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Citation: Pace, I. (2007). Gordon Downie and Ian Pace: A Dialogue. *The Open Space Magazine*(8 & 9), pp. 181-208.

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Gordon Downie & Ian Pace - a dialogue

Composer Gordon Downie and pianist [Ian Pace](#) discuss music, visual art, culture, modernism, Marxism and Britain

[Gordon Downie](#) is a unique figure in British new music, or indeed anywhere, with whom I have had the pleasure to work on multiple occasions. His music (and visual art) demonstrates a ferocious commitment to the possibilities of complex abstraction and a pronounced resistance towards passive, habitual listening.

This extended and in-depth interview has been conducted over several months by e-mail, and delves deep into issues of complexity, modernism, the role of culture in late capitalist society, and the current state of new music. The type of language used, drawing extensively upon ideas and methodologies from Marxism and the Frankfurt School as well as elevated levels of technical musical discourse, may seem difficult and a little esoteric to some, but has both a beauty and an objectivity of its own. Discourse about music and cultural matters in Britain in particular is notoriously woolly, over-laden with tired metaphorical clichés and rather quaint biographical reductionism.

Through this dialogue, Gordon Downie and I attempt to offer an alternative discursive possibility, in part as a strategy to find a way beyond the prison-house that more conventional writing on music frequently imposes, laden as it is with so many aesthetic and societal assumptions that are tacitly accepted and never questioned. Our positions and convictions on many issues are by no means identical, as should become clear through reading, but the interaction was deeply fruitful and stimulating.

For myself, having known and conversed with Gordon Downie for quite a number of years now, I have so often found our dialogues force me to rethink various slightly banal assumptions I might have previously made, and sharpened up my thinking on many

matters, though I choose to maintain my own positions often (for example on jazz!).

This interview deserves to be read carefully and diligently, and all those involved in the world of contemporary music or culture in general should ask themselves if they can really afford not to engage with the issues raised. I hope that in the context of British music, this discourse represents a beginning rather than an end.

Ian Pace, October 2004

1.

Ian Pace : Gordon, you seem as committed an advocate of the ideals of 'high' modernism in music (as well as in architecture and other artistic media) as just about any composer I have encountered. Can you tell me about how you first became drawn towards a modernist aesthetic, and how your interests developed?

Gordon Downie : And with my university duties you should add to that list computer science, which, in its emphasis on the systematic organisation and analysis of problems and phenomena, offers us a scientific-technical model for creative action fully in keeping with aesthetic modernism. But that kind of breadth and interdisciplinarity is essential for me, otherwise one is subject to making all those operational and conceptual mistakes that are borne of an extreme division of labour. It's a result of a desire to think structurally, to comprehend the intricate connectivity between phenomena. Modernist architects, composers, and visual artists have (or had) the same, or closely similar concerns, and it's essential to see how those concerns manifest themselves in different media.

But aesthetic modernism, of course, is just a field-specific manifestation of a wider socio-political programme of modernisation and cultural maturation. That's what gives the programme legitimacy for me, in that it penetrates well beyond merely parochial, aesthetic concerns. We should note, for example, that constructionism emanated from a socio-political context of liberation, that many of the most important manifestos of this period from Abstract-Creation, Unism, and De Stijl, though

articulated in an aesthetic form, are essentially political statements, and political statements of the radical left: who would deny the essential connectivity between Mondrian's notion of equivalence and socialist distributions of power? One of the problems now is that the *new* left and its various offshoots (and I'm not referring here to party affiliation), has taken the dictatorship of the proletariat so literally. It's true that high cultural forms remain inaccessible to both the proletariat and large sections of the petit bourgeoisie. For those writers of the *New Left Review*, and *Culture, Theory and Critique*, the solution is to interpret aesthetic complexity as a means to sustain an unequal distribution of cultural power. By this route all high-cultural endeavour is condemned. But such an analysis, intentionally or not, conspires with those very forms of domination with which the new left has claimed to be at war. Whilst our systems of education and media dissemination continue *not* to serve the interests of genuine intellectual enlightenment and engagement, broad masses of the population will continue to find the most radical and revolutionary cultural artefacts utterly impenetrable. So if they prefer Big Brother or Eastenders to Stockhausen's *Gruppen* or Joyce's *Ulysses*, and if they prefer B&Q pseudo-Georgian to Le Corbusier functional, we should analyse what role Big Brother, Eastenders, and B&Q pseudo-Georgian have in maintaining the proletariat in this state of anaesthetised ignorance. The new lefts' time would be better spent analysing and attacking this: as it is currently constituted, the proletariat is a product of capital, and as such, should, like capital, be condemned.

So I could respond to your question by citing my first encounter of Webern's *Symphony Opus 21* or Stockhausen's *Klavierstücke I* as life-changing events, but I'd rather refrain from such bourgeois autobiography and self-aggrandisement if you don't mind. What we might query is how, in our present cultural climate, one can sustain, let alone initiate, a commitment to ideals such as these. Given Boulez's trajectory, it's not as if one has models to follow. On the contrary, this composer's appropriation and privatisation of this tendency is as much a factor in Modernism's decline as a dominant paradigm, as are the attacks from more obviously reactionary sources, such as those representatives of the so-called post-modern and other cultural neo-conservatives.

IP : Point taken about bourgeois autobiography! It's a quaint and trite bourgeois notion that all art is about nothing more than the personality quirks of its creator - a convenient ideological tool for neutralising its wider relevance. Anyhow, your reply suggests to me a number of questions and issues to discuss, which I'd like to outline at length.

While in total agreement with you about the link between modernist artistic manifestos and radical movements for political change, it might be argued by some that such tendencies are over-utopian in nature, disengaged from the historical state of underdeveloped class consciousness at the time of their emergence (and today).

GD : How can one be *over-* utopian?! The conditions that gave rise to the movements and ideals that I cite have only changed in their severity and totality, which only make those ideals even more important.

IP: Well, this leads me to several suppositions. I would imagine you would agree that ruling class ideology has a vested interest in maintaining a high degree of disengagement on the part of the working classes, so that, as you say, their attentions are concentrated upon Big Brother and EastEnders (and celebrity trivia) rather than more exalted and potentially emancipatory artistic creations less easily assimilated into the entertainment industry, not to mention greater awareness of the limitations provided by their class position, or the realities of Western imperial domination. Given such an actually existing situation, is it not possible that 'high' art (in this case specifically high modernist art) lends itself too easily to appropriation for the purposes of bourgeois hegemony?

To give a less jargon-ridden example of that, the purported 'difficulty' of highly complex music can lead to the cultivation of the 'specialist listener', he/she who prides themselves on their superior understanding as opposed to that of the masses he/she looks down upon with patronising contempt. I've seen this sort of appropriation implicit in the attitudes towards such music from many in the musical world (especially those from backgrounds of privilege and the public schools); as such, do we not need to address the danger of such arts being used as a weapon for maintaining a state of class divisiveness? The proletariat are

indeed a historical product of capitalism, but so are the bourgeoisie - Marx would see both disappearing after socialist revolution. What would you propose as workable methodologies for examining the state of proletariat consciousness that leads them to prefer popular art forms to high modernism? Shouldn't bourgeois consciousness and artistic preferences also be subject to an equal degree of critical scrutiny?

GD : Your observations point to the contradictions inherent in capitalist, class societies. The contradiction here is that high-culture is indeed appropriated by the bourgeoisie to sustain unequal distributions of power. But the bourgeoisie appropriate everything. It doesn't mean that such work is produced specifically for them, it means that only *they*, in principle, have the intellectual capacity (itself a product of privileged educational opportunity), to comprehend and patronise it, in addition to the necessary leisure time. Though of course, we should be a little clearer about what we mean by the term *bourgeoisie*. They do have the educational foundation, potentially, but only a minority engage in the kind of intellectual challenges that we are identifying. The extreme divisions of labour we witness in capitalist society place severe constraints on the ability of different sections of that society to comprehend the activities of another. And for the most part, bourgeois or proletarian, most subjects reject complex art. This may indicate that progressive cultural production, like any other sphere of high-level human activity, is something for which significant preparation and education is required, and although class origin and interests play a part in the willingness and ability of subjects to engage it, other, culture-specific issues also come into play. For the most part, it would seem that art is seen to fulfil certain emotional expectations. If it doesn't, then it is rejected. This has been the fate of the high-modernist avant-garde, an indication, perhaps, of its genuinely negatory character, and thus its importance in the wider socio-political context.

But I produce work for no particular class faction. However, I do require from listeners certain educational and intellectual prerequisites to enable the work to be understood. Why is this so surprising? This is my expectation. If one wishes to explore complex cognitive phenomena in art, one will obviously require from one's clientele a willingness and an ability, in addition to the

patience, to penetrate it at the appropriate level. I believe that an interest in exploring complexity, the thread connecting all the advanced art of our time, is quite appropriate and understandable. Unfortunately, those with the necessary qualifications are largely drawn from bourgeois class factions. I would rather this wasn't the case. But I am not prepared to change my creative focus to ameliorate the problem. This is simple-minded. To start to compose workers' marches or use common tonal triads reduces both the analysis and the solution to this problem to a level of extreme banality. This serves no interests other than those of power: by jettisoning complexity, we disassemble one of the remaining weapons against the process of intellectual emaciation, conformity and passivity that characterises capitalist societies.

Of course, it will be argued that high art is itself a creation or product of bourgeois consciousness, which serves bourgeois class interests. In other words, artists are themselves recruited from the ranks of the bourgeoisie or internalise bourgeois ideology. It is for this reason that we need to examine the medium itself. All objective phenomena are complex, natural or synthetic. It should come as no surprise to us that products of artifice, of which cultural products are an example, should also exhibit complexity. Generally, simplicity isn't interesting. This suspicion of collusion held by factions of the new left serves the interests of only one class faction: power.

IP : But do you see any value at all in inhabiting artistic forms and genres perceived as more 'accessible', to subvert and defamiliarise them from within to engender critical consciousness of both the forms/genres themselves and also of the wider social and historical processes that gave birth to them in the first place? An obvious example of this is in the plays of Brecht; some of the music of Mauricio Kagel, Dieter Schnebel, Nicolaus A. Huber and Konrad Boehmer attempts a similar process, so by very different means does the early work of Frank Zappa.

GD: Given the immediacy of the theatre, a case might be convincingly advanced for Brecht, but what evidence is there that those methods of subversion practiced by Huber and Schnebel, for example, actually reach their target? And they must have a target otherwise their position is untenable. Might it not be the

case that, once again, it is only the bourgeoisie that is able to decode such intentions, which rely upon a considerable level of formal education which the proletarian is unlikely to have acquired? That being the case, the main achievement here is the compromising of high-art endeavour. Following Adorno, I would be inclined to view committed art or critical composition as a form of pseudo-activity. Those artists who place the medium at the service of political agitation or subversion might have a greater chance of effecting real social change if their energies were applied to real, direct political action. I am unable to argue that complexity doesn't assist the maintenance of the political status quo. But capital deforms and corrupts all that it touches. Resisting this process of deformation strikes me as the most effective response, and this can only be attempted by maintaining the autonomy of artistic media. By placing the medium at the service of political agitation, committed art deforms the medium. Clearly, the bourgeois and the proletarian are both products of capital. But I would argue that only the intellectual, who is ideally outside either class formation, has any chance of transcending these conditions. We are all in the fish tank together, but we can become more aware of the ideological waters through which we travel. In advocating the primacy of the medium and artistic autonomy, I am well aware that I present myself open to charges of conspiring, indirectly, with power. But this is a contradiction internal to the system. Of course, appropriation is one thing, but the intellectual can collude with power directly by manufacturing his or her art with a view to maximise its success or symbolic profit margin in market society. And since the last aggressive re-assertion of capital in the form of Thatcherite and Reaganite economics, this has become the norm for several generations of neo-conservative British composers and visual artists. I would argue that the vast bulk of new music composed in the UK today is an act of simulation, simulation in the sense that the *fake* is now the preferred model.

IP: The artistic movements you listed earlier, and others from the same time, sprang up as a response to particular historical circumstances. Are they utterly predicated upon the particularities of the historical moments from which they emanated, and if so, do you think our current historical moment is sufficiently similar so that such movements are not diminished in their importance and vitality?

GD : As I stated earlier, the conditions that gave rise to such movements haven't changed, so the relevance of such ideas and programmes has not diminished. There are plenty of voices that would like to pretend that such conditions *have* changed, to enable them to brand mere reformist opportunism as radical. This is a strategy that typifies the agendas of both cultural producers and administrators, and political parties, New Labour being prime among them. It is an attempt to erase memories, and they are doing an excellent job of it.

IP : What you locate as the new left (with respect to an over-literalist view of the dictatorship of the proletariat, in the sense of wishing to impose the currently-existing state of proletarian consciousness and taste upon all people) seems to me a better description of the Stalinist and Maoist left. Cornelius Cardew's rejection of all his and others' modernist and experimental work in favour of a 'music for the people' is the epitome of this ideological viewpoint. There are many on the 'new' left (including myself) who believe that increased education and accessibility can act as a means to enhance the *possibility* of working class people being able to engage with supposedly more 'demanding' art (and politics!) - even a plain social democrat would surely be sympathetic in this respect. After all, there is no more demeaning attitude one can take towards working class people than to deny their potential (on the question of whether Cardew was guilty of this I remain agnostic). Actual organisations and programmes such as the Open University, or Workers Educational Programmes, were designed in part as a response to these needs in more social democratic times. Do you feel in sympathy with such a view?

GD : Of course, any mechanism that can help the proletariat in this way is welcome, but such efforts are, of course, largely reformist, and for that reason, as Rosa Luxemburg showed us, they do not represent real solutions. Rather, such solutions are equivalent to putting a plaster on a gunshot wound - they come too late.

IP : With reference to your comment about an intellectual manufacturing his or her art for purposes of maximising success in market society - how precisely do you think a composer does this? And how is it possible to act differently?

GD : We're already accustomed, of course, to market priorities determining at a fundamental level the way that arts and cultural organisations operate. The withdrawal of state subsidy during the past twenty years or more has made such organisations increasingly dependent upon corporate largesse. But this largesse comes at a price. For corporations, association with cultural organisations has symbolic value, to enhance the corporation's image in society. Their finance, in consequence, will only be awarded to those organisations, events, or cultural producers that maximise that image and that symbolic profit. But this means that those values associated with the market risk penetrating cultural organisations and influencing their decision-making. In such circumstances, organisations are either pressurised to withdraw support from any cultural product of a negatory complexion, or use this market-driven climate as a cloak to mask a cultural agenda that is already reactionary. Given this environment, we should ask ourselves whether cultural products themselves have escaped this process of commodification, or whether creative horizons and ambitions are similarly determined and constrained by the priorities of the market. In other words, are creative artists creating with market success in mind, however diffuse the definition of market might be in this context? Once again, this is an environment which creative artists of a reactionary or neo-conservative tendency find hospitable to their creative inclinations. In such circumstances, their otherwise reactionary behaviour can be interpreted and marketed as a healthy realism, which exhibits a flexible, pragmatic response to new, social realities over which they have no control. And as the market penetrates state educational provision and the university sector, this process finds formal legitimation. This is a cultural environment that becomes a highly hospitable breeding ground for the restoration of cultural-historical resources that *objective* historical processes have already superseded.

But this isn't an argument about material. We risk missing the point if we make this an argument about the continued relevance or not of either tonality or the formal archetypes to which it is umbilically connected. For composers who employ these means, in whatever degraded and distorted form they usually take and however well masked they may be with occasional splashes of modernity, their use is primarily symbolic, in order to signal to their consumers (whether listeners or performers) or their

employers (whether performers, promoters, publishers, or broadcasters), their intention to conform to certain ideological norms, and their intention to affirm and reproduce within the cultural sector and within an aesthetic context, their submission to commodity form. But of course, we must bare in mind that Judith Weir, James MacMillan, Thomas Adès, John Woolrich, John Casken, or Sally Beamish (to take the most obvious examples of this neo-conservative tendency), don't really compose tonally. Their product is eclectic in the truest sense of the term, in that survival in market society is dependent upon exhibiting maximum flexibility, in order, like the true entrepreneur or spiv, to take advantage of opportunities when and if they arise. So to answer your question, a composer submits to the market by employing those creative means that maximise the possibility that the subject can make an uninterrupted transition from passive consumer to passive listener: only through this route can the distinction between department store commodity and cultural artefact be successfully collapsed. Tonality, in whatever generalised and degraded form this may take, in conjunction with ersatz religion and spirituality, literary reference, quotation, and autobiography, fulfil this function with military-style precision. The main absentee from this space is the medium. And the high modernist programme represents the primary response and alternative to this process, but the costs of pursuing it in this current political climate are great.

IP : I'd like to pursue the issue of appropriation further: let's return to Adorno, who privileged the less explicitly 'political' work of Samuel Beckett as against that of Brecht, which he felt was more amenable to absorption and appropriation by the 'culture industry'. In Brecht's case, it has been argued that the crude didacticism of a play like *Arturo Ui* lends itself to this process - by its excessively individualistic focus, it is unable to probe deeper into the historical conditions that makes the rise of such an individual possible. As such, the play's ability to project into our own times also becomes limited.

Nowadays, there are plenty of people who pay homage to Luigi Nono as a 'great composer', and are quite happy with his 1960s and early 1970s works without any need to engage with their politics (other than as a type of 'radical chic', whereby subjects such as Vietnam, Chile, Auschwitz seem harmless when viewed

from a safe historical distance). I would argue that the earlier and later works of Nono, through their qualities of displacement, alienation, fragmentation and denial, constitute a much more *politically* powerful alternative to that which is offered by commodity consumer culture nowadays. Would you agree with this?

GD: Appropriation works at different levels. In recent years, Nono has become a useful symbol for a newly formed lumpen-avant-garde that, whilst seeking to maintain ideological and critical distance from power, seeks a spokesperson from within the movement who offers an alternative engagement to what they perceive as the cultural and ideological impasse caused by a purely high modernist cultural programme. With arguments that are closer to fiction than genuine critical enquiry, all such positions merely obscure what is already an unmistakable and unavoidable reality.

IP: In the case of Beckett, many could plausibly argue that his work (at least the plays) has equally been absorbed into the 'culture industry'. I'd think of it slightly differently, in a context which is especially pertinent to music: it has been possible to perform Beckett in such a manner as to tame the apocalyptic qualities of his work, as well as the terminally black humour, by casting members of the 'luvvie brigade' (Jeremy Irons, Alan Rickman, Juliet Stevenson, etc.), whose commodified acting style (repertoire of taught gestures, body language always revealing the lack of genuine identification on the part of the actors/actresses) places the work at a safe distance, and thus makes it more amenable to the purposes of bourgeois entertainment.

Parallel processes occur in the performance of modernist music. I read one review of a performance a few years ago of Stockhausen's *Kreuzspiel*, a work we both know and admire, which stated that the performance 'made this piece of utopian structuralism much more than cerebral abstraction' and that the pianist brought 'wit' to the piano part. I can only cringe at the thought of how this performance would have looked and sounded. In music that strives so hard to exceed and transcend inherited categories of expression that have descended into idle mannerism, can performance practice not serve an ideological

purpose of its own by 'historicising' a piece of music in this sort of way? A piece of music that is made to sound sufficiently rooted in dated modes of expression, with minimal mediation, can much more successfully satisfy the demands of the middlebrow entertainment industry.

GD: I think you are identifying the subtle and various ways in which appropriation or recuperation can take place. Clearly, for any cultural artefact to be absorbed, it has to be transformed to make it amenable to administration. But I would argue that this process operates most successfully at the level of material. In this way, the reproduction of those values and ideologies essential for maintaining capital, is made an essentially automatic process, as the very materials composers or visual artists use come ready-processed or ready-formed, or even ready-marketed. Attempts to process Stockhausen or Beckett post hoc are largely clumsy, though your particular example is striking for the level of inanity and incompetency that it exhibits. Unfortunately, commentators like this have conspicuous platforms upon which to disseminate their ignorance. But it continues to be the case that high modernist art is generally absent from the cultural field, and this is particularly the case for music. But its absence is an index of its continued resistance to processes of appropriation. Put simply, how can they market it?

IP : So, would you agree that a wilful historicisation is part of the appropriation procedure (in the sense of reducing modernism to a historical category whose time is past)?

GD : Most certainly. High modernism gains much of its critical power from its claims to historical objectivity and transcendence. Periodising the programme enables neo-conservatives to safely acknowledge its relevance whilst pursuing political agendas that are otherwise wholly reactionary and revisionary. But this process is also internal to the movement. Boulez's own appropriation and privatisation of this programme enables his continued dominance of the movement despite his more recent conservative tendencies.

IP : It has recently been shown (not least by Frances Stonor Saunders in her book *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the cultural Cold War*) how the rise to international prominence of American abstract expressionist artists and others was in part

made possible by CIA funding (craftily channelled through a variety of 'front' organisations so as to obscure the true source). In light of this, should we think again about questions of 'historical inevitability' in terms of the success of some modern art movements?

GD : One could list other, more recent interventions that distort the field of cultural production, whether it's Saatchi's patronage of a whole generation of young British artists whose work is created in their sponsor's mercenary image, or Frank Zappa hiring Pierre Boulez and the EIC to perform, promote, and legitimate his music. One could also question whether the extreme turn to the right in new music in recent years might have its roots in similar neo-conservative interventions. Certainly, both Adès and Adams have benefited considerably from such covert action channelled overtly through the Grawemeyer and Nemmers 'prizes'. (The award of such prizes to composers such as Harrison Birtwistle, incidentally, should not deflect us from this analysis. Despite its apparently hard surface, music of this kind is imbued with that particular flavour of pragmatism and compromise which is an essential ingredient of British pseudo radicalism, which in this case mistakes ugliness for rigour and seriousness of intent and hands the bourgeois victory on a plate: after all, knighthoods and genuine aesthetic radicalism are wholly incompatible). Clearly, the intervention at state intelligence level that Stonor Saunders reveals is of another order. But if her assertions are correct, then it is doubtful that abstraction would have reached the level of international dominance that it did without such intervention. And this would conform to the historical norm and explain why other, more radical forms of abstraction, such as the constructions of Charles Biederman, for example, which did not enjoy covert US government sponsorship, remained largely neglected and ignored by authority and the critical establishment. This helps to counter any argument that radical modernism of this kind is, in fact, some form of fabrication, and more or less a creation of power for the assertion of cultural hegemony. Rather, abstract expressionism was appropriated by power opportunistically for reasons already outlined. And the controversial nature of much of the work and the personalities producing it, some of whom exhibited hedonistic, self-destructive lifestyles which usefully reproduced romantic visions of the aesthetic life, offered useful tools of

promotion: the intellection involved in construction sells fewer weekend supplements.

But we should also question the motivations behind such critiques of high modernism, and consider whether critiques and revisionary analyses of this kind are driven by neo-conservative or feminist agendas that, though emanating from very different positions, share a common aim to discredit or relativise the high modernist programme.

IP: If a high modernist agenda is vulnerable to feminist critique, should one not question it?

GD : It's quite clear that in *Capital* Marx made little room for gender in his analysis of capitalism. The more separatist strands of feminism that view patriarchy as more significant in the creation of social divisions than either class or race have only contributed, I would argue, to the continued weakening of the organised left and its apparent impotency in the face of global capital domination. Feminist critiques of aesthetic modernism are similarly focused and analyse the internationalising and rationalising impetus of the movement as aesthetic imperialism or patriarchy. Again, such masculinisation only serves to factionalise and weaken forces of liberation and enlightenment, a particularly tragic waste of time if gender is in any case socially constructed to serve forms of labour division intrinsic to capitalist economics.

IP : Many of the abstract expressionist painters (most obviously Pollock) created wild cults of personality around themselves. John Cage did so as well, despite all his rhetoric to the contrary, as did Morton Feldman. I hardly need to mention Stockhausen. The media love this, enabling them to displace attention from the art to the artist. But do you think this had an impact upon the work itself, or is totally separable?

GD : It's regrettable that creative artists appear so willing to succumb to this kind of cultism, so willing to allow themselves, as subjects, to become as important (or more so) than their creative programmes. But you pose an interesting question, and as you say, Stockhausen's career trajectory is a perfect instance of this. If we examine his work from the 1950s, by considering pieces such as *Kontra-Punkte* , *Gruppen* , or the early *Klavierstücke* , these works have an aesthetic comportment largely in keeping

with the objectivising, internationalising spirit of the high modernist programme. To a significant degree they denounce the subject in favour of the collective: this is always a stronger option. One of the complaints customarily made against this music is that it all sounds the same. Notwithstanding the extent to which this is an over-simplistic over-statement, I consider this to be one of its potential strengths, signifying a transferral of notions of collective ownership, and a rejection of individualism, to the aesthetic. Though it is interesting to consider how Stockhausen's later period text or intuitive scores examine musical process at very fundamental levels, one could be forgiven for thinking that this analysis is a by-product of a musical development that enables Stockhausen-as-subject to be foregrounded, due to the social and more marketable form that this work took, enabling a transition of relative ease into the pages of *Rolling Stone* and *Melody Maker* . Such displacement of attention does have an impact on the art produced, and it is a feature of much cultural production. In this sense (if in no other) as Cardew asserted, Stockhausen really *did* serve imperialism, and it is a major contributor to this composer's increasing decline as a creative force from the 1970s onwards. But Stockhausen has always exhibited a level of careerism that has compromised his production, whether it's the conceptual inanity of *Klavierstück XI* or the abdication of critical perspective in *Klavierstück III* . His most recent work is surely unworthy of commentary.

2.

IP : Do you see your work in part as a strategy of negation, a word which has largely pejorative connotations in English, though very different resonances in Germanic idealist parlance (the process of negation, of critique, is a stage on the process of sublation (*Aufheben*) on the path towards higher knowledge; English empiricism is profoundly sceptical about such a thing ever being really possible)? Also, would you say there is a certain 'classicism' in your work and that of the modern movement in general (in whatever medium)?

GD : I understand and employ the concept of negation in broadly two ways. Firstly, with reference to set-theoretic practice, it functions as a formal strategy to manage change and difference,

to determine both linear and vertical structure, relationships, and incident, in order to control the levels of difference and similarity that these structures exhibit. Direct reference is made to this process, for example, in the suffix to **forms 5: event intersection**, in which every aspect of the work is governed by set operations of this kind, though I increasingly find that a more flexible approach can be obtained using fuzzy, rather than fully crisp set operations and structures. It is in this sense, perhaps, that work of this kind can be termed classical, though this isn't a term I generally use due to its unwanted connotations. Its emphasis on formalised and verifiable modes of practice, most commonly mathematical models or systems which are inevitably objective and externalised in nature, indicate a concern for standards of practice which subordinate individualism to more collective aims. This, I suppose, is a form of classicism, and may be what you mean. Underpinning the whole of the constructionist programme is a concern for accountability of this kind. This transforms the role of the artist, of course, and our current historical period is in large measure characterised by a reaction to this possibility. We should be unsurprised by the hostility initiated, for example, by integral serialism and similar modes of practice. Whilst art, functioning as surrogate religion, is viewed as a refuge, retreat, distraction, or escape from total administration, any practice that appears to replicate those features associated with total administration will be rejected, or not even recognised as aesthetic behaviour.

It is in this second sense that I use the term negation, in order to delineate one's position and response to power, and what strategies one can employ to manage that response. Practice can either affirm dominant power relations by reproducing them in symbolic form (and tonality, as I outlined earlier, is a perfect vehicle for this), or attempt to negate those relations through a refusal to take one's allotted place in that superstructural network which functions to reproduce those relations at ever higher levels of abstraction.

IP : All your compositional processes do still use the 'note' as the fundamental unit. Are you at all interested in extended instrumental techniques and the use of timbre individuated from pitch and rhythm?

GD : As the phrase indicates, extended instrumental techniques involve the individualisation of instrumental performance and the radical idiomaticity of instrumental technique. If the projection and investigation of integrated, highly structured and cohering wholes forms the basis of one's creative practice and aesthetic programme, as it does in my own case, one will seek to avoid any feature which risks loosening or weakening those inter-relationships and connectivities which are a pre-condition for such structures' successful implementation. The idioms of one instrument or instrumental family do not necessarily map on to the idioms of another, if at all. In consequence, the possibility of factoring out sufficient commonalities in order to construct integrated forms of organisation is, therefore, significantly weakened. Thus, to concentrate on 'the note' as the 'fundamental unit' is, for me, a recognition that, in order to suppress those forms of singularity that risk compromising the fully integrated whole, only those features exhibiting the highest levels of invariance constitute valid components of any organisational system or procedure. At this time then, my creative interests preclude the possibility of such techniques within the instrumental realm, though, given the flexibility of the human voice, I am interested in exploring extensions to this as a resource in the future.

But there has been an assumption driving the extension and expansion of musical materials that all parameters can be subjected to similar levels of development and exploration, an assumption that concludes that a radically expanded notational repertoire, for example, can be accompanied by a similar expansion in *timbral* control. This assumption doesn't take into account the different operational and cognitive modalities that notation and timbre inhabit. Of course, we do have technological devices, computers, that offer composers, in principle at least, unlimited control over this complex parameter; and it is for this reason that the bulk of my creative and research energies during the 1980s were devoted to computer music synthesis and investigation. For this reason, I am at a loss to understand why composers strain the instrumental medium by placing demands upon musical instruments that they are unable to satisfy. As technological tools, they were not designed to manipulate and control timbre to a sophisticated degree. It's true, especially in the hands of highly accomplished performers, that interesting

results can be obtained. But the contradictory nature of such research soon becomes apparent. To explore timbre, tools of exceptional analytical precision and sophistication are required, tools that are able to act upon sonic events, in parallel, at a highly multi-parametric level. Again, computers can do this with ease. At this time, I cannot imagine the physical constraints intrinsic to human physiognomy offering the means to explore instrumental timbre in this way. Attempts to do so risk inhabiting the special effects category of production or theatre. As such, they are highly singularised and risk compromising the internal integrity of any given structure. Thus, within instrumental music, I would claim that timbre *cannot* be individuated from pitch and rhythm to a sophisticated extent, so there is little point in pursuing it as a creative programme. It is for these reasons, and others, that my scores at this time do not specify any deliberate timbral modification or associated techniques of articulation. This even extends to 'standard' string techniques such as *sul ponticello* and *flautando* .

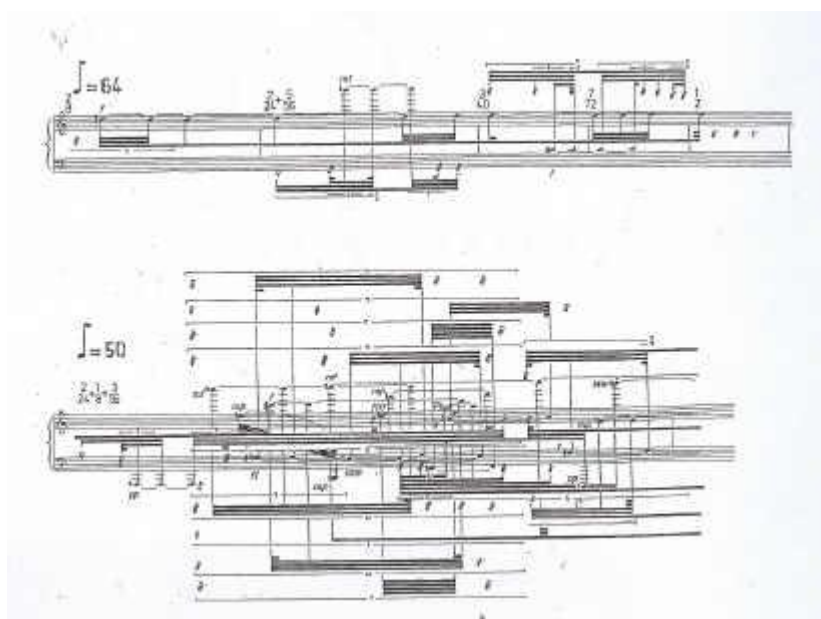
I am fully aware, of course, that those instrumental resources available to composers at this time are to some extent arbitrary. But this does not mean that they are without an internal structuring which delimits their field of competency. This field cannot be arbitrarily enhanced or extended by operating on one modality without considering how those extensions propagate and affect inter-modal relationships, possibly in detrimental and unforeseen ways. I am also aware, of course, that in the hands of certain composers, the use of extended instrumental techniques has other functions, as either a means to deliberately undermine the medium itself or as an agitational device to attack bourgeois security and 'good taste'. I am not without sympathy for such positions. But for reasons I outlined earlier, there are more direct and efficient ways to subvert bourgeois expectations than this, even though the average bourgeois couldn't care less about such posturing. And I am also fully aware, once again, that my disinclination to adopt such practices coupled with a general tendency of the field to measure radicality in coarse, quantitative terms, risks relocating my own practice to the centre-left, thereby reducing its critical potency.

IP : Well, the composer Helmut Lachenmann uses extended instrumental techniques in part precisely because they draw

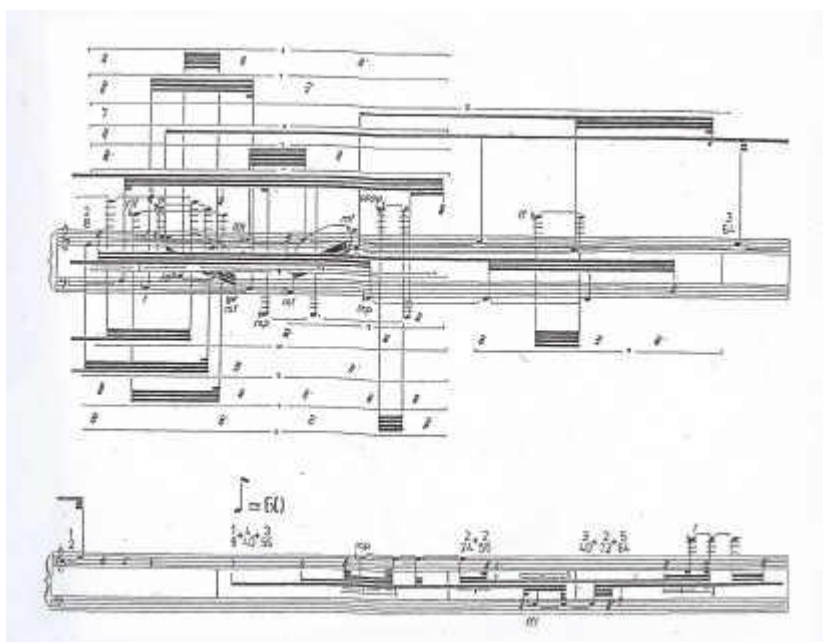
attention to themselves in live performance, foregrounding a certain non-posturing theatricality grounded in its literal 'means of production'. This serves as an antidote to a streamlined instrumental technique which seeks to erase the material-nature of instruments and performance for purposes of mystification, perhaps giving music-making a fetish quality as a rarefied music 'from on high'. Of course, Lachenmann is also simply fascinated by timbre per se, using intricate strategies of contextualisation to make manifest an almost naïve (in the best sense of the word) love for the possibilities of sonority. This is quite different to a 'means to deliberately undermine the medium itself' or 'an agitational device to attack bourgeois security and "good taste"', though some critics would like to co-opt Lachenmann into one of these camps. Do you believe this sort of compositional aesthetic to be of value?

GD : This is an interesting programme that Lachenmann is exploring, but it is a programme that makes itself easy prey to the types of appropriation to which you refer. Indeed, its agitational and critical function is surely its primary focus and value? Again, I would have to repeat that if one is 'simply fascinated with timbre per se', then explore it using those tools that reward that fascination.

But there is an important link here with aspects of my own practice that is most clearly explored in **piano piece 2**.



extract from Piano Piece
No 2



If Lachenmann's methods seek to *recapture* the means of production through processes of de-mystification, the notational devices utilised in *piano piece 2* function to subvert and disable those processes of appropriation and recuperation *before* they occur.

This resistance, I would claim, is embedded within the work's notational fabric and form. This exhibits a level of perceptual and operational complexity that acts as a barrier to unreflective, automatic realisation and reproduction. This is achieved through the radical re-specification of each successive impulse at every parametric level. The concentration upon the single impulse, or note, as the largest unit of organisation, acts as an efficient barrier to the formation of higher-level sensory units that are more susceptible to appropriation because of their (relative) ease of cognition. In combination with notational techniques that constantly mediate between high levels of determinacy and relative indeterminacy, the potential for resolving the polyvalent nature of the work, the possibility of the work reaching closure, the possibility of the work forming a conclusive identity, is constantly delayed and frustrated. In reply to Bourdieu, here, *complexity* is an act of resistance to processes of appropriation.

3.

IP: I'd like to ask if you can see anything of value in popular music and jazz, or in free improvisation? Would you subscribe to Adorno's views on these matters?

GD : You're right that in all essentials I would subscribe to Adorno's position with regard to so-called popular music. I think I would have little to add to his analyses, which strike me as no less applicable now than when he wrote them. But I would ask you why are we still examining this question? Given our own activities, why is this still considered an important issue? Let's try to examine this in more detail than is often the case. Firstly, great difficulties surround the notion of 'value'. Does the music articulate something of value in terms of technical innovation or interest? Or does the music have value in developing critical consciousness, awareness, or maturity? And what exactly do we mean by pop music or jazz music? In terms of technical construction, popular chart music strikes me as exhibiting no harmonic, rhythmic, or formal characteristics that elevate it above the severely retarded. For a while, particularly during the 1980s, the rapid development of synthesizers and associated signal processing devices enabled these moribund materials and forms to be projected in timbrally novel, though not necessarily richer, contexts. But whether projected using a Yamaha DX7 or a Fender Stratocaster, the materials stay either the same or, to paraphrase Brian Ferneyhough's words, progress from three-chord, to one-chord, to zero-chord trickery. But this level of retardation is built into the form of division of labour that characterises the field. Pop tunes are unable to exceed the boundaries of complexity allowed by the short-term memory characteristic of head-arrangements. Only music notation enables such boundaries to be exceeded. As a synonym for the intellect, it is ironic that those arrangements manageable by the head are of an intellectual ambition and range that requires no intellect at all. But we should be unsurprised that pop stars seek to bypass those formal programmes of learning that would equip them with the required knowledge and skills to read and write: show business is the cultural wing of capital, and as such it has no time for anything that will slow down the process of capital accumulation and its symbolic forms, fame and celebrity. It is true, of course, that during the 1970s certain factions attempted to extend these

basic ingredients. But if we examine, critically, the products of so-called progressive rock, we find essentially the same harmonic and formal characteristics. Where there *is* an attempt at formal expansion, as in the work of Yes or King Crimson for example, the expansion takes place with no concomitant attention to change in other parameters, an essential consideration if those expanded forms are not to buckle under this new expressive weight. This strain is particularly evident, for example, in Yes's *Tales from Topographic Oceans* : where such pretension is still to some extent hidden in the *Yes Album* , the limitations here become unbearably evident which no amount of virtuoso electronic keyboard scale-work is able to hide. There is thus a level of incompetence here that has its origins in extreme ignorance; though of course, as we can hear in the scores of MacMillan and others of his ilk, such incompetence is not limited to rock'n'rollers.

It is important to apply the same critical standards to this music that we do to all other musics. Only then does its truly retarded and reactionary nature become apparent. But it is still the case that such musics are given the benefit of the doubt. And it is extraordinary to see pop stars enjoying exceptional material wealth whilst simultaneously enjoying the suspension of belief that comes from the conferral of victimhood. This stems, I presume, from pop music's ancestry in certain (non-privileged) class factions. But if this were ever the case, rebellion has now joined the long list of other commodified and reified manners and images that make up the pop music industry style portfolio. Certain elements within high-cultural endeavour are far too tolerant of this process.

But as pop music can take many forms which are in their foundation nevertheless virtually indistinguishable, this is frequently also the case with jazz. Where jazz similarly seeks a higher level of technical expansion, it frequently does so by simply mimicking and appropriating those resources developed within high-cultural endeavour, but without the critical focus characteristic of the latter, and often rather clumsily. But the nod, wink, and grin that is elicited from Dave Brubeck's irregular metrical and phrase structures merely reassures us that despite this aberration, everything's the same underneath. And such music aligns itself with all those other musics of an affirmatory

nature that seek to hide their otherwise reactionary complexion beneath the thinnest veneer of modernity. As a propagandistic tool, syncopation just gives you the *illusion* of freedom. The position is no different when the nod, wink, and grin is replaced with a more learned demeanour: the main lesson to be learned from Tony Coe's use of Bergian twelve-note row structures in his *Zeitgeist*, is that for appropriation to go unnoticed, it has to be pursued far more wholesale and far more ruthlessly than we witness here.

The main thing to come out of this is a repeat of my opening question: why are we still examining this? We are concerned with it, in part, because such musics constitute the primary weapon of response by those cultural theorists who view high modernist complexity as a means, as I stated earlier, to sustain unequal distributions of power. Such musics are also effective symbolic tools that neo-conservative composers ransack as a badge of market utility masked as fake camp. But I do not question cultural theorists' veracity. The British strand of this tendency emanates in large measure from those institutions to which university status has only recently been conferred. Just as such institutions exist to service expanding student enrolment from proletarian origins, so the demography of faculty members is not infrequently sourced from similarly proletarian or petit-bourgeois class factions where an adolescent encounter with high culture was replaced with products of the culture industry. The kind of critique characteristic of Stuart Hall is an example of this kind of class warfare. In this process the comparative 'value' of Britney Spears or Pierre Boulez is, of course, lost

IP : In the eyes and ears of many serious aficionados of rock music, a band like Yes are hardly the epitome of a genuine 'progressiveness', despite the label; punk sprang up in part as a reaction to this sort of navel-gazing work (akin perhaps to something like the symphonies of Robert Simpson?), a combination of narcissism and solipsism that was a huge distortion of the more 'engaged' work of 1960s bands such as the Soft Machine. While punk was undoubtedly appropriated and rendered harmless by the rock-music industry, I'd argue that there was still some quality of authentic engagement at the very outset, manifest in the first Sex Pistols album, say, whose potency remains relevant today. The same claim could be made

for other key strategic moments in popular music history, or in the work of jazz musicians such as Charlie Mingus, Ornette Coleman or Cecil Taylor, say (and some earlier practitioners). Do you not see any potential in this type of work?

GD : Like any other hobbyist, the aficionado is highly territorial, and will always seek to ring-fence their activity and enthusiasms in this way. Distinctions such as those you relate function to achieve this end. But within our context, to assert the revolutionary potential of the tendencies you cite is to radically over-estimate the extent to which this kind of epiphenomena has any significance to power. Persistent questioning about this is akin to being asked at dinner parties ones opinion of Beethoven. It's a call to conform.

4.

IP : In Britain and America today, and increasingly also elsewhere, the dominant aesthetic seems to be one of *absorption* , under the auspices of a certain post-modern pluralism which turns every aesthetic movement (including high modernism) into just one 'style' amongst many (relatively homogenised to make this possible, not least through performance practice); aesthetic choices from amongst these styles then resemble any other consumer activity. This attitude is especially prevalent amongst the younger generation (especially that group of people who were all at Cambridge together in the 1980s) who have grown up in a world in which the values of Thatcherism have become 'normalised' and have shown little inclination to resist them. Much of the work of younger composers is depressingly familiar in this respect. How can or should one act to try and counteract this?

GD : What has happened in the UK over the past twenty years or so would be described, in another context, as a coup d'état. The particular factions to which you allude form a monopoly which enjoys a near exclusive possession and control over many or all of the most significant resources available for new music production, performance, and dissemination. But, as you intimate, this has only been possible due to their willingness to subordinate creative autonomy and decision-making to the priorities of the market and to fashion their product in its mercenary image. What action can be taken to counteract this

has far-reaching implications. Within the cultural field, politics and ideology are customarily masked as aesthetics. This being the case, acts of symbolic violence and oppression are accepted, interpreted, or, to use Bourdieu's formulation, *misrecognised* as objective characteristics of the field. Whilst this is the case, the product of contrivance and design is interpreted as fortuity, the product of favour and influence, as talent. As we see in other spheres where structures of democratic accountability and equity are absent, and where the possibility of engineering real change appears impossible, the response is frequently a resort to action of a more direct, less symbolic form. This may be the only effective route left open to us.

IP : The sort of discussion we are having at the moment is, I think, quite markedly different in its nature, attitudes, language and ideological viewpoints to most of what characterises discourse about music in Britain . Such discourse more commonly comprises purple prose and blow-by-blow description, an almost adolescent fixation upon mystical personae of the individuals involved (with a lot of emphasis upon the bourgeois autobiography you rightly decried earlier), and a general aesthetic privileging of what might crudely be called the more titillating aspects of music. Discourse of this type is not merely an appendage to music, or a footnote to it, I believe: the discourse, in the form of hype and publicity, reviews, or simply the oral discourse that goes on between those involved with the administration of new music, is manifested at every level. Such discourse legitimises certain types of music, and delegitimises other work that exceeds the discursive categories employed. This seems a *prima facie* case of the means by which the discourse bullies the artistic work into the service of entertainment, in this particular British case. Would you agree with this? What are your thoughts on the role of 'words about music'?

GD : I think you're isolating here a feature that penetrates our society at a very fundamental level, whether between individual subjects or between groups. It should, therefore, come as no surprise to us that music, like any other form of human communication, is reduced (wherever possible), to the same kinds of coarse discursive categories that you cite. Since the last aggressive reassertion of capital during the 1980s, contemporary music has finally been allotted its place in the leisure, heritage,

and entertainment industries. This has been a gradual process, which remains incomplete. But it is one that has already transformed the field into a mere simulation of what we mean by contemporary music: even the term has been stolen from us, and we're unable to use it without qualification. This being the case, we should be unsurprised that the language used to describe or discuss it, takes a similar form, one that is as indistinguishable as possible from the language that is used to describe or discuss any other commodity in market society. And, once transformed into a commodity, the languages of advertising and marketing are deployed to sell it, which, of course, are languages of distortion, deceit, and propaganda. This accounts, I believe, for some of the more colourful prose that you rightly condemn. But what astonishes us, in part, is the extent to which composers so readily allow themselves to be subjected to these processes.

But this process is an attack on complexity, a prohibition on thinking. Like the music it serves to sell, such language is an abdication of reflective and critical thought. Like the acronyms that so horrified Marcuse, reified language functions to delimit and control, what can be said or thought. In such a context thinking can only be restored by a radical critique or re-formulation of those tools of discourse that we employ to explore and organise that thinking. This is the case with music, and this is the case with words. Many techniques can function as models of resistance, not least the fragmentary discourse and forms we associate with critical theorists such as Theodore Adorno. In my own case, the reader should also note my total disinclination to employ those conceptual categories that typify discourse on music, not only because of their inappropriateness to the task in hand, but because, having been fully appropriated, their signifying capacity is no longer under our control. This being the case, one must find or invent new discursive and critical categories that will once more enable authentic communication to take place. From a wider perspective, this also accounts for my rejection of forms of labour division that constrain and order thinking by imprisoning it in domain-specific language. For this and other reasons, I map categories of discourse from one domain (such as computer science, anthropology, sociology, evolutionary psychology, or psycho-acoustics) to re-form the conceptual framework of another. Thus, my preference for the term *temporal partitioning* rather than rhythm, for example, is

not only driven by a desire for conceptual and discursive precision, but also a realisation that the term rhythm has become semantically overloaded with connotations and denotations which I am unable to control.

But most importantly, we need to make a distinction between speech and writing. You use the term 'words', which leaves me unclear to which you refer. Speech, more than writing, lends itself more easily to those processes of reification and appropriation that kill authentic communication. This is due to the context in which speech is the dominant discursive and communicational format, such as we find in mass communicational systems. It is to this process that Bourdieu so horrifyingly refers in describing those processes of discourse management commonly employed in television and radio broadcasts, where the sheer speed of interaction prohibits the kind of reflective thought necessary to prevent the subject's decline into automatism. Without such reflection, the subject is prone, or forced, to employ more or less prefabricated units of speech that carry with them a semantic content, the intent or meaning of which has been taken out of the hands, or mouths, uttering them. To paraphrase Guy Debord, inarticulateness in this context is a sign of extreme enlightenment.

More generally, one could argue that artists should write more and create less. By remaining mute about their work, they leave it open to manipulation by others. Historically, artists' letters are one of the primary sources that scholars can use to analyse their thinking. This being the case, we should be unsurprised at the infantile, shallow form that much writing about music has taken: this is not a recent phenomenon. But we might consider whether the hostility that has accompanied *intellectualised* art (various forms of constructionism being the primary examples), stems, in part, from such artists disinclination to allow others, whether researchers or critics, to speak for them. Disempowered, the critic fights back by championing the mute and the dumb.

IP : How important is progressive aesthetic activity in comparison to explicit political activism? Have you ever been involved in the latter?

GD : As I believe I intimated earlier, I am sceptical about the ability of art to effect direct, political change. If that's what you

want, then use more appropriate and direct tools of engagement. But for intellectuals of the left, organised political activity offers an inhospitable context within which to do this, given the left's commitment to a proletarian dictatorship in which radical social change must be initiated from below. As I stated earlier, given that the proletariat are themselves a product of capital, and represent a low revolutionary potential, I would advocate a model along the lines proposed by Isaac Deutscher and others, in which a radical intellectual vanguard guides this process through enlightened leadership. No current organisation of the left dare advocate such a programme publicly, because of its Stalinist and Maoist overtones. However, the internal divisions within the left are such that it remains a largely ineffective force against global capital. But art of a progressive and critical nature offers a context for encouraging and developing critical consciousness and awareness, which is a precondition for significant social change, and it can give glimpses of what currently seems an impossibility.

IP : Might the consciousness of radical bourgeois figures like either of us not still reflect some of the human interests of our class, as opposed say to that of a shop steward? Aren't there intrinsic dangers in our aesthetic projects in that respect, operating aloof from the broad masses of humanity? What relevance might such work have to a late-teenage girl working in a sweatshop in the Far- East for a big multinational corporation, say?

GD : What we do has no relevance to the workers to which you refer, and it's preposterous, of course, to suggest that it does or should, given the oppressive nature of the conditions that such workers are forced to endure. But I am at a loss to understand why your examples are taken from the bottom or lower end of the socio-economic spectrum. What we do has no relevance to the vast majority of workers, whether in a Far-East sweatshop, a legal firm, hospital consultancy, corporate board room, or university faculty. It strikes me that there are two fundamental and inter-connected reasons for this. Firstly, as Susan Sontag correctly observed, advanced modern art requires a level of intellectual engagement and cultivation akin to that required for physics, higher mathematics, computing, or any other of the advanced sciences. Generally, extreme divisions of labour prevent this kind of comprehension. I am a computer scientist, and rarely

is it asked whether sciences should be understood by or have a relevance to, non-specialists or those with little formal education: issues of accountability are of a different kind. The question is posed within cultural production because there is a general assumption or expectation that art should be comprehensible to everyone, with or without the requisite educational foundation; indeed, art is deemed faulty if it requires this. The source of this assumption is, in part, the use of culture as a means to implement forms of pseudo-democratic accountability within a cultural context that is largely irrelevant to the wider political decision-making process. Due to its impotence, liberalising culture is a cheap way to fake democracy. Secondly, advanced intellectual activity of this kind, whether in the arts or sciences, is rarely given access to those mechanisms and channels of communication, such as television, radio, or the press, that would allow this process of education, or enlightenment, to take place. This is a form of censorship, a prohibition on the most complex and advanced products of society being made available to all of those who would wish to access them. There are two solutions to this problem. Either one works to eradicate this socio-economic system and erect an alternative to it, or, as the cultural theorists would recommend, reformulate our activity to enable its easier navigation through this system with a view to subverting it from inside. Our cultural terrain is littered with examples of the latter that only results in culture enlisting itself into the service of power through a poor appropriation and simplistic re-formulation of political-reformist and ersatz military strategy.

5.

IP : Is there a place for the irrational in yours and others' music? Do the high rationalist procedures and aesthetics you employ have a type of quasi-mystical significance for you?

GD : Most art feeds off and is based on the irrational and the illogical, and makes little sense as a result: this is the norm for art. As the possibility of God recedes, for those seeking an alternative refuge, art becomes a useful surrogate for religion and other forms of so-called mystical belief. And many composers are happy with this state of affairs as it relieves them of the responsibility to properly account for their creative decision-

making, and enables them to mask their incompetence as humility.

But this is now just one more form of entertainment. My own techniques of composition have no significance to me greater than the structural and intellectual elegance that mathematical systems of thought intrinsically offer us: they are already fascinating and offer us efficient tools with which to model, structure, and explore our thinking. I can think of no alternative to basing one's actions on reason and associated logical processes. They strike me as the most effective weapon against the anarchy and irrationalism that is at the foundation of capital.

IP : Late post-modern capitalism attempts to channel irrational human qualities, including desire and sexuality, into pigeonholed categories that lose their force of purpose by that very action. I'm personally interested in radical sexuality as one possible arena in which some modicum of human desire can still exist in a form not totally occupied by the demands of capitalist society (though of course this is by no means easy to maintain, the forces of commodification lurk like barbarians outside the gates as much as in any other field of human activity). In music the concomitant quality might be a continuing attempt to convey something resembling authentic human emotion, though not of course in the commodified form beloved of neo-romantics, who render such possibilities utterly inert and stillborn. The more abstracted rationalism that you would seem to espouse is certainly important in times dominated by the type of 'instrumental reason' identified by Adorno and Horkheimer in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (by which reason assumes a purely utilitarian role, whose importance is seen purely in terms of its use-value, for building nuclear weapons or the maintenance of capitalist economic hegemony); nonetheless, mightn't the Enlightenment project itself contain some essential limitations? When total administration is the driving force in contemporary society, is there not something to be said, aesthetically speaking, for an attempt to convey that which lies beyond the boundaries of such administration (two very different composers who to my ears achieve something of this are Michael Finnissy and Hans-Joachim Hespos)? This is the reason why some have suggested that genuine romanticism could actually be a major threat to post-modernism. Or do you think such attempts are futile and doomed from the outset?

GD : Capital has appropriated the languages of mathematics, science, and reason to serve the interests of power and capital accumulation. We should be unsurprised, therefore, that subjects recoil when faced with cultural products that enlist those very same processes of rational organisation, systematisation, and construction, as it reminds them of their enslavement to total administration. But you are advocating the exploration or liberation of primary drives as a way to force holes through the administrative fabric. Every social order creates the personality types necessary for its preservation. As submissiveness to authority is a pre-requisite for such preservation, strategies that offer the possibility of liberating dissent through restructuring such types offers us a potentially powerful space of engagement. But given the way in which such drives are appropriated, channelled, and exploited, it would appear that no sooner do such opportunities for dissent arise than they are neutralised. In this sense, the forms of liberation that interest you are no more privileged than any other. So we keep returning to the power of capital to absorb dissent, and perhaps it is *that* process that requires our critical analysis.

6.

IP : In your work, you seem to avoid mimetic connotations almost entirely, whether in terms of the properties of the musical material, or even in the titles (which generally have a 'formalist' quality). Do you think there is a place for 'descriptive' or 'evocative' music?

GD : New evolutionary-psychological research suggests the adaptive and survival function that an intimate understanding of the natural or external environment offers organisms. There is thus a reciprocal relationship between fitness and performance in this environment. This being the case, we should be unsurprised at the extent to which depictions of that environment, however specific or generalised, dominate aesthetic media and representation. Landscapes, for example, which are often depicted from vantage points which offer the viewer necessary protection from predators, can be seen in this context as analyses of such environments. And such an observation could be extended to narrative forms and literary representations that similarly function to analyse and comprehend the hominoid, social

environment. At this historical juncture, however, such adaptive behaviours are arguably functionless, and are leftovers from our developmental, evolutionary history where an intimate understanding or knowledge of the savannah, for example, was crucial to survival. But these are merely medium-specific examples of how mimetic behaviour assists the maintenance of subject homeostasis and stability. Through the creation and/or use of stable, unambiguous referents (or images from the life-world) mimesis is particularly effective in lessening the perceptual and information-processing burden that subjects might otherwise experience. By rejecting such strategies, non-mimetic art media disrupt this process.

We should be unsurprised then, at the extent to which non-representational art, in all media, has been greeted with hostility. Where it has not, then its real nature has been misunderstood. And although certain categories of abstract expressionism (which still retain, to varying degrees, traces of the real) have enjoyed both significant patronage and public enthusiasm (even if CIA-manufactured), constructive art, as I intimated earlier, has been relatively ignored or rejected (I know of no reference by Clement Greenberg, who was instrumental in propagating abstraction, to such art). This is due to its connection to the life-world being more efficiently severed. And this hostility derives from the artwork's refusal to affirm nature or, when the two are different, bourgeois expectations: mimesis is the bourgeoisies' way of insisting on arts utility. But the extent to which *music* is mimetic is poorly, if at all, understood. Once we perceive that the role of mimesis is to assist the maintenance of subject homeostasis, we are in a better position to understand which aspects of music function to achieve this end; and the very term, mimesis, is in need of additional conceptual treatment and refinement to enable its application to psychological and physiological categories in a more precise and meaningful manner. Clearly, each aesthetic medium emphasises a different modality of perception and cognition. Auditive media, or music, act upon primarily temporal modalities; and music is mimetic when it functions to reflect, reinforce, or re-create the temporal organisation of the subject's internal or external environment. And as there is a performance and adaptive advantage in partitioning experience into identifiable and recurrent patterns, patterns that have both an ecological and biological foundation, we should be unsurprised that to

successfully reinforce this, music is organised in a similar way. But the more complexly such patterns are disrupted or the more thoroughly they are negated, the less music functions to affirm such expectations. Indeed, psycho-physiological research, indicating changes in neuroendocrine and cardiorespiratory activity, begins to support this contention, indicating the links between physiology and auditive input, and their concomitant affective responses and arousal potential. And the more reinforced such responses become, the greater the potential for the link between autonomic, physiological responses, and dominant ideologies, to be established: we need a Marxist physiology to supplement those psycho-analytic researches and perspectives initiated by the Frankfurt School . And expectations *will* be negated the moment the medium is prioritised, which is the central operational tenet informing high modernist practice. And it is at this point that the medium attains autonomy, that its aesthetic function is foregrounded. So in answer to your question, the avoidance of mimesis is a result of foregrounding the medium.

But I'm not sure how to answer whether there's a place for 'descriptive' or 'evocative' music. Despite ones intentions, the meaning listeners attach to ones work are out of ones control, especially if they are naïve or uninformed listeners, which is the norm. But I realise that there is a sub-text to your question, which is making reference to work which is overtly exploitative of stereo-typical modes of expression and assorted reified styles, manners, and images. This practice dominates much new music production today. So when we encounter titles such as *To Fields We Do Not Know* , *A Deep but Dazzling Darkness* , *Higglety Pigglety Pop!* , and *A Short Ride in a Fast Machine* , we know that the composer is sending the consumer a re-assuring message that they are safe in the composer's hands and that the product will contain little or nothing that will disrupt the consumer's expectations. *Forms 5: event intersection* , *Structures* , or *Kreuzspiel* , send out different messages that direct the reader to issues surrounding the works' construction. So, is there a place for 'descriptive' or 'evocative' music? Yes, and that place is a social formation that seeks to subordinate all activities to the priorities of the market - which is what we have now. In such a context, cultural production has to assume its allotted place within the heritage, leisure, and entertainment industries, and be

of a complexion that offers little or no risk that the distractive function of those industries will be disrupted.

IP : How about a work such as Xenakis's *Arousa* , or Messiaen's *Catalogue d'Oiseaux* , or even before them works of Debussy or Beethoven and many others that allude to nature? Would you really say that those works are entirely subsumable in the social formation you have just described?

GD : My comments here are targeted primarily at current trends and are thus historically located. But I would question any tendency that aimed to sustain the subject in a state of enchantment, which exploits nature as a mechanism of retreat, and as a romanticised antidote to technical-rational administration. I realise that the logical outcome of the programme that I advocate is the abolition of art as we customarily understand it. But this is a central tenet of aesthetic modernisation.

IP : Do you see your individual works as relatively self-contained entities, or the body of work as a whole as a more continuous project, from which separate works form a connected part of an on-going aesthetic 'discourse'?

GD : Very much the latter. As a creative programme, this is most obviously articulated in my *forms* series, but the smaller works such as the piano pieces are no less connected to this process - they just have a different emphases, which is in part due to their more timbrally focused and delimited nature. A more precise understanding of the issues generated by the series can be gained by invoking the sciences of cognition and perception, which offer a wealth of research, terminology, and analytical perspectives of great relevance. And as a computer scientist I am always keen to associate my practice with science whenever possible. One of the most important features of the forms series is its systematic and analytical attention to a more or less well defined set of technical and aesthetic issues. These include pitch relations and structures, gestural profiling, and density, temporal, order, and proximity relations of various kinds. The series as a whole thus forms an attentional set or collection exhibiting high levels of intra-set invariance. In effect, each work exhibits high levels of similarity to all the others. Thus, where they *differ* will take on an increasingly significant status. This aids processes of

parametric foregrounding, whereby parameters customarily hidden due to their encapsulation and embeddedness in higher-order structures, are accessed and promoted to the perceptual foreground. This enables the avoidance of featural singletons that would draw attention to the particular, as my concern here is to draw attention to high level, abstract commonalities. The best way to do this, I believe, is by lowering the difference threshold between those works which are the vehicles through which such abstractions are explored: if two works only differ on a limited range of the scale, we are forced to pay attention to these differences at a higher level of detail than would otherwise be the case. The problem of addressing such issues within *a single work* is that such difference is then mistakenly perceived as dialectical, with all the problems that arise from such coarsely fabricated conceptions. Composers and musicologists usually describe this as contrast, whereas they really mean a level of distinctness which places grave doubts on the coherence of the percepts in question: the terms 'section' and 'movement' are routinely deployed to mask this logical deficit. I would hope that the similarity this has to processes of scientific research and methodology, and the incremental and systematic nature that this endeavour usually takes, is apparent.

But it has implications that go beyond 'mere' aesthetics. One of the most obvious means by which cultural products assume the role of *commodities*, is how successfully they control and manipulate supply and demand. Within cultural production, this is most commonly achieved through the manufacture of scarcity. The more singular and exceptional a cultural product is, and the more iconic its status, the greater value it achieves. And this status is most obviously achieved through maximal differentiation, as this is the perceptual modality that is most successful in arousing the attention of subjects, as experiments have conclusively shown. If I write the letter 'a' in fifteen different fonts, none will stand out from this display set to the same extent as a letter 'b' interspersed in red ink. Within *cultural* production, a whole set of terms are used to register this effect, such as 'original', 'distinctive', 'innovative', 'ground-breaking', and the like, such terms functioning as the basic hyperbolic critical repertoire of the critical community that would otherwise have little idea what to say. It is thus interesting to note to what extent subjects' appraisal of aesthetic objects is determined by neuro-

physiological programming of this kind, and how ideologies of domination can be engineered to exploit them. We also need a Marxist branch of perception studies. But such a working method, with its emphasis upon notions of collectivity, is also an attack, within an aesthetic context, on private ownership. In consequence, I am most interested in that art which prioritises processes of this kind. Examples within visual art and architecture are far more common than in music. One could cite the work of Piet Mondrian, Richard Lohse, and Anthony Hill as models, in addition to architectural internationalism.

IP : In your *forms* cycle, the listener is likely to be first struck by the relationship between density of events, as the most obviously perceptible aural level. Could you explain how the macroscopic 'architecture' of a highly active work such as *forms 5: event intersection* for 30 players is arrived at? How does this relate to the quasi-serial procedures employed at more microscopic levels of composition?

GD : **forms 5: event intersection** is characterised by a process of mediation between extremes of point density. Two extremes are established of high density on the one hand, and low density - or sparsity - on the other. The two extremes are then mediated to produce a seven-element scale of density, or notes per unit of time, from high to low. This scalar organisation is then permuted to produce seven distinct series or arrangements. This basic structure forms the high level architecture of the work. Once again, negation dictates the particular ordering that each series takes, whereby juxtapositions are chosen that emphasise maximum differentiation. This process contributes to the highly dynamic and active surface to which you refer. In order to appreciate the manner in which this high-level organisation is manifested at other, lower levels of organisation, it is necessary to grasp the importance of mediation and negation. They are the principal organisational features of this work and the forms series as a whole, and determine not only the large-scale architecture, as I have outlined, but the behaviour, progression, and parametric complexion of sequences of individual notes. This process accounts for the high level of differentiation sequences of notes exhibit in terms of registral position, contour, dynamic, duration, and timbre. The superimposition of these processes, to which the work's suffix refers, generates a highly dynamic and

differentiated aural image, that is nevertheless highly unified due to its foundation in an integrated and consistent organisational scheme.

IP : The rhythmic notation of your **piano piece 2** is on a whole new level of complexity compared to **piano piece 1** . What occasioned this notational shift?

GD : I should start by indicating my aversion to the term *rhythm* . It is insufficiently precise in our context and comes with unwanted connotations. I prefer the phrase *temporal partitioning* . For new music, we need a new language.

The notations developed in **piano piece 2** function to further emphasise the autonomy of the *point* , or the single note. This is achieved through the hyper-re-specification of the parametric profile of each successive impulse, in terms which include duration, intensity, and register. In addition to fractional durations, this level of point autonomy is further heightened by the use of fractional meter and the additional techniques of articulation that their use generates, such as *impulse tiling* , where the start points of primary note values are fractionally staggered, and *durational migration* , which de-couples impulse time from impulse duration. Time intervals between successive points are then defined using thirteen relationships. Omitting their inverses, all interval relations between two events, *a* and *b* , can be captured and organised using the following six relationships, in addition to equality: *a precedes b* , *a adjoins b* , *a overlaps b* , *a starts b* , *a is during b* , *a ends b* , and *a equals b* . Clearly, such relations can be nested to arbitrary levels of complexity. Abstracting time relations in this way further emphasises the independence of individual impulses, as their *actual* temporal location is more or less indeterminate (though still within very narrow bounds of probability), frustrating both the performer's and listener's attempt to extract from the music's surface shapes or sensory units that are superordinate to the single note. Larger-scale structures can be organised to determine invariant relationships that control the progression of musical events throughout the work.

IP : What is the basis upon which you choose the particular configurations of instruments you employ?

GD : As I have already indicated, negation is one of the primary formal tools structuring my music. The choice of instruments is governed by this principle. Thus, the instrumental configurations that I use emphasise maximal timbral differentiation. This becomes more apparent in the larger works such as **forms 5: event intersection** and **forms 6: event aggregates** , where all instrumental families are represented. Within particular works, sub-ensembles also function as attributes or features of event-types, which are also characterised by gestural profile, duration, tempo, and impulse-density, for example. Instrumental configuration is in this instance part of a wider organisational principle, functioning to control the progression of colour contrast and volume, and various levels of density and activity throughout the work. **forms 3: equivalent forms** , for example, is constructed from seven event-types and each is characterised by seven configurations of one, three, five, seven, nine, eleven, and thirteen instruments. Such organisational techniques are particularly effective projected within very large forces, as opportunities are created for *superimposing* such processes in very diverse and complex ways. **forms 6: event aggregates** begins this process which **forms 7** will extend much further.

IP : **forms 3: equivalent forms** for 13 players in particular seems to present a highly 'egalitarian' relationship between the different instrumentalists. Do you see any sort of innate hierarchies between instruments, and if so is this something you try to counteract? Would you consider writing a work for soloist and ensemble?

GD : The suffix to **forms 3: equivalent forms** points to one of the main concerns of both this particular work and my practice in general. Though *equivalence* is a notion central to integral serialism, it is also a dominant conceptual tenet of many of the most significant movements in 20 th century visual art and architecture, such as De Stijl; and Stockhausen's concept of mediation is essentially equivalence with another name, though more formally conceptualised. Equivalence posits the rejection of hierarchical structuring in favour of heterarchical structuring. In a heterarchical structure, all components are assigned equivalent status. This formal concern penetrates the organisation of **forms 3: equivalent forms** at every level, and accounts for the

'egalitarian' relationships that I attempt to establish in the distribution of the thirteen instruments. But this can only be achieved by demoting the primacy of pitch in order that percussion instruments such as temple blocks, wood blocks, and tom toms, can compete more equally with other members of the ensemble, in order to mediate between pitch and noise, or between the fully discrete and the continuous. This is achieved by employing pitch structures that exhibit a high level of invariance. There is little change or differentiation within this parameter throughout the work, which is formed almost exclusively from a single pitch class set, namely 3-3 using Forte's terminology. Through this form of cognitive saturation, listeners' attention is inevitably drawn to other parameters that are customarily subordinated or suppressed. This creates opportunities for instruments that are pitch-impoverished to contribute more equally to the musical argument.

But other factors contribute to this process of pitch-demotion. The use of more or less densely articulated textures of sound, which are frequently opaque in quality, hinder the perception and definition of clearly delineated and precise pitch content. This is achieved by the use of either forward or backward temporal masking, whereby successive impulses mask or interfere with one another. This problematizes pitch definition. But with successful masking intervals being smaller than or equal to fifty milliseconds, we can only notate such effects indirectly and indeterminately, by superimposing different strata of mutually negating activity, the emergent complexity of which is a sum of that process of superimposition. This is how Stockhausen achieved some of the most effective, amorphous complexes in *Gruppen*, and it's a technique which contributes to the effectiveness of Gilbert Amy's use of two nearly identical ensembles in his *Diaphonies*: such effects are even more successful applied to identical timbre. In addition, **forms 3: equivalent forms** uses very few long durations, a form of articulation not generally available to percussion instruments. As the discriminability of the frequency of pitches is reduced the shorter in duration they are, this feature contributes to the successful mediation of pitch and noise. Psycho-acoustics offers us a wealth of analytical and generative tools with which to explore these new sonic phenomena.

But as I outlined earlier, processes of parametric foregrounding cannot occur in isolation: one must consider how changes in one parameter propagate and affect others, or consider that in affecting change in one, others may need similar levels of processing. Thus pitch-demotion is itself a *multi-parametric* operation. If this is not taken into account, one will achieve the kind of nonsense that often passes for radical action: notating key-slaps or various forms of ad hoc distortion for woodwind and brass in the hope that pitch and noise can be successfully mediated (assuming the composer in question even realises this is what they are trying to do) only emphasises even more their oppositional characters. You are right to query whether my concern for structural equivalence could be consistent with the demands for hierarchy that inhere in soloistic or concerto forms. Clearly they would not, and it is for this reason that I have not so far explored this area. But I have often contemplated how it might be done, and several methods await further elaboration. These include the use of multiple soloists employing multiple timbres, or, perhaps more effectively, multiple soloists employing singular timbre, such as five harp soloists with ensemble. In a sense, one has to find a way to project a one-to-many form within a many-to-many conceptual framework. I'll let you know how I get on.

IP : How has the experience of writing for full orchestra in your new BBC commission **forms 6: event aggregates** worked out? How do you deal with the baggage that the medium itself carries with it?

GD : All media comes to us with what you call 'baggage', or formulaic, reified, and routine methods of working. It should be part of any creative intellectual's creative programme to critique the medium in order to identify such features. If he or she does not, then one loses control and ownership of the medium. Composers of a neo-conservative tendency find this 'baggage', in all its manifestations and forms, very useful to them, as it enables them to control and manipulate listeners' responses, and to signify their own conformity which is a prerequisite for market success, which, from what I can see, is the primary measure they use in determining whether they have been creatively successful. The orchestral medium is no different in this respect, other than

the scale of its resources offering more 'baggage', 'baggage' which can be displayed to a generally larger audience.

One of my initial concerns whilst planning the work was the problem of scaling-up methods and techniques used in contexts that utilised significantly smaller resources. But in many ways, the process involved 'merely' projecting some of the features of forms 5: event intersection more radically and more diversely, in particular, determining and articulating multi-layered structures, activity and gesture. My emphasis on the *point* places significant constraints on the formation of higher-level sensory units or shapes that are super-ordinate to the single note. But if one wishes to exploit the opportunities offered by multi-levelled structures, then one has to discover ways of appropriately defining such levels of independence that nevertheless do not compromise this fundamental concern. It is this problem, amongst others, that has occupied much of my energies in forms 6, and which offers some of the greatest potential for development for forms 7, which is to follow.

But the experience of composing **forms 6: event aggregates** has confirmed my belief that, in principle, and with appropriate development and expansion, such forces are ideal for projecting the kind of ideas that form the basis of my creative programme. However, one meets significant resistance to developing the potential of orchestral resources, whether in terms of instrumental configuration, spatial distribution, or whatever, as the orchestra as customarily configured does not exist to serve the interests of composers of a genuinely enquiring disposition. Rather, it exists to perpetuate certain factions of power (at their most obvious, conductors, recording companies, and promoters) and as an adjunct to the corporate entertainment and leisure industries. This is a tragic waste of an extraordinarily rich and exciting resource. Somehow we have to claim it for ourselves.

7.

IP: Your visual art seems to employ similar strategies of hard-edged abstraction to your music. Could you give me some idea of the means by which you settle upon proportion, figural placing, colour, etc., in your visual constructions, and the aesthetic ends you are striving for?

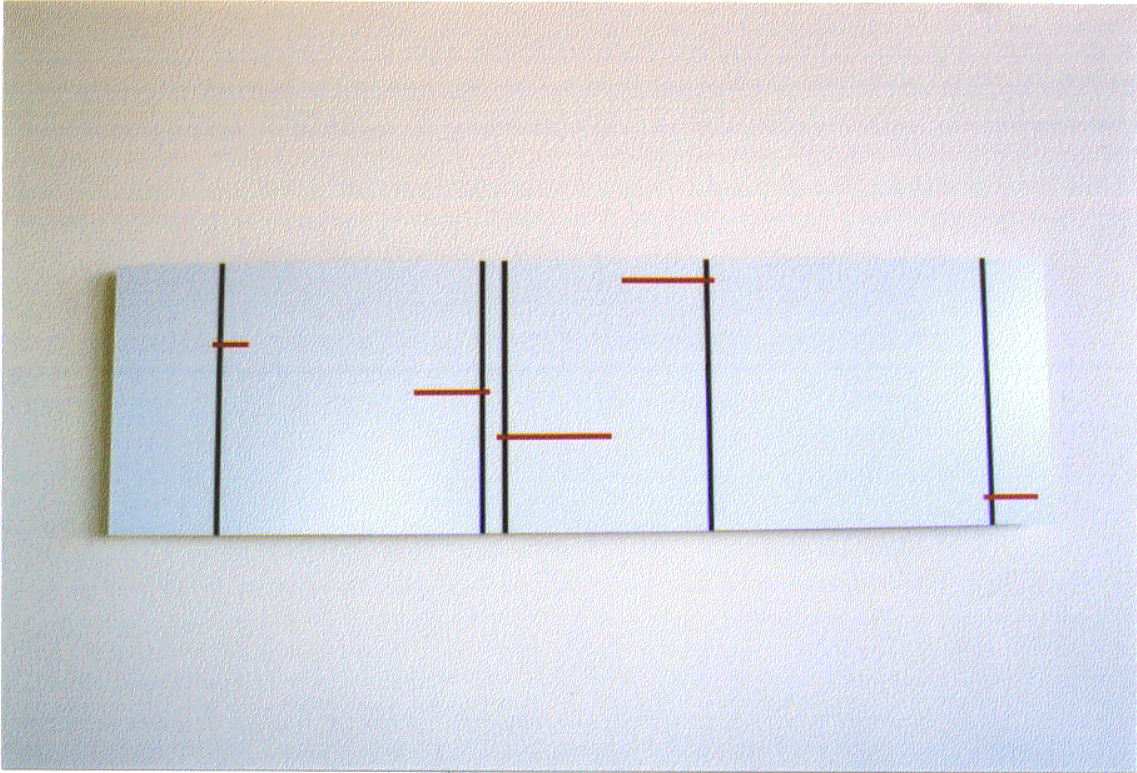
GD : The pieces use industrial materials such as vinyl and plastic. And although I choose the materials and plan the works, they are realised by another party, usually sign-makers, who have at their disposal the kinds of materials that interest me, and the skills to manipulate and process them. There are many reasons why I use such materials. In the case of **partitioned plane with line segments** , for example, the level of precision obtainable from vinyl strips is far superior to paint. I would find *painterliness* a barrier to achieving the kinds of radical abstraction and construction that interests me. And such precision of means reflects and helps enable, the aesthetic-constructive ends. But my aesthetic-constructive aims are more fully realised in **relief construction 1** . There is still a sense, in **partitioned plane with line segments** , that the object connotes something else. This is due to the illusion of depth that the superimposition of red segments over black lines creates: this isn't possible on a flat plane. Mondrian, of course, never did this (until his last works, which are a disappointment as a result), and if one seeks to maintain self-referentiality and fully pursue a non-representational programme, then the constraints of the flat plane *must* be observed. In the case of **relief construction 1** , the artwork is more fully the subject of our attention: the eye and the intellect *halt* at the object. **relief construction 1** uses vinyl and plastic. Two, differently proportioned planes of black and white plastic are attached to a single, transparent orthogonal plane. Vertical strips of grey, yellow, and red vinyl are also applied, and the whole is then projected off the wall surface by a steel bracket positioned behind the larger black plastic plane. Opaque and transparent plastics such as these have very beautiful characteristics. They exhibit light and image reflective qualities that aid the object's integration, interaction, and discourse with the external environment. This desire to disintegrate the art work is a constant feature of constructive art, whether in the case of Gerrit Rietveld's Schroeder House and Berlin Chair, or Katarzyna Kobro's space compositions. It is an attempt to demote the individuality and particularity of the artwork, an environmental correlate of the underlying aesthetic aims of constructionism and pure plastic expression.

The distribution of those elements that make up both of these works is obtained by the determination and superimposition of various number and coordinate systems, such as are obtainable

from prime, exponential, and factorial sequences. But the works are not simply visual projections of mathematical ready-mades. Rather, as with my musical constructions, systematic and rigorous mathematical techniques function to both generate and to serve higher level aesthetic - or ideological - ends, to do with notions of structural balance and the distribution and density of incident. Perhaps the concept that most importantly links the visual and aural works is that of *equivalence*, which I discussed earlier with reference to forms 3: equivalent forms. If the positioning of elements in **partitioned plane with line segments** and **relief construction 1** serves to privilege no area on the visual plane, then the organisation of **forms 3: equivalent forms** and other works in that series, functions in a similar way to confer equivalent status to each structural and material component. In *both* media, there is thus an attempt to construct non-centralised forms, in which contrasting elements of nevertheless equal strength negate and balance one another in a process of dynamic equilibrium.

* * * * *

partitioned plane with line segments



relief construction 1

