboration.

That said, there are some programmes aiming to address this sort of disconnect. You worked with the Nieuw Ensemble to produce a new piece for **hcmf** 2009, and this programme featured a number of workshop stages to play around with ideas with the musicians. This programme has been running for a few years, now, and has just expanded to include two more ensembles as of 2011. Did you find these additional workshop stages more conducive to risk-taking? Also, given that there is so little in the way of similar programmes involving workshop stages, how did you and the other composers negotiate what must have been quite a foreign dynamic?

**BI:** Well first of all I should point out that these were the first workshops I participated in away from a degree course, so although I realised that this was a rare opportunity, I could only compare it to the single sessions I'd had previously. The three other composers on the scheme were far more experienced than me in that respect so I suppose they thought about this a bit more, though workshop comparisons only occasionally came up in conversation. The scheme involved two weekends of workshops in February and April 2009 and then a couple of rehearsals before the concert during **hcmf** in November, so the idea was to build up a piece from initial sketches. The ensemble is twice the size of any group I'd written for previously so the sessions were crucial for my growing accustomed to the weight of the ensemble as much as the nuances of its instrumentation.

Perhaps the most valuable thing these longer-term programmes offer is the opportunity to make mistakes. Because the Amsterdam sessions took place before I had to start finalising any conception of the piece, I was able to take risks with untried instrumental techniques. Many of these were com-

pletely ineffective and immediately discarded, but certain ideas were pleasingly successful and others created problems that were solved in a way that produced viable alternatives that ended up in the final score. My piece (*and darkness sweeps in like a hand*) would definitely have been less adventurous (and almost certainly less interesting) if the programme was built around a single workshop session before the concert. These experiments and risks are of course ones that composers regularly take when working closely with performers in other situations but are I suppose understandably avoided when working towards the usual, time-constrained workshop environment. I think part of this is also the desire to have a finished, performable piece, rather than something that will need further work or revision, so it is very encouraging that initiatives like this allow for experimentation and revision whilst still resulting in a professional performance at a major festival.

One other aspect of the scheme worth mentioning is the round table discussions that took place after each day of workshops. These involved the four composers on the scheme, as well as the conductor, the ensemble's artistic director, and on one occasion a visiting composer (the wonderful Richard Ayres). Fourteen ears are better than two, and it was beneficial to have a built-in space to speak openly about one's reactions to the set of workshops. Perhaps these kind of activities could be more useful than brief individual lessons with tutors on summer courses, who probably haven't seen or heard the work before. I'm convinced that discussions with fellow students shaped my university education more than anything else, and I'd suggest that having a platform for in-depth discussion of individual works would enable summer course participants who might be worried about sounding overly critical about the work of someone they've recently met to express their opinions in more detail than they would in a social context. Have you encountered such sessions anywhere? There wasn't anything like them at either Acanthes or **Darmstadt** (which I attended in 2008).

**RD:** That's interesting. I'd agree with you about the interaction with colleagues being a hugely defining factor of education in general. Collegiality is a powerful thing. At Royaumont, this evolved over the dinner table and over the work table – the fact

that we were all still finishing our pieces during the second week (some of us further into that week than others...), frequently late at night, meant that a certain amount of bonding, and a certain amount of discussion about the issues involved in one another's work took place. I think this was possible, though, due to the small number of participants – it's possible to get to know fourteen people relatively intimately over the course of three weeks.

But I guess this is really what it comes down to, isn't it? The situation either having the space to permit a detailed interaction (between composer and performers, or between different composers, or between composers and teachers, or whatever), or not. The most in-depth interaction I had through the MSO programme was with their (rather extraordinary) librarian, Alastair McKean, which was extremely beneficial – a huge part of the process of score and part production, for me, continues to take place 'in response to' what I learned through working with Alastair. Even when that 'response' is a hearty disavowal of what he would regard as conventionally-mandated good sense.

Hearing pieces played is, of course, vitally important to one's development as a composer, but musical production doesn't take place in a vacuum, and I suspect that this extends to the building of compositional technique. It's through the many interactions we have as composers that we're able to form a multifaceted understanding of what being a composer is.

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**Ben Isaacs** is a composer whose music is characterised by its limited gestural palette and preference for weak, unstable sounds, often occurring at extremes of instrumental register and quietude. Current and future projects include pieces for pianist Sebastian Berweck, saxophonist Eleri Ann Evans and Japanese ensemble mmm... Ben studied at the University of Huddersfield with Aaron Cassidy and Bryn Harrison.

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