

COMPOSER INTERVIEW

Assisted by Pithoprakta: An Intermittent Dialogue with Diana Burrell

Chris Dench

Diana Burrell is one of Britain's most original composers. She possesses a markedly distinctive and unclassifiable musical voice. The individuality of her compositional vision is reflected in the strangeness of many of her titles, and the often unorthodox instrumentations she adopts. She has written in many genres, from chamber music using children's voices, to large orchestral works, to opera. Her series of concertos is particularly notable.

It was hearing Diana Burrell's *Viola Concerto* in early 2001 that impressed me sufficiently to want to get to know her. Serendipitously, Diana had just ventured online for the first time, and we sounded each other out in the exchange of opinions below. Time constraints meant that the gaps between responses were somewhat protracted, and the text was not completed until November 2001—an intermittent 'interview.'

Chris Dench: Do you subscribe to the idea of architecture as large-scale rhythm?

Diana Burrell: What I immediately thought of in a rather negative fashion were all of those awful buildings put up in the 1980s which had no rhythm whatsoever. The post-modern era had well and truly arrived in the UK helped along by an interfering Prince of Wales who stirred up a lot of mud. The trouble with this country is that people take notice of what he says with bad results. You know the kind of architecture I mean; grotesquely patterned brickwork in different colour—referred to as diarrhoea-striped in one architectural journal I read—lots of blue and yellow or red paintwork, and as many different styles of chimney/gable/pillars/portico, et cetera, as could be stuck on one building. All in the name of 'blending in' with existing surrounding architecture, but all of the elements at war with each other and producing this static effect.

Funnily enough, this was what was happening in music too. Do you remember some of the glossy scores being produced around the same time? All surface glitter, lots of notes scudding about, masses of detail both rhythmic and coloured, but no real movement—the

harmony was completely static. Ha! We are meant to be talking about rhythm and I've just selected harmony as the progression agent in a piece of music. Architecture may be frozen rhythm (John Ruskin?), but the progression through the architecture itself is harmonic, is it not? Perhaps it is a journey through a building or a piece of music. For me, every piece (whether mine or someone else's) represents a journey; I want to emerge at the other end a different person.

This is probably why I'm having such trouble starting solely with the rhythmic aspect of my new piano and percussion work. I'm cursed with my European upbringing, admiring above all the composers who struggle through harmonic means to arrive at the end. Nielsen is my absolute passion, has been since I first heard him aged 15 and he remains so to this day. The best architecture *glows* with movement wanting to move on from its base. I think of Le Corbusier, of course: his work has some of the qualities of Barbara Hepworth whose sculptures stretch ever upwards; also Alvar Aalto, Lasdun, Mies van der Rohe, and of course the current bunch—R. Rogers and co. Their work is anything but frozen in one sense. Perhaps architecture is more like music being trapped briefly before the lid explodes and all expands outwards and it can never be put back as it won't fit ever again, a sort of big bang. Although I suppose the word 'frozen' could have the same rather unstable connotations; it could easily become unfrozen. However, I think I quite like the idea of architecture being music before the big bang!

CD: It's a powerful image, architecture as frozen music. I often use a similar image as a way of illustrating my view of the interaction between local (neighbourly) and global (civic) aspects of musical behaviours in my pieces. I propose that the piece is a 'force-field,' a latent field of propensity with extension in time, into which I sprinkle the pitches to make the field 'lines of force' audible. Now, of course, those 'lines of force' are not just trajectories in an arbitrary pitch space: just like lines of force they have particular distributions, which is how I think of harmony. Harmonic change is the routemap of the melodic substance of the piece (aural town planning?). This reminds me of a dramatic aspect of medieval cathedrals, all those flying buttresses that convey energy to the ground. They always look to me to be vibrant with tension.

Just lately I have been discussing harmony with an American friend, and I discover that he and I seem to mean something rather different by the word, perhaps inevitably. I think, on the basis of the way he describes harmony in say, Finnissey, that he is imagining harmony as a kind of aural geometry (architecture again!), with the intervals functioning rather as vectors, which produce sound-objects that have a uniquely defined character, and can be collided without compromising their meaning. For me, on the other hand, coming from a European background, harmony is inseparable from resonance, and I perceive harmonic entities as varieties of composite timbres. This has resulted in interesting differences of opinion: clearly in these two views of harmony, harmonic tempo means quite different things.

Richard Barrett once remarked that although my music often has a very busy surface, it always seems to have a very slow rate of change. He is, of course, right. I control the rate of change of harmony with rigour, as it seems to me the most important expressive device open to us as composers. On the other hand, I try not to fall into the spectralist trap, of as you say 'no real movement.' The Big Bang is not irrelevant, certainly; my favourite architectural template

used to be the Creation Myth (including the cabbalist version), and harmonic tempo can be used to articulate such a model. But the idea of a pre-Big Bang music is startling: can I have first refusal on the piece?

The challenge of such a project is that it would have to eschew the journey aspect of musical unfolding that is normally vital. Without that irreversible transit from somewhere to somewhere else, we might as well be working in the popular music field, which rarely attempts to do more than bind time, not articulate, let alone differentiate it. Here in Australia, there is a lot of focus on landscape as a musical paradigm, rather than architecture: a nature/nurture polarisation that I find rather alien. Nonetheless, I have recently found that, in retrospect, some of what I have written conforms to a landscape-model; wet to dry, for instance. Do you see the journey that any of your pieces entail in these terms? Much of your music that I have heard, especially the woodwind concertos, seems to subscribe to the 'nature' end of that spectrum. I used to envisage pieces, whether mine or someone else's, as a walk-through of a building (preferably starting somewhere other than the front door), with views through windows into other places, rooms and passages; rather a straitjacketing image.

DB: To take your last sentence first. I used to have precisely that image in mind when envisaging a piece! I also used to refer to it quite often if I was trying to make things clear to students, give a pre-concert talk, et cetera. In the end, though, it felt too neat and tidy, too static and enclosed, so I rarely think along those lines nowadays. There's something in me that, whilst wanting to control such aspects of my work as structure, harmonic progression, in order to make a faultless whole (as if that were ever possible!), it rebels against the 'meanness' of composers such as Mozart, who is said to come closest to achieving it. I think music should be too big for its form so that the poor composer can barely steer it safely, as all the while the sounds are trying to escape his/her grasp.

Novelists have this problem with their characters, I'm told, but presumably only if they appear real enough. A composer's musical ideas therefore need to be larger than life, quite dangerous and difficult to handle.¹ I very much like your description of the piece being a 'force-field' into which pitches are sprinkled to make the lines of force audible. It conjures up a kind of multi-dimensional harmony to me. This led me to begin imagining all kinds of wild thoughts. What about multi-dimensional structure? A string octet, say, divided into two string quartets, each progressing along separately yet in the same performance space and at the same time musically colliding, thereby opening up a completely new piece, which may be an opera. During the course of time, much of the opera—though not all and not in the right order of events—would be revealed in performance, and the string octet and the two separate quartets may or may not be. How tantalising for the music to almost reach its goal only to disappear into a different universe. I really like this idea, it's totally unformed, but I want to store it away and work on it; I think it might lead to something interesting, what do you think? We may or may not be back to the Big Bang idea and, yes, you can certainly have first refusal on that piece. Start writing!

¹ 'A man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a metaphor?' said Gregory Bateson, paraphrasing Robert Browning. There is a novel by Miguel de Unamuno, called *Niebla*, in which the characters actively subvert the author's intentions for them, and argue back when he remonstrates. [Dench]

CD: That's challenging, music that simultaneously presents different trajectories, a method particularly favoured by Carter. I've often tried to do that, but it is profoundly difficult, given the sizes of ensembles for which we mostly write. I think that all my pieces would do that particular thing if I only had a large enough band to work with, and time to work it all out. As you say, what a powerful concept! Small bands make it hard to define the different characters, except in a banal way, but I always try to have a spectrum of different tempi present in the pieces, sequentially or consecutively. One of my plans is to do just such a piece for my own satisfaction—probably for huge orchestra—without thought as to whether it will ever be performed. That way I can take my own good time over it.

It's interesting to hear you reporting back on your creative conjectures. We rarely witness such moments of conceptual ignition. Your ideas as articulated possess a sense of thrown energy, cracklingly wide-ranging projected thought that sustains its own flight. I'm annoyed that I cannot achieve that same lightning-like intensity; but then, I suppose that is one way in which dialogue is revealing.

DB: Where all this energy is really needed, though, is in the music, and it is just these qualities that can evaporate as one becomes more self-conscious as a composer which is inevitable as one gets older, technically more self-assured, and so on. I think I had that boldness as a 'beginner' artist; sadly it goes away somewhat, and although I try and recapture that impetuousness it feels fabricated and no longer innocent. I think that this happens to us all. Are there any composers who managed to retain that youthful boldness and naivety? Of course, it is replaced with the deeper vision, which comes with experience and I wouldn't want to replace the later symphonies of Sibelius with more Kullervo for example, but how I love that energetic, untidy early piece. Pop artists try and deal with this by re-inventing their image. I'm forever reading how Madonna and your Kylie Minogue have re-invented themselves yet again. In popular culture what you look like is the product rather than what you produce but this is not feasible in our line of work I think! However I am sometimes conscious of the worthy composition teacher at work as I wrestle with my materials and I'm nostalgic for those early days where I'd simply chuck down sounds and rhythms and then try and make sense of it all.

My cat Pithoprakta has come to see me; she must sense a certain air of despondency in me today. (I also have cats called Eonta, Stephanie and Xerxes!)

CD: That old cliché, youth wasted on the young. I was once a composer who believed strongly in the power of the imagination, but a number of contrary experiences led me to the conviction that my imagination alone was insufficient to produce 'great' (read 'worthwhile' in our post-modern times) music. In order to get past this particular watershed, I did as many have done before, I systematised. I frequently advise young composers to systematise whatever they are least accomplished at, be it the rhythmic, intervallic, structural aspects of their work, so that they can trust to the system to ensure that feature of their music succeeds while relying on their innate talent for the remainder. But although this systematisation permitted me to trust the outcome of my compositional actions, it also rigidified the music in a way that tended to a sense of detachment, holding the listener at a distance. Ironically, learning to re-trust my own imaginative impulses has been one of the most difficult and at the same time rewarding

exercises I have ever undertaken, and I think that my music is much the better for it.

Mind you, the selfconsciousness that I have always felt as a composer reflects the nagging sense that I've committed some kind of aesthetic *faux pas* in my work. I feel a strong sense of guilt when I hear performances of my more audacious pieces, which I attribute to a straightlaced 'fifties/'sixties upbringing. But, and this is an irony we probably all confront, what use are unaudacious pieces?

Consequently, I'm having exactly the opposite experience to losing the youthful boldness, hopefully not naivety regained, either. However, with my compositional resources now under control (that is, I have a long enough history of creating to know how to realise almost any idea that might occur to me, and no longer at the cost of the players' patience) I find that I have wilder ideas than ever before, and am finally able to develop the thread from philosophical intent to sonic outcome without loss of focus. Admittedly, it is true that few composers manage to stay fresh in the way you describe (Mompou, Ravel, Tailleferre). Perhaps there is another version of maturing, which I find in your works—and hope might be found in my own—which is the expanding of horizons and confronting of ever more challenging compositional issues. There are not many composers who have taken this route, and it must surely be a matter of temperament, but those that have exhibit a *wanderlust* of the imagination, and seem to me to contrast strongly with the creative stay-at-homes, who, having established their (sonic) territory microscopically explore their backyard. Elliott Carter and Colin Matthews seem to me the stand-out wanderers, who felt the need to expand their stylistic perimeters. Possibly Nono too, who, after early serialist extravagances, pared back his material to the max while introducing extremely subtle and, for the time, hightech transformations of the live sound; the effect was, paradoxically, a vast enlargement of the expressive range of his music.

Then again, these three composers had the good fortune to be in a position to metamorphose, despite the high risk. I presume that the pressure from publishers, concert organisers, and even performers not to modify the 'product' must be a major disinducement to imaginative exploratoriness in composers of any age.

DB: *Light-Strung Sigils* is most interesting. It's bold the way you use some conventional tonality in conventional ways. The piano behaves like a piano, the cello plays 'cello music'. What's going on? Any fan of Brahms's chamber music or Rachmaninov's piano preludes would recognise this world. It's impressive how you have simply carried on in a tradition and yet also carried on in your tradition, as there's no sense of a style-break in your music. I would say it truly exhibits that *wanderlust* of the imagination to which you were referring.

A piece I'm working on at the moment is for a large ensemble of amateur musicians called COMA. They are a very special group: COMA stands for Contemporary Music for Amateurs. They are fanatical about playing new stuff but not the kind of music generally presented to amateurs, for example, sub-English folksy dancierie. No, they want the cutting edge (wherever that is), if not extreme and undiluted modernism. Highly intelligent, at the same time they are amateurs, not professionals, so the music needs to be technically accessible. I'm exploring the idea of virtuosity in my piece, why should they not play at the very edge of their abilities? One way of achieving this is perhaps to keep extremes of pitch vogue. If they have to play extremely high, very loud, and as fast as possible, then the effect will be bolder if precise pitch

doesn't come into the equation; I for my part have to find a new mode of writing which helps them achieve these aims.

CD: This is a field of endeavour I've never felt drawn to. Although I think that I could make my musical ideas work in the context of a performance by amateurs, the truth is that even seasoned professionals find what I write tricky, even after I try (I really do try!) to keep the material manageable. One of the issues that used to come up with my music was that players felt very vulnerable, playing at the extremes of their technique, but the music didn't work if the performances sounded in any way precarious. The necessary 're-invention' to make my soundworld approachable by amateurs would, I suspect, drive me nuts.

DB: In writing the piece for COMA, I have had to 're-invent' the act of composition, which brings me back to an earlier remark of yours. You refer to the difficulties of presenting different trajectories when faced with writing for a small ensemble. I agree with what you say absolutely, and yet something in me believes that everything is possible even if I personally don't know how to bring it about at the present time. If a composer has only a triangle, it is still possible to make a huge symphony. Michael Finnissy in a work such as *Multiple Forms of Restraint* is perhaps concerned with this issue, in a way, but doesn't go as far as I would like (presumably never his intention). To re-invent form and indeed all other aspects of music such as sound and time, perhaps we should go back to where this dialogue all started which was architecture and instead of looking at the similarities between it and music, consider instead the differences. This might be a clue as to how to re-make musical composition?²

CD: Coming back to the idea of a piece with more than one simultaneously unfolding trajectory, one of the primary mechanisms available to us as composers is architectural rhythm. By this I mean the way we relate the events in bars, to the events in sections, to the events at the largest structural level: the old local/midground/global cliché. When I listen to music, one of the things I am most alert to is the 'vertical' relationship between the treatment of the differing time-scales. It's one of my favourite paradoxes, the way that event tempo and harmonic tempo (just to name two of the many simultaneous tempo-types that pieces can exhibit) can be made to run at entirely different speeds. This can provide a justification for the characterisations of 'very fast slow music' (Beethoven's *Arietta*, Op.111, for example) and 'very slow fast music' (such as Colin Matthews's *Suns Dance*). It's evident that I'm much more inclined to the former than the latter, but I like the ambiguity of both. In teaching, I emphasise to students that composers can engineer for pieces to involve a range of different simultaneous tempi, and that this is one of their richest sources of expressivity. I already mentioned the perception that my music has an extremely slow tempo, whatever the degree of surface activity (does that

² I just saw a curious movie from 1963 called *The Mindbenders*, in the course of which Dirk Bogarde off-handedly refers to a 'symphony for one bassoon.' I was amused by the idea of the 'symphony for triangle.' Diana is of course quite right; to paraphrase Jay Alan Yim, it is not the material but the manner in which that material is treated that counts. Why not a triangle, indeed? My favourite example of a large-scale work for small forces is Schwitters' *Ur-Sonata*, for solo speaking voice. I have also heard tell of a piece by a Radulescu pupil for several angle-poise lamps, and there is a quartet for bass drums by Jim Tenney. Speaking of limiting ensembles, Galina Ustvolskaya has written austere works for bizarre ensembles, including a *Dies Irae* for eight contrabasses, 43 centimetre-square cube, and piano; a *Benedictus qui venit* for four flutes, four bassoons, and piano; and several very unorthodox symphonies. [Dench]

make it part of the 'glossy music of the 1980s' syndrome that you described earlier?). I've always felt that (ironically, given my distaste for their output) my work shares this feature with the New York minimalists.

This curious feature of my work was anything but intentional, at least to begin with. I used to try to achieve as smooth a transition of approach as possible, as I moved up or down the temporal scale-factor, from within the beat to within the section, so as to deprovincialise my thinking about any particular location within that scale-spectrum. Such a neo-serialist approach resulted in an obsession with scale-free structural planning—in the hope of achieving holism—which, as already mentioned, I have come to see as misguided. For all that, Stockhausen's melodic germs provide the entire trajectory for his pieces, who but he is able to trace this unfolding as it happens (at first hearing, anyway)? So, despite my doing the holistic thing, no listener is ever going to discern the tightness of the structure. For me, that is one of the curious things about the Darmstadt serialists: they adopted compositional methodologies, cut from the same intellectual cloth as the early Renaissance numerologists. And, given that the latter's works were intended as intercessive with God, prayers of action, one must wonder to what extent the serialists saw their own patterning as expiatory. For myself, I quite consciously adopted the numerologies as a cabalistic alternative to the Xenakisian 'natural-pattern' music.

DB: I think the concept of 'architecture as large-scale rhythm' is an interesting area and one I've probably never quite got my head around. I have a feeling that quite a few of my pieces belong to the 'slow fast music' category as opposed to the reverse which you say relates to your own stuff. Pared down to the essentials, my music is often harmony with little in the way of decoration or orchestration, and I try and move the harmony as I have a fear of not journeying somewhere and also of boring the listener. But, I also now realise that 'artifice' is necessary too; beauty and interest and all those other qualities have to be considered and found and, artificially created for the music to be complete. Listening to George Benjamin's wonderful *At First Light* again the other day, it seemed obvious that not every aspect of a piece should be systemised, even if it is in this case. There seems to be a lot of pure decoration there, a lot of surface fastness in places. Am I wrong in thinking that often, even when all the fast lines are totally systemised (as indeed I have begun to do more; in *Gold*, for example) the role of all this activity is actually to decorate?

I have yet to try and completely systemise the architecture, the overall form of the work—in the way that the serialists did. I'm not sure I could, but I also need to play God with one aspect of the composition. I sometimes need to judge the effect of the whole in the way that a visual artist might, that is, by seeing (hearing) the bigger picture and by cutting/rubbing out/painting over/losing a whole section. In other words, I decide what I am going to do by instinct or maybe experience.

Back to the examples you gave of 'very fast slow music' and 'very slow fast music'. I can't comment on the Matthews piece as I haven't heard it in years and I have no score at hand, but I remember it as a work that is full of interest. The Beethoven work I would almost describe as 'very fast stationary music,' or at least the first half of it. This is the effect that the tyrannical eight-bar phrases induce with the obligatory cadences; there is a sense of no movement but

with many notes! Totally sublime of course; I certainly imply no criticism. But what about the opening of the *Eroica*? Here, there is no harmonic movement. The music is perched on a springy twig ready to leap off into air, but still static and waiting for the time being, and yet it's fast music, because the event tempo is very quick, each of the first two bars contain an amazing dynamic of energy.

Perhaps one of the clearest examples of the foreground/background, different simultaneous tempi thing is your *ik(s)land(s)*. The cool vibrato-less sounds of the mezzo and her entourage of simple and pure instrumental noises progressing slowly underneath this welter of brilliantly-lit fast music is very strong. It reminds me of a production of Glass's *Akhmaten* (not the music, the staging) I saw, where throughout the whole production, at the back of the stage, a small mime was being played out quite independently of the main action, and completely irrelevant to the pace of the music. The actors took the whole production (or maybe just an entire Act) to move from one side of the stage to the other. Two different tempi, but also nearly two different universes. I'm assuming that the mezzo in *ik(s)land(s)*—a wonderful singer—is meant to be within the texture rather than 'out front' as a soloist? It strikes me as being a truly romantic piece in that you have created something that sounds free, imaginative and picturesque. It reminds me a little of a piece I have from around the same time, *Dunkelhvide Manestraller*, an orchestral song-cycle for mezzo and orchestra that was performed at the 1998 Proms. I think it's the one piece that I have which could be labelled 'romantic' and, oddly enough, it's the one piece that the conductor always took too fast. Like most composers I suspect, I complain about the performance not getting enough of a move-on! It is only in the respect of the work's 'romanticism' that I hear a connection between the two works; I think you have more genuinely gentle and mellifluous sounds than I do. I was once called the Janacek of Bow; although we do have a liking for recorders and steel drums in common.

CD: I must admit I wouldn't have thought of Janacek! I am very struck by the way your music, with its craggy emptiness often alternating with dense agitation, cuts to the core. I think our musics share something else that is interesting: a complete unwillingness to accept the cosmetic. I don't even use trills, but beyond that, our musics both eschew any decoration or scaffolding. Perhaps the connection is simply this: that we both still believe in the communicative efficacy of humans shaping sounds on historically-validated musical instruments.

DB: I'll certainly go along with that. I also sense that we both recognise perhaps, that music has the ability to communicate extremes of discourse and meaning in a way that other languages (except possibly that of architecture?) do not. That sounds like a suitable topic for another 'dialogue'!