Northern light

IAN PACE illuminates the music of Christopher Fox

THE PARADIGMS COMMONLY used to categorise contemporary composers, such as hard-line, middle-of-the-road or conservative, tend in my view to bypass more fundamental distinctions. For instance, many composers whose work is said to belong either to the 'new complexity' or the 'traditionalist' schools in reality share a large number of assumptions about modern music and the role of the composer. Composers are meant to develop their own 'individual voice' or their own 'style', so they can make a career from continually rewriting what is essentially the same piece. Their music must above all be 'heard: i.e., every event must be the product of conscious intention rather than external process. The composer is a superior human being (in Britain this viewpoint is particularly implicit in those who have been through the élite educational institutions); when such 'special' people open up their 'inner world' to the rest of us, we are to be led up a path towards an exalted state of consciousness. The composer is perceived variously as *Übermensch*, 'clever boy/girl', 'wild man' (whether through designer nihilism, horror-show misanthropy, or contempt for the world around), composition as ego-cult, a state of affairs designed to produce feelings of awe and inferiority in mere mortals.

In reality, most of these assumptions represent a continuation of a late-romantic (principally Teutonic) aesthetic which, when divested of any traces of a common musical language within which to communicate, is based on a reductive view of music, bereft of any autonomy of its own, acting as a window onto the self, in a world where composers are more important than music. These assumptions are necessary to sustain an 'atonalist' position, whereby reactions to music are a historical construct, and can equally well be replaced by whatever else a composer wills. Against this position, I would contrast a long tradition of music which is unafraid of the fact that the sounds produced have a life of their own over and above their conscious intentions. Within the last century or so, a good deal of music outside the mainstream central European tradition could be said to relate in part to this conception, but as key figures I would cite Satie, Ravel, Stravinsky, Ives, Janáček, Brecht/Weill, Eisler, Cage, Feldman, Xenakis, Kagel, Reich, Glass, Bryars, Andriessen and Donatoni. Cage's attempts at the complete subjugation of the ego seem the extreme point along this line, while Andriessen's statement, 'We are not important. Music is.', is an equally virulent form of anti-romanticism. Such alternatives to the aesthetic of the all-controlling personality actually open the way to music of greater generosity and humanity.

This may seem a digression, but I believe it provides an essential context within which to discuss the music of Christopher Fox. Fox's work bewilders many, and confounds many of their assumptions about music. It is near-impossible to talk of a 'Fox style'; his music stands at a distance from styles and genres, interacting with many but embracing none. In the age of the soundbite, where critics like to sum up a composer in a few stylistic adjectives, this drives many to dismiss that which they cannot so simplistically comprehend.

To Henri

FOX WAS BORN in 1955 near York, where he has continued to make his home. He studied with Hugh Wood, Jonathan Harvey and Richard Orton, all composers whose work he was able to respect despite its being quite different from that which he wished to achieve. Consequently, from early on Fox was able to see the virtues in maintaining a certain distance from one's work, enabling a sense of perspective and recognition that no one composer or type of music constitutes an exclusively valid universe. The first work he now acknowledges is a piano piece *Second eight* (1978–80), followed by *Magnification* (1978–80) for voice and tape. This early interest in extension beyond the medium of the live instrumentalist(s) was also apparent in his music theatre works *darkly* (1981) and *Bewegung* (1981), the former of which, inspired by Kagel (to whom it is dedicated), employs four performers, on a low-lit stage, all dressed in black and wearing mirrored-sunglasses, who play non-instruments behind a series of screens. Later, lines from 1 Corinthians ('For now we see through a glass, darkly', 13: 12) are introduced in Latin and English. Fox found that most music-theatre he had previously encountered seemed to consist either of performance situations going wrong or of people becoming deranged. In his lectures at Huddersfield University, Fox has drawn attention to the unfortunate similarities between the rantings of the king in Maxwell Davies's *Eight songs for a mad king*, and a sketch on BBC TV's *The fast show*, in which a water-colourist becomes demented whenever he sees the colour black. This may seem frivolous, but actually raises an important question: can art

contain its own irony, so as not to become merely risible when viewed in the post-ironic, post-alternative comedy age? Perhaps Stockhausen does not understand why people find his talk of living on *Sirius*, or his dressing of performers in flesh-coloured costumes, wearing illuminated X-signs, hilarious. Fox, as a writer on music and critic as well as composer, can see the pitfalls of such a self-centred, humourless approach; it is through trying to look at his own work as others might see it that he is able to create a defence mechanism against mockery. This does not require the creation of pure folly; a seriousness of purpose is made all the more apparent by such a sense of perspective.

Fox's career as a writer advanced in parallel to his recognition as a composer. In a series of articles, principally for *Contact* magazine (of which he later became coeditor), he was to use the work of Walter Zimmermann, Christian Wolff, Morton Feldman and Erhard Grosskopf as a forum for exploring ideas about music, rather as Zimmermann had used his series of interviews with American composers, *Desert plants*, as a means of considering his own compositional ends. Since then his writing has become more occasional, though important articles on Richard Barrett and Michael Finnissy suggest some points of congruence with these seemingly dissimilar composers. His music has been performed by the Arditti Quartet, Ensemble Exposé and performers like myself, who are in some people's eyes more often associated with the work of Ferneyhough, Finnissy, Barrett, Dillon and others, and has been regularly performed at Darmstadt (where he is the most performed British composer after Ferneyhough), ever since the furore created by the performance of *Dance* there in 1982, exceeded only by an even bigger furore over the Arditti Quartet's performance of *Heliotropes*[6] in 1988[1]. This need not be odd; Fox's music has as much to do with 'complexity' as with 'experimentalism' or 'minimalism', his work connects in one sense with all of these 'movements', but in another with none of them.

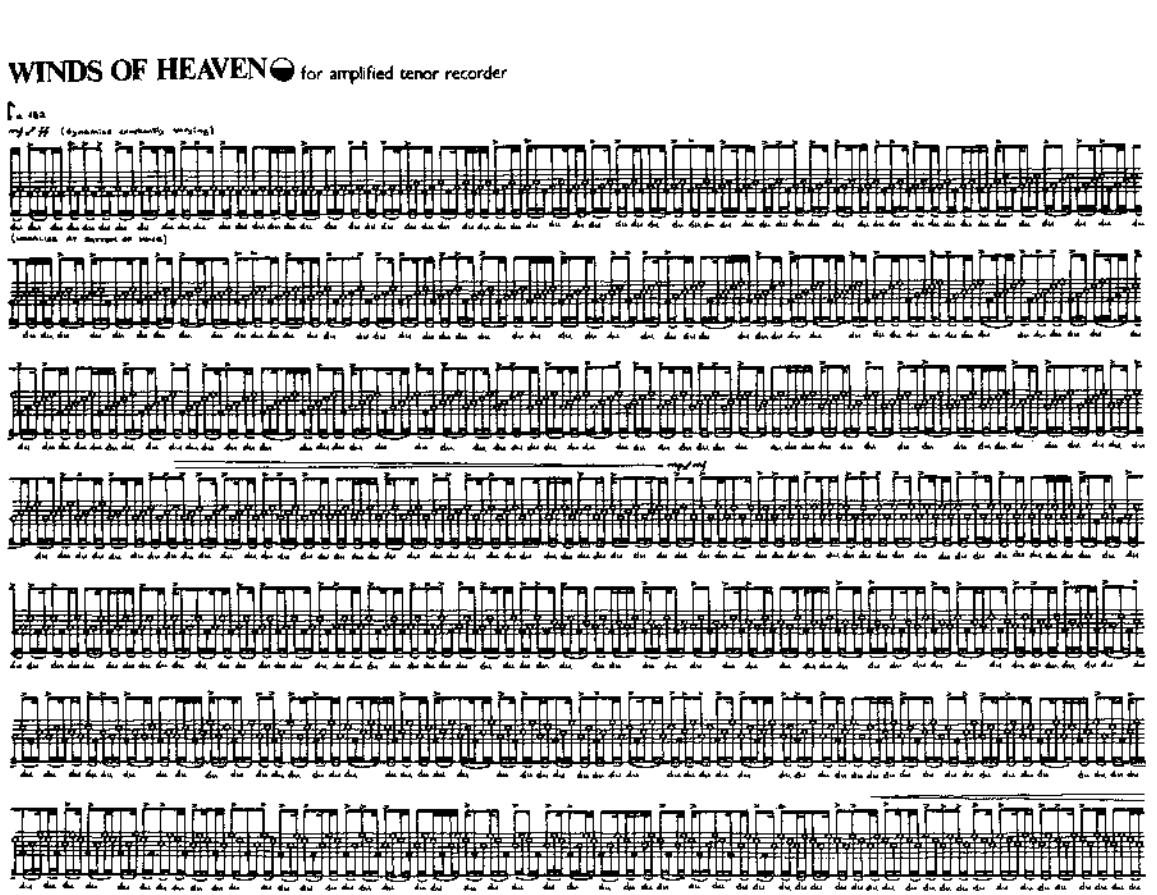
FROM AN EARLY AGE, Fox's musical loves included Byrd, Purcell, Beethoven, Wagner, Mahler, Ravel, Stravinsky, Janáček, Messiaen, Britten and Tippett, and he particularly admired some of these composers' ability to realise distinctive music in multiple idioms. As a student he was to encounter in close succession the work of Stockhausen, Kagel, Cage, Wolff, Cardew, Reich and Glass. He was particularly interested in Cage's challenge to hyper-subjectivity and expressionism, both highly 'constructed' phenomena, but found Cage's aesthetic insufficiently ironic or historical to be wholly reconcilable with his own needs.

So in *Dance* (1980) for alto flute, clarinet, viola and cello, for example, Fox distills elements from Stravinsky's *Agon* and applies his own compositional grammar, including permutations, oscillations and extensions as well as the serialists' techniques of retrograde and inversion. In the contrasts between the elated use of pan-diatonic intervallic combinations and the pensivity of minor ninths and major sevenths which are predominant in other places, one discerns conflicting forces acting upon Fox's creative imagination.

As a result of digesting these various influences, Fox became convinced that the idea of musical process was of far greater importance than narrow concepts of 'style'. Rather than try to develop a personal style, with which the familiar tools of a composer's armoury can be used to spin out a piece of whatever length is required, Fox was more drawn to the type of formalistic approach that one finds in the earlier Stockhausen: the creation of sophisticated, intricate and above all clearly discernable musical processes, articulating the form of the piece. Many of the works from the early to mid-1980s, such as *Etwas lebhaft* (1983) for medium-size ensemble, *Winds of heaven* (1984) for amplified recorder and delay, *The Missouri harmony* (1985) for organ and *Ci-Gît* (1987) for mezzo-soprano and five players, subject restricted bodies of material to extensive procedures and formal schemes (here the similarity to Stockhausen ends). The music-theatre works mentioned earlier strive for an equal degree of abstraction; in *Bewegung* the player's physical movements are notated and choreographed with a degree of specificity equal to that of the sounds, recalling Stockhausen's original idea for choreographing the pianists' fingers in *Mantra*.

Ex.1, from the second section of *Winds of heaven*, demonstrates clearly Fox's processual working. The four positions between the staff-lines signify which of the left hand holes are to be left open. Fox uses such tecniques as the addition and subtraction of notes, weighting of particular patterns or groups of notes and also patterns of accentuation. In *The Missouri harmony*, three lines begin with a counterpoint in which they move mostly stepwise up or down, in such a manner as to resemble an organ improvisation. Gradually larger shifts are introduced, generating a particularly striking impact at the first such occurrence in the top part. The score looks relatively ordinary, but the musical result is extremely beautiful, with endless suspensions and a 'deferred' harmonic basis. Notwithstanding the relatively linear nature of the processes, Fox's understanding and exploitation of the historical resonances of particular moments which the processes generate creates the sense that one is moving through a myriad of colours and emotions. Stepwise motion was to remain important to Fox, par-

1. For an account of this occasion, see Keith Potter: 'Darmstadt 1988', in *Contact* no.34 (Autumn 1989), and Edward Dudley Hughes: 'British Music in Darmstadt', in *New Music 89* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989).

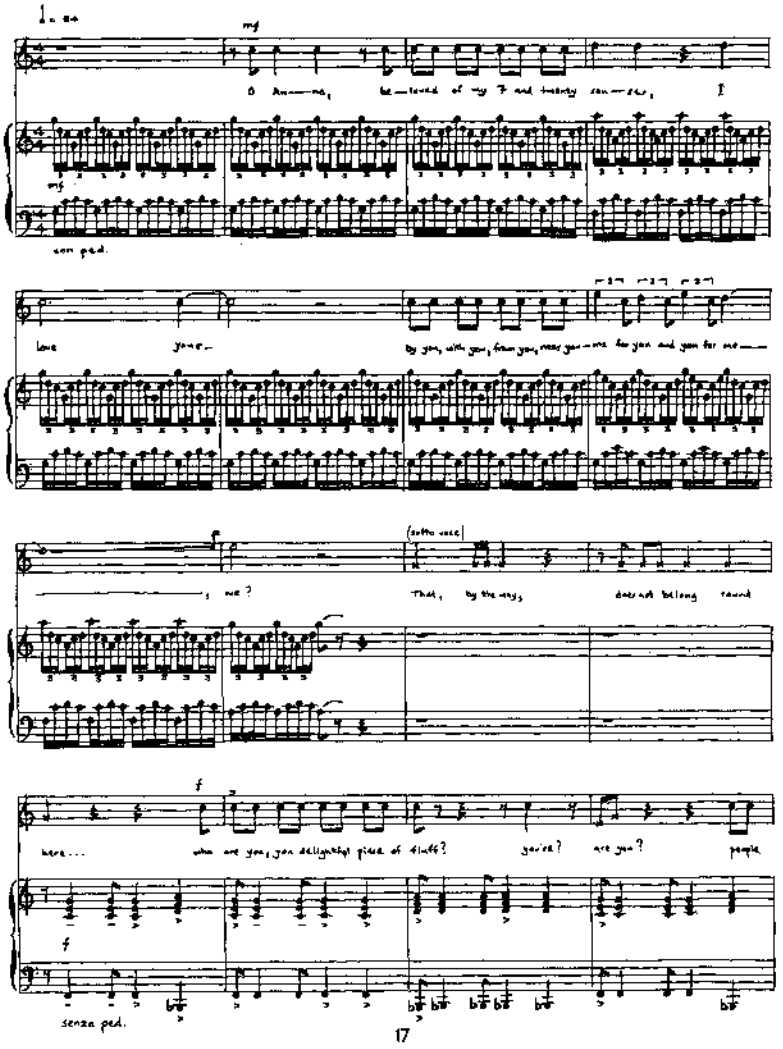


Ex.1

ticularly in the later *Straight lines in broken times* cycle.

With *Ci-Gît, Heliotropes*[6] (in which the quartet progress smoothly from a dense oscillation around a few diatonic pitches towards a sparser, but much more chromatic type of writing) and *A kind of prayer* (1986), a forty-minute work for two pianos, permuting a vocabulary of harmonies in a quasi-serial manner, in which the only changes in texture from pitch oscillation are a few arbitrarily placed silences, Fox had reached such a degree of material restriction as to produce a kind of processual fundamentalism, or high formalism. In some of these pieces the music is the form or the processes. Occasionally these processes can become a little predictable, only just sustained by the relentless way in which they are pursued. Fox had certainly achieved one of his aims, the elimination of rhetoric and its associated banality. (When he later made use of declamatory writing in the Oboe Quintet (1995), the result seems surrounded by multiple sets of inverted commas.) In this anti-gestural world, one hears instead a continually mutating totality or substance; the composer interacts rather than declaims. The results were engaging, but Fox felt that he had reached the end of a line; more was required.

Subsequently, Fox was to introduce a greater degree of differentiation between material types and a greater concentration upon the essential characteristics of material itself. The breakthrough works in this respect were the piano piece *More light* (1988) and the song cycle (for voice and piano) *A-N-N-A blossom-time* (1988). *More light* (reproduced as this issue's music supplement), named after Goethe's dying words, is divided into clearly delineated sections, discernable by palpable changes in harmony and/or texture. The manner in which the processes operate between the beginning and the end of each section varies from section to section: in some there is a clear linear progression, in others the degree of linearity varies between parameters. Some other sections present a relatively static permutation. The function of the processes also varies: in some sections there is a clear sense of motion, whereas in others the processes are a way of allowing the essential inner qualities of the harmonies or the configuration to shine through more radiantly. Yet the piece is preoccupied with death; in many sections the material is fading away, reaching a long period of relative stasis. The 'climax' soon descends to hollow rumblings at the bottom of the keyboard, and the remainder of the piece separates ever more forlorn attempts to achieve 'light', and the increasingly melancholy, epilogue-like section. The final gesture is like a truncated, lowered attempt at regaining the world of the opening.



Ex.2

This piece was written soon after the death of Morton Feldman and one might perceive in it the dying away of Feldman's 'light', the flame that burnt for all those who appreciated his music.

A-N-N-A blossom-time seems at first sight to be a more light hearted affair.[2] It was the first work in Fox's trilogy based upon the work of Kurt Schwitters, with the song-cycle *Louisiana* (1992) and the radio piece *Three constructions after Kurt Schwitters* (1993). In the work of Schwitters, particularly his *Merzbilder*, constructions made by applying classical formal principles to 'found objects' such as debris that he would pick up from the street, Fox found a kindred spirit in his own attempts to construct complex structures around the residua of contemporary (and earlier) culture. In the two song cycles, Fox set his own free translations of Schwitters's poems, many written to his fictional beloved Anna Blume, riddled with textual puns and jokes (for example, in 'The critic' from *Louisiana*, the more familiar translation 'He is a peculiar beast, the critic: a camel before and a window behind'[3] becomes 'The critic-tic-tic-tic is a curious creature, camel complexion, glass arse').

For the music, Fox works in a number of styles reminiscent of folk and popular idioms, but always made strange, 'defamiliarised', bent towards his own ends, making explicit his affinity with Weill, Brecht and Eisler. The works use surprising harmonic progressions, unexpectedly static occurrences, pitches that seem like wrong notes, and in *Louisiana* especially, truncated cadences or openings that seem to have come too late. These have a textual counterpart in the rhymes that don't work, the lines that don't quite scan, and the various double entendres ('and her green nuts are bright and scarlet fair'), though disruptions in music and text rarely occur simultaneously. Fox also works in musical references, to Berio's *Folk songs*, 'Tea for two' and Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, when quoting Schwitters's 'Expressionism is not always expressive'. The absurdity of the result creates at times a bizarre form of surrealism, or a meaninglessness that is strangely beautiful.

A-N-N-A blossom time was written while Fox was living in Berlin as a guest of the DAAD Berliner Kunstlerprogramm. It was during this period that he began to consider seriously those aspects of Germanic culture to which he himself particularly related. His mother, Barbara Fox, is German, and amongst the contemporary composers with which Fox feels the most affinity are members of the so-called 'Cologne school', such as Walter Zimmermann and Clarence Barlow (and many comparisons of intention, if not of result, might be made with the work of Chris Newman, who lived and worked for a long period in Cologne, then Berlin). One might also compare Fox's outlook with that of the film-maker Wim Wenders or the writer Peter Handke, each of which attempt to bring about reconciliations between American conceptions of space and an alienated form of European existentialism. Like Wenders, Fox is drawn to things in motion, to the transient nature of that which passes.

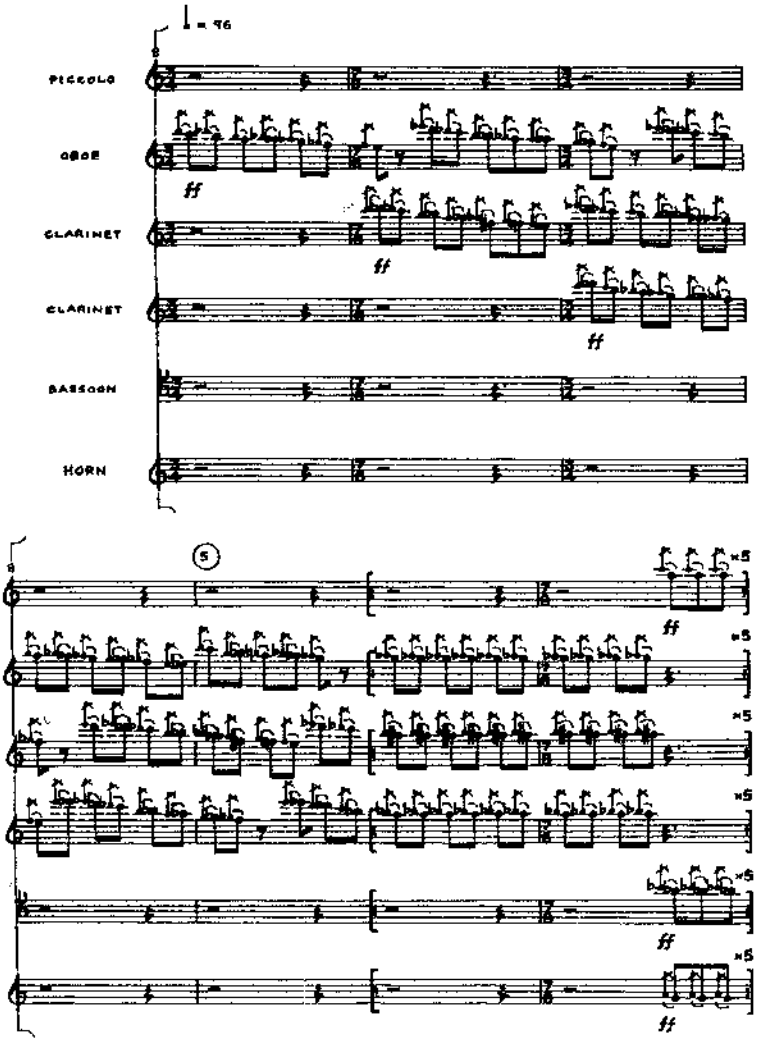
With Schwitters, however, the affinity is perhaps closest. Schwitters's branch of Dada was not about destruction or anti-art. The impact of Schwitters's creations is precisely because of, not despite, the ordinariness of his materials, and stands at the opposite end of the spectrum from the highly polished, but ultimately frivolous work of Salvador Dali. So it is with Fox; slick orchestration (in fact Fox has no desire to write for the modern orchestra) and glossy, decorative surfaces would be a distraction from the immediacy of his music. In the prepared piano piece *Block* (1992), the beauty of the piece is made all the more so by the seeming lack of potential in the material type. The underlying optimism and joy of the Schwitters songs, created in a non-materialistic manner (in various senses of the word), have an idealistic innocence that is subversive of heavy ideology. Not that this is in Fox's case a 'naïve' form of in-

2. This work is discussed in more detail in Jane Manning: *New vocal repertory* vol.2 (Oxford, 1998), pp.56-63.

3. Cited in Hans Richter: *Dada: art and anti-art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1965), p.145.

nocence (and this is one thing that separates him from Schwitters and also a fundamental distinction between Fox's work and that of Newman, who follows Blake's exhortation to make one's life into his art); his understanding and control of the connotative potential of that which he produces makes this clear. I am conscious of the deep water these attempts at description are getting me into; in Schwitters's words 'It is impossible to explain the meaning of art; it is infinite.' To paraphrase Roland Barthes,[4] *A-N-N-A blossom time* (see ex.2) is that uninhibited work which shows its behind to the Political Father.

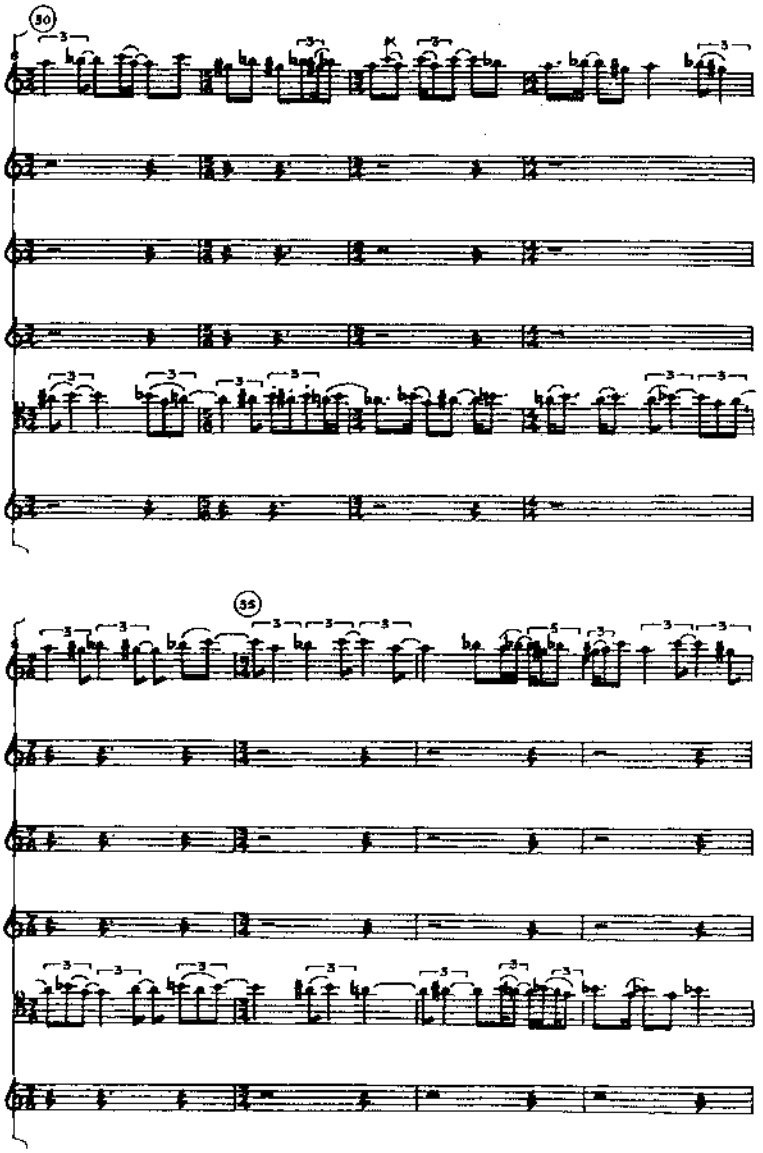
With the *Three constructions*, Fox made his first foray into the medium of the *Hörspiel*. The work began as a series of three original texts Fox had wrote in tribute to Schwitters, but he was then asked to write a radiophonic composition for BBC Radio 3. Fox chose to find a novel way of presenting Schwitters's biography in a manner relevant to his work. Thus for the first construction, as a homage to Schwitters's *Ursonate* (the finale of this work taken word for word provides the structure), Fox collected recordings of Schwitters speaking and reading and various sounds that Schwitters was known to make (such as a dog howling), together with other environmental noises and associated sonic events . The speech of Schwitters is included within a biography spoken by Fox as an introduction to the work. From a vocabulary of short fragments (mostly less than a second), Fox assembled sonic phrases which could then act like musical subjects, and was thus able to create a 'Biography in sonata-rondo form'. The result is astounding and hilarious, with the semantic content of the fragments used to signify particular events. The second construction relates to Schwitters's period spent in Norway, where he constructed a *Merzbau* which was subsequently destroyed in a fire, so Fox uses the piano piece *Worthless leather* (a movement from *Louisiana)*, which sounds a little like Grieg. For the third construction, relating to the last years of Schwitters's life, when he lived in obscurity in the Lake District, constructing his final *Merzbau* in a barn (a large scale sculptural installation, later transferred to Newcastle University), Fox went armed with tape recorder to record environmental sounds. These were then used to construct a sonic evocation of Schwitters working at the *Merzbau*, overlaid with a few comments from people who knew Schwitters at this time, in a pseudo-documentary manner. This section thus also relates to Cage (to whom the title *Three constructions*, like the later *Themes and variations* is a homage), finding music in everyday, un-'intended' sounds. Similarly, in the final section of the piano and tape piece *More things in the air than are visible* (1993), the piano part is played together with a tape of sounds recorded in the vicinity of the concert space, thus allowing composed and non-composed sounds to happily coexist.



Ex.3a

From a situation in which processes would practically beat material into submission, Fox moved towards a more dialectical relationship between the two. In *Foreplay* (1988–89) for five players, he was to cite ironically some of the conventions of baroque overture forms while using types of material that do not relate to these conventions. The result is a tension between form and content, objectifying both and making the particular, constructed nature of each apparent (as in the false ending, a tacked-on low hammering 'cadence' when the piece seems already to have ended). Fox moved on towards the use of formal structures increasingly disjunct from the material types used within these structures. In *Missa est* (1983) the Mass form had effectively acted as a 'container' for the widest diversity of material, like Stockhausen's moment forms. With *Heliotropes*[3] (1987/90) for wind sextet (the same as that used in Janáček's *Mladi*), and before that the sequence of pieces *stone.wind.rain.sun* (1989–90), Fox made use of numerological factors as a rela-

4. See Roland Barthes: *The pleasure of the text*, tr. Richard Miller (New York: Noonday, 1975), p.53.



Ex.3b

tively arbitrary constraint upon the content of the pieces (in a manner which relates both Brian Ferneyhough's use of 'grids' to sieve his creative imagination and the number games in the films of Peter Greenaway).

Heliotropes[3] uses seven types of material, each of which occur seven times (two material types are shown in ex.3). Most of the material types are based on scalic patterns of differing lengths, including scales of one note. Like *Foreplay*, there is much use of close tessitura, though here such use is more scalic than melodic. In the way the instruments are used, particularly the duets between pairs of instruments, the priority attached to clarity of individual line and textures and the type of harmonic language that results from the processes involved, Fox seems to be making explicit his relation with Stravinsky, an influence that would also inform the *Straight lines in broken times* series and the piano piece *lliK.relliK* (1991–93). In the latter work, the contrast between the pounding, rock music-like first section with the *Le sacre*-like assemblages from staccato chords in the second demonstrate the fallaciousness of the Adornoesque association of Stravinskian primitivism with populism.

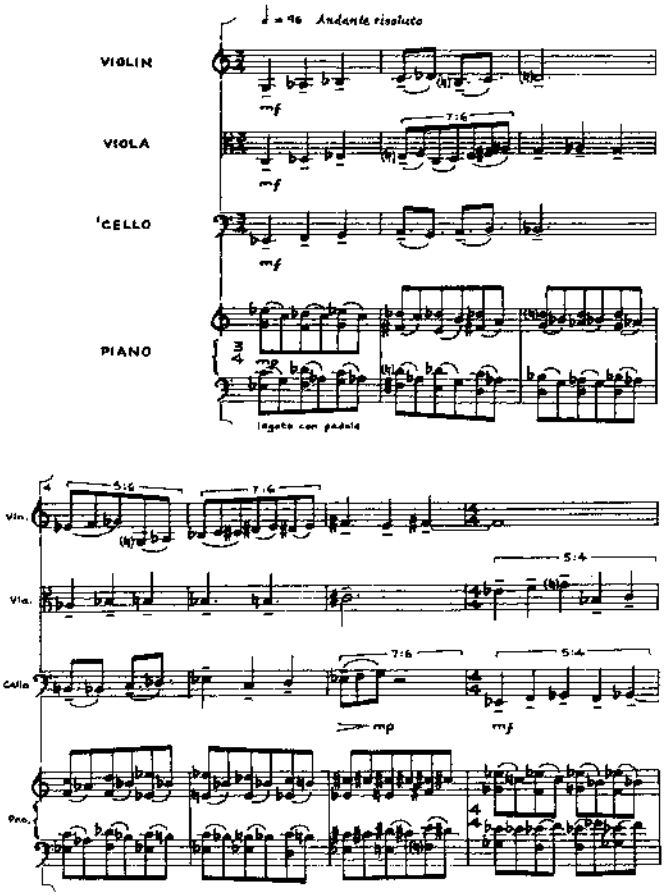
Very often Fox will use varying numbers of repetitions of particular bars or groups of bars. The effect of these changes from piece to piece; in *Straight lines in broken times*[2] (1992) this brings about a hierarchy of 'nodal points' within the flow of the piece. On the other hand, the bleak, dessicated *clarinet quintet* (1992), using very close microtonal intervals, resembles a late Beckett play, in which the musical 'characters' are forced to enact some inescapable ritual. In this work, the formal schemata serves both to invigorate and depress the material, creating a non-linear sense of time. There is one moment where real passion seems close to arising out of the desolation. This could have fulfilled the role of a conventional climax (as in a similar moment in Ravel's 'Le gibet' from *Gaspard de la nuit*), but the length and intricacy of what follows causes it to recede from the memory.

THE DISJUNCTION between form and content has become even more pronounced in more recent works. Fox's monumental forty-minute *Themes and variations* (1996) for ten players, a tribute to the New York School (Cage, Feldman, Wolff, Tudor) written for the Ives Ensemble and described by Fox as 'containing everything I know how to do', presents a highly enigmatic and disorientating structure that pulls its material around in ways previously unimaginable. The fourth movement, 'intersections', a quartet for alto-flute, bassoon, trumpet and double bass, works in an idiom reminiscent of the neo-classical Stravinsky, but the permutational, rather than directional, way in which the movement proceeds serves to defamiliarise this material, not to mention the extreme difficulty of the individual parts (especially for the trumpet!), which moves this dry, aloof idiom into a state of hypertension. From the opening of the first movement, 'memento', which resembles a plague-stricken Schubert (ex.4), the piece plays havoc with one's expectations in a variety of different ways; the final 'string quartet' requires considerable *scordatura*, such that all the strings are tuned to one pitch from a C minor triad. The disruptive action of this *scordatura* being executed prior to the movement leads one to expect a solemn, C minor conclusion, but what follows an eerie, extremely quiet quartet in harmonics (ex.5), only approaching the triad at the very end. The title, as well as nodding in the direction of Cage, refers to the fact that each of the six movements contains some material derived from earlier in the piece (the 'variations'), and some

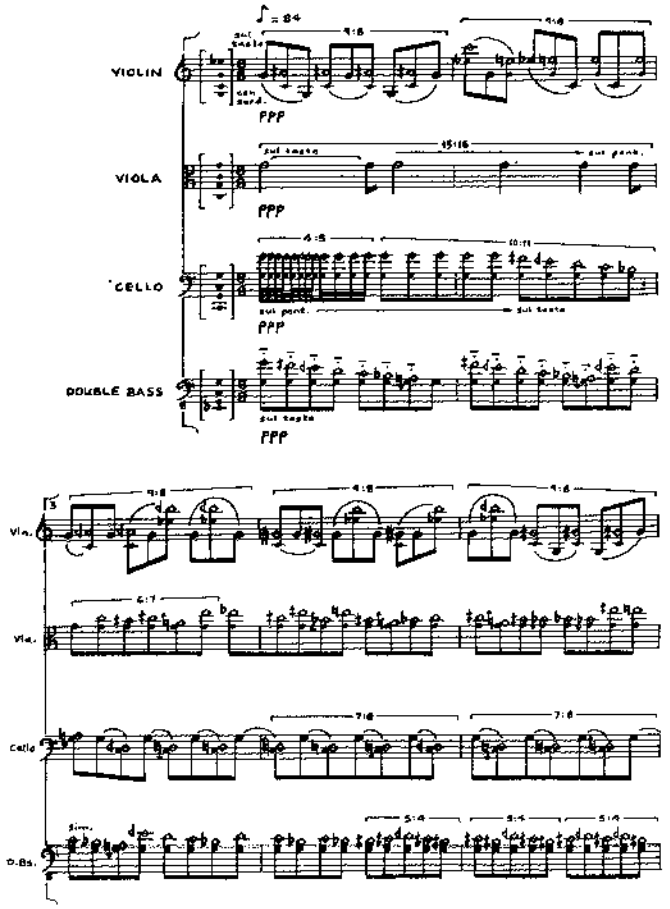
new material (the 'themes'). The piano piece *Prime site* (1997), written soon afterwards, is equally estranged. The piece is in seven continuous sections, each of which use a different material-type, though there are many connections between them, and each section is approximately the same length, regardless of the developmental potential of the respective material. All questions of proportion and balance go out of the window; the musical material is constrained by these rigid boundaries.

Fox's interest in exploring similar phenomena in diverse manners is demonstrated by his cycles of works. In the first of these, *Heliotropes* (1985–90) a cycle of six pieces intended to be played together and in which there is some cross-referencing, the unity is one of conception between the pieces, each to do with spirals and things turning towards the sun, rather than so much of techniques. In the four pieces *stone.wind.rain.sun* (1989–90) the unity concerns conception and numerology. The conception is of the four elements transferred to a Northern landscape, and literally going down into the landscape, as with rock erosion in the Pennines. The key number is four; in *stone.wind.rain.sun*[3], for amplified alto flute a single line is constructed from four canonic voices (differentiated by four playing techniques) in four metrically related tempos, so as to produce a virtual 16-part canon (ex.6).

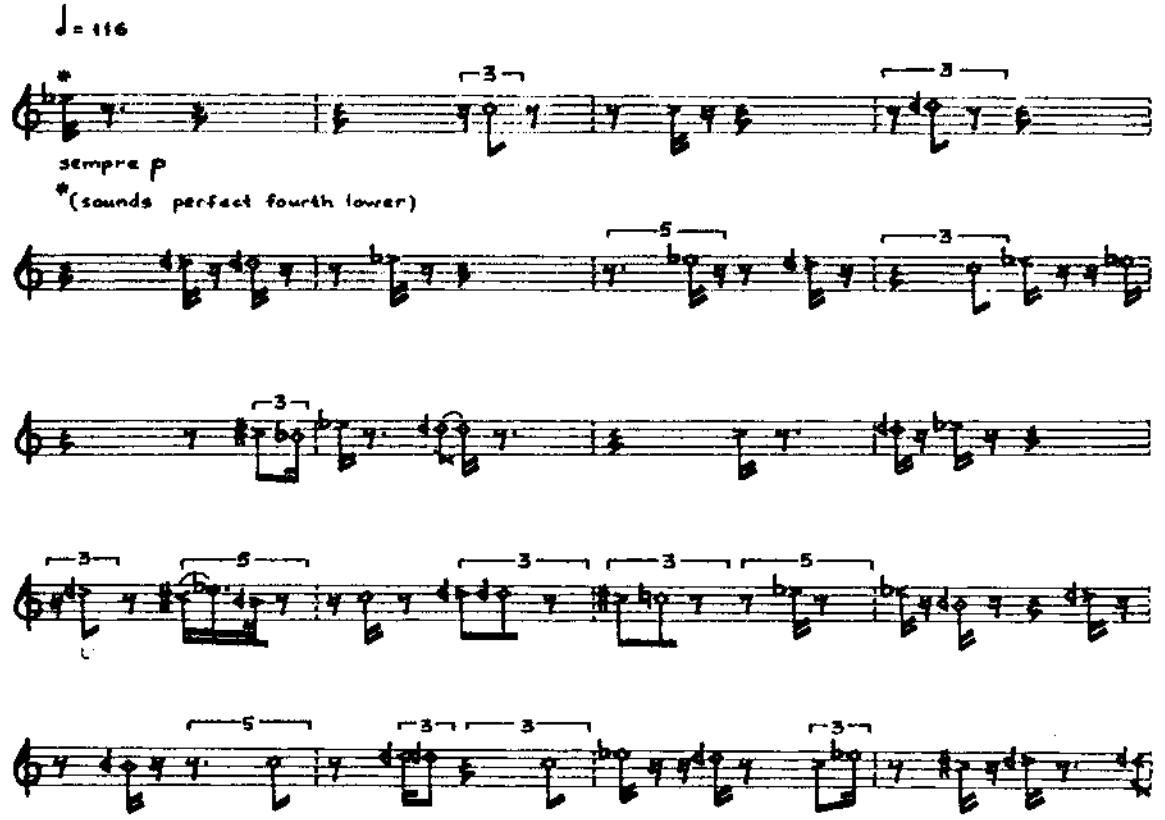
With the most successful of the cycles, *Straight lines in broken times*, the unity was provided by a more rigorous sharing of compositional procedures. Fox devised a computer programme for deriving scalic patterns. From a vocabulary of three durational units, the crotchet, quaver and semiquaver, the latter only occurring in groups of two or four, so that a quaver would remain the basic unit, the programme uses weighted random selection to generate sequences, then decisions as to whether a sequence should go up or down in pitch, incorporating decisions as to whether a sequence should start from the pitch at the beginning or end of the previous sequence. The results were all written out in white notes, then other scales were overlaid upon these patterns. This process was used to generate *Straight lines in broken times*[1](1991) for organ. For *Straight lines in broken times*[2] (1992) for clarinet, violin and piano, similarly generated lines were cut up into sections and divided between the players, then repetitions were used to preserve the relative lengths. The modalities cause a multiplicity of stylistic resonances, at various points recalling moments of Stravinsky (at one point the violin part metamorphosises seamlessly into a quotation from *L'histoire du soldat*) and Janáček. The simultaneous use of different scales sets up a series of false relations that hearkens back both to Purcell and Stravinsky (ex.7). Thus we have a piece that is both about a fundamental archetype, the scale,



Ex.4



Ex.5



Ex.6

together with its associated histories. *Straight lines in broken times*[3] (1994) for solo cello, takes the melodic contours and rhythmic outlines of the first two pieces, then distorts them through microtones, irrational rhythmic overlays and extended bowing techniques, to produce a piece whose resemblance to the others exists only on the page. *Straight lines in broken times*[4] (1994) for two bass clarinets and tape, uses the basic algorithm to generate the tape part, using only four pitches, then constructs the live parts above this using quasi-serial principles. In this and the other cycles, the conspicuous absence of musical 'objects' serves to refocus attention on the temporal evolution of events.

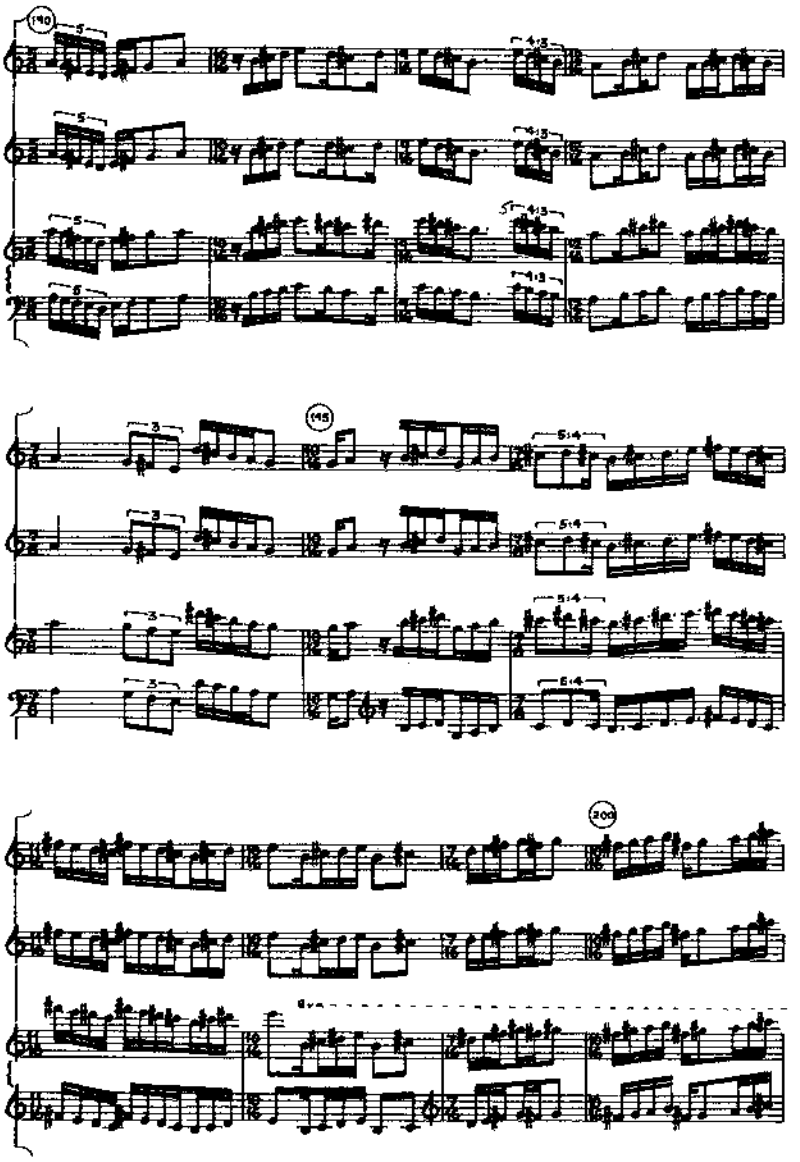
IN RECENT FOX, however, the question of form seems to have been superseded by that of narrative. The forms matter less in the sense that they can be apprehended and analysed than in the extent to which they create a type of psychological narrative for the listener. This is in no sense programme music; the narratives are more cinematic than programmatic, and still remain essentially abstract in nature. The strength of the formal procedures could be a result of their resonance with narrational archetypes. But in his recent works that overstep the boundaries between media, the narratives have taken on a more concrete form. *A glimpse of Sion's glory* (1992) for eight voices and instruments takes samples from six texts from the English Revolution (a period which continues to fascinate Fox, whose birthplace is close to Marston Moor, scene of the famous battle), from the Levellers to John Milton, each dealing with the church, state and democracy, and uses a form of textual montage to set up a dialogue between these different viewpoints. Using musical references to hymns from different Protestant traditions, as well as some hymn-based works of Christian Wolff, Fox is able to work his own sympathies into the fabric of the piece by the nature, from frivolous to grand, of the musical configurations.

Historical resonances are important to the construction of both text and music of *Trümmermusik* (1993) for mezzo-soprano and hurdy-gurdy. This work attempts to draw parallels between the ravaged Berlin of the immediate post-war period and the Berlin that Fox experienced when living there, at the tail-end of the 'cold war'. Fox takes as the basic structure the diaries of Max Frisch, then uses textual fragments from various sources (particularly an essay 'Europe in ruins' by Hans Magnus Enzensberger) to construct an account of his own. The 'proletarian' associations of the hurdy-gurdy are obvious, but Fox also works in other musical allusions, such as to Schütz's *Deutsche Requiem* and Schubert's 'Der Leiermann', from *Winterreise*.

Most ambitious of all is the second *Hörspiel*, *Alarmed and dangerous* (1996), a multi-faceted,

multi-conceptual work which crosses the boundaries between documentary, radio play and music. Fox manages to join together the history of the trumpet with the history of warning signals, and thus of various types of alarms. The work weaves its narrative around four musical episodes, which travel from fanfares, through a dialogue between the trumpet and alarm signals, each 'chasing' the other, towards an overwhelming climax using multiple brass, referring to Revelation 8: 2, 'And I saw the seven angels which stood before God; and to them were given seven trumpets'. The work, which begins in a documentary fashion, incorporates a vast number of quotations and recorded speech, ranging from biblical quotations through information about the history of alarm systems towards vocal 'alarms': the fire and brimstone utterances of such religious zealots as Ian Paisley or Louis Farrakhan. For the climactic section, Fox uses a series of quotations as a bridge between different manifestations of his own composed (and often electronically modified) music: 'The trumpet shall sound' from Handel's *Messiah* (which is used earlier on in the piece as a *cantus firmus*), Monteverdi's *Orfeo* and Ives's *The unanswered question*, in all of which the trumpet is paramount.

This thoroughly artistic work which is none the less stuffed with positivist, factual data is perhaps not unlike a radiophonic parallel of the approach to the medium adopted in Tom Philips and Peter Greenaway's *A TV Dante*, which combines a classical love of knowledge and learning with a modernistic quest towards abstraction. Though Fox's work was essentially constructed around the narratives, he was surprised to find what he perceives as a quasi-symphonic structure. Whether or not this is the case, the work creates a synthesis between form and narrative. Formal principles drawn from media other than music have occurred in other works from around this time; the conclusion of the Oboe Quintet (1995) is modelled on the type of credit sequence at the end of a television programme in which a rapid montage is constructed from segments of the programme.



Ex.7

NO MUSIC exists in a historical vacuum. The post-war serialists' demands that all vestiges of tonal or rhythmic consonance must be excluded from music, besides being ultimately an unachievable end, led towards ever-increasing limitations placed upon pitch and duration, to the extent that most of the composers involved soon realised the extent to which they were painting themselves into a corner. There is a world of difference between the opinion that important music resulted from this period and the tenet that this idiom (or alternatively that of harmonic saturation) must become a universal *lingua franca*. Fox, as a scholar of this period in musical history, understands these questions as well as anyone. He is also aware of the stylistic resonances in much serialist music, despite these composers' attempts to create a 'year zero'. Thus he chooses to make explicit his music's relationship with the past, so as to be able to deal with it all the better.

Furthermore, Fox's early, high processual work, led him to realise the limitations of any such fundamentalism. With the best will in the world, and the most sophisticated of techniques, there are limits to that which can be created from first principles. The amazing complexity of much music before the late 20th century (or that of natural sounds) can never be wholly explained in these terms, any more than the current situation in Chechnya can be explained in terms of elementary units of mass and energy. Thus his use of found materials or material-types represents an

attempt to build upon and critique the achievements of the past. Consequently, since *A-N-N-A blossom time*, Fox has been happiest using that whose properties can be apprehended, controlled and diverted (as witness the use of recorded music and sounds), and this may explain why he has shyed away from pure electronic sounds.

If this is a type of postmodernism, then so be it, but it is a rationalist postmodernism, rather than an empirical one i.e. that which plunders musical history without asking any questions. As Paul Griffiths points out in his book *Modern music and after*,[5] even Ferneyhough must now be considered a 'post-modern modernist', meaning that he is using a type of musical language that is clearly located in a particular time and place and is surveyed at a distance, with historical hindsight.

The achievements of the postwar era are as important to Fox as those of any period; his music is unthinkable without the formal innovations of Stockhausen, Kagel's technique of organising a chord sequence around the notes of a melody, Barlow and Zimmermann's extraction of one part from the frequency differences of others, and much else. Similarly, his work on pitch-class analysis has undoubtedly informed his approach to harmony.

What many find hardest to come to terms with is the way in which Fox can, for example, write in the course of one year (1992) a series of works so different from each other as *A glimpse of Sion's glory*, *Straight lines in broken times*[2], *Louisiana*, *You, us, me (Habañera)*, *clarinet quintet* and *Block*. But Fox is more concerned with the composition of good music more than the creation of a personal style. As I hope to have demonstrated in this article, a study of a broad cross-section of his output reveals common characteristics and concerns, but Fox is happier to let these arise of their own accord than attempt to stamp 'C. Fox' over every note. He has said that he would like his pieces to be remembered, but is less concerned that people know who composed them.

Of course self-expression cannot be avoided completely. Our experience of (say) a long silence in the middle of a piece is different when we know a composer has signed their name to this (even if it came about as a result of random procedures) than if no human agency had sanctioned this event. But Fox is not aiming for a complete Cageian abjugation of intention (which Cage never achieved either); his formal conceits, use of found materials, computer programmes and use of randomness are a means of transcending the self, ex-

5. Paul Griffiths: 'Brian Ferneyhough', in *Modern music and after* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995), pp.294–303.

ceeding that which first-person consciousness can create at will.

To perform Fox's music, one's efforts are undoubtedly enhanced by a broad knowledge of different musical traditions, contemporary and otherwise. Fox dislikes a naïve romanticised approach, that which fits conventional criteria of 'musicality', bending the music to fit in with a different aesthetic (I will return to this subject in a forthcoming article on the performance of contemporary piano music). In this sense, he appreciates the authentic performance movement and is closely involved with the York Early Music Festival. But this does not mean that he wants performers to take a clinical, literalist, approach to his scores. Fox's scores are not sacred parchments: they try to provide enough information to delimitate his intentions at the time of writing, and he is prepared to consider other possibilities (for example regarding tempos). His music should not be played as if by a machine, and he enjoys rehearsing and the social dimension of music-making.

WHILST MANY BRITISH composers take the strange and water it down sufficiently as to make it seem familiar, Fox, a true heir to the Brechtian tradition, takes the familiar and makes it strange. A scourge of all forms of unnecessary mysticism and obfuscation, he attempts to express the complex and intricate in as clear and direct a manner as possible. His music is panoramic in its ambition, moving beyond the romantic's trust in the immediate reaction towards the rationalist's (or classicist's) search for understanding and illumination. Moreover, it seems clear to me that Fox's outlook is conditioned by his being a native of the North, rather than South, of England. Anyone familiar with this part of the world knows its combination of a deep sense of its own culture and a wild, windswept, rugged terrain. It is perhaps not too fanciful to suggest that something of the spacious but uneven rocky landscapes, and the stone walls, of this part of the world informs the psychological topography of Fox's music. It is often said that Northern light is the perfect light to paint in. When the light varies more from season to season, one becomes more aware and appreciative of it (as witness the volatile nature of the music of Kaja Saariaho, coming from a part of the world where the changes in light are more extreme). And light is perhaps the most appropriate metaphor for Fox's work. He says that he would almost like to include the word 'light' in every title that he invents. Light as the physical phenomenon (his music is shot through with shafts of light and darkness) but also as shining light upon things and presenting phenomena in different lights.

Ian Pace has recently recorded Christopher Fox's piano music for CDs on Metier (for release in August 1998) and NMC. In autumn 1998 he will be presenting a recital series in London based around these works.

CHRISTOPHER FOX – A CHECKLIST

Works

Second eight (1978–80) pno
Magnification (1978–80) v, tape
Dance (1980) afl, cl, vla, vcl
L (1980) 4 vv (ATTB)
American choruses (1979–81) 16 vv (SATB), 2 elec orgs
darkly (1981) 4 performers (music-theatre)
Alleluia (1981, rev. 1997) 5vv (ATTBB)
Bewegung (1981) 3 performers (music-theatre)
Recirculation (1982) tbn, tape
Contraflow (1983) amp bfl
Reeling (1983) cl, perc
Missa est (1983) Ct, T, 4 viols, rebec, recs, portative org, bells
Etwas lebhaft (1983) fl/afl, ob, cl, hn, tpt, tbn, pno, vln, vla
Threnos (1983) v
Winds of heaven (1984) amp rec, elecs
Broadway boogie (1984) 3 eng hns
... or just after (1984) cl
... or just after (1984) hp
auf dem Zweig (1984) pic, glock, mand
The Missouri harmony (1985) org
Dead fingers talk (1985) perc
Heliotropes[1] (1985–86) 2 vlns
Heliotropes[2] (1986) tpt, tbn, hp, vib, db
A kind of prayer (1986) 2 pnos
Heliotropes[4] (1986) hn
Heliotropes[5] (1986) 2 cls, vib
Ci–Gît (1987) ms, afl, bcl, prep pno, vla, vlc
Heliotropes[6] (1987) 2 vlns, vla, vlc
More light (1988) pno
A–N–N–A blossom time (1988) v, pno
Foreplay (1988–89) fl/pic, ob, perc, pno, vlc
stone.wind.rain.sun[2] (1989) ssax, asax, tsax, barsax
stone.wind.rain.sun[3] (1989) amp afl
Leap like the heart (989) bcl, tpt, pno, 2 perc, db
stone.wind.rain.sun[4] (1989) 2 cls
stone.wind.rain.sun[1] (1990) 4 tbns
The science of freedom (1990) fl, vln, perc, hpd, vla da gamba
Heliotropes[3] (1987, rev. 1990) fl, ob, cl, cl/bcl, bsn, hn
Straight lines in broken times[1] (1991), org
Chile (1991), gtr
I sing for the muses and myself (1991) v (ad lib.), pno
A glimpse of Sion's glory (1992) SSAATTBB (+ ad lib. insts)
Straight lines in broken times[2] (1992), cl, vln, pno
Louisiana (1992) v, pno
You, us, me (Habañera) (1992) pno
clarinet quintet (1992) cl, 2 vlns, vla, vlc
Block (1992) prep pno
liiK.relliK (1991–93) pno
Striking out (1993) vla
Trümmermusik (1993) ms, hurdy-gurdy
Three constructions after Kurt Schwitters (1993) tape
In the key of H (1993–94) (with Ian Duhig) spkr, saxes, tape
More things in the air than are visible (1993–94) pno, tape
27 fanfares (new heaven, new earth) (1994) org
Straight lines in broken times[3] (1994) vlc
Straight lines in broken times[4] (1994) 2 bcls, tape
Paired off (1995) pno
Oboe Quintet (1995) ob, 2vlns, vla, vlc
Complementary figures (1996) pno
Themes and variations (1996) fl, cl, bsn, tpt, pno, perc, vln, vla, vlc, db
Pastoral (1996) fl, pno
Alarmed and dangerous (1996) tpt, brass, tape

Prime site (1997) pno
how time passes (1997) vln
Vanished days (1998) tnr, pno
The art of concealment (1998, 4 perc
Another reality (1998) fl, cl, ssax, tpt, elec gtr, vln, vla, vlc, tape
Chant suspendu (1998) vlc, pno

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'Walter Zimmermann's local experiments', in *Contact* no.27 (Autumn 1983), pp.4–9
'Après Einstein: la succession minimaliste', in *Contrechamps* no. 6 (Lausanne) (April 1986), pp.172–85
'Cage–Eckhardt–Zimmermann', in *Tempo* no.159 (December 1986), pp.9–15
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'Reflections from a slow country (on Morton Feldman)', in *Contact* no.31 (Autumn 1987), pp.31–34
'New music and the politics of distribution', in *New Music 88*, ed. Michael Finnissy, Malcolm Hayes & Roger Wright (London, 1988), pp.127–32
'A Berlin Diary', in *Contact* no.32 (Spring 1988), pp.70–74
'Loops, overtones and Erhard Grosskopf', in *Contact* no.33 (Autumn 1988), pp.6–12
'Steve Reich's "Different Trains" ', in *Tempo* no.172 (March 1990), pp. 2–8
'Complexity in music', in *Complexity?*, ed. Joël Bons (Rotterdam, 1990), p.20
'British music at Darmstadt, 1982–1992', in *Tempo* no.86 (September 1993), pp.21–25
'Once there were parking lots, now it's a peaceful oasis', in *Versus* no.3 (Leeds, 1994), pp.49–52
'Music as fiction: a consideration of the work of Richard Barrett', in *Contemporary Music Review* vol.13, pt 1, ed. Tom Morgan (1995), pp.147–57
'Luigi Nono and the Darmstadt School', in *Contemporary Music Review* (forthcoming)
Von Kranichstein zur Gegenwart, coedited with L. Knessl, R. Stephan, O. Tomek & K.Trapp (Stuttgart: DACO Verlag, 1996)
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