‘A Never-Ending Search for a Sound Nobody Has Ever Heard’: An Interview with Elena Kats-Chernin

Patricia Shaw

I first heard the music of Elena Kats-Chernin in a performance of her earliest major orchestral work, Stairs (1984), at the Composing Women’s Festival in Melbourne in 1994, the year the composer returned to Australia after ten years’ study and work in Germany. Given my own interest in orchestration, I was struck by the simplicity of the devices she employed in writing for the individual instruments and the complexity, depth and richness of timbre and texture achieved in the final blend. This work immediately revealed an extremely inventive composer whose primary interest lies in exploring timbres and textures through minimal motivic ideas (Stairs derives from a whole-tone scale), who revels in the sensuality of sound and who conveys a sense of joie de vivre in her music. Already well established in Europe, especially as a composer for theatre and dance, Kats-Chernin is a prolific composer who now has a burgeoning career and reputation in Australia. Her strength of compositional technique derives from thorough musical training during her youth in Russia and from studies with the Australian Richard Toop and with Helmut Lachenmann, whom Toop describes as ‘arguably the leading modernist hardliner in German music today.’ However, Kats-Chernin has forged a unique style, quite different from that of her teachers, and her music is notable for its energy and exuberance, accounting for at least some of the composer’s popular appeal.

The following interview, based on nine questions sent beforehand by fax, took place via telephone on 29 May 1997, and was then transcribed and edited in conjunction with the composer.

Your major pre-occupation as a composer seems to be not with abstract aesthetic ideas, but with the physical nature of sound itself, above all the timbres of acoustic instruments, and your engagement with that sound. Would you agree?

Firstly I think about the final result, which is for me never something abstract. I’m an intuitive rather than a cerebral composer, but I wouldn’t even define it this way because composing is a very complex process and I don’t think in categorical terms. While still a student and at the start of my career, perhaps I was more concerned with the structure, texture and chordal relationships between the elements, but over the years this has become so automatic I don’t even think about it much any more. My interest is now directed towards the way the instruments sound and especially the sound their combination produces. My initial thought is the image of

the sonority or the texture, also in its rhythmic sense—which, of course, may change in the end—not an abstract aesthetic idea.

I’m also interested in the physicality of a performance. While listening to music on the radio, for example, I like to imagine what the player looks like. It helps me when I know who I’m writing for so I can imagine a stage situation. Because of many years spent working in the theatre the visual aspect is of quite a significance for me.

Is that true of all of your works, even works that aren’t specifically for theatre?

Absolutely. When you play piano, for example, the sound is hit or attacked, so if I write a cluster, it’s not only because I desire this particular sound, but also because I like to see the hand jump up and then fall onto the keyboard with that cluster. It’s the energy, the gesture of hands, of the body, together with the aural perception; these go together, and I believe very much in the intensity, as well as the varying degrees of such, in the playing.

What is the relationship between the way you manipulate acoustic sounds and instruments, and the way that you manipulate sounds electronically? Do you prefer acoustic instruments and live performers?

I feel more comfortable, more at home, working with acoustic instruments; that’s where I come from. Electronics is a medium with which I was confronted, almost overnight, in about 1985. I had to produce music on tape for the theatre in Germany. Incidental music is rarely done with live musicians for all sorts of reasons, the main ones being aesthetic and financial. If there are musicians on stage the question immediately arises of what is their role in relation to the play, and this sometimes has no artistic value: it distracts from the plot and, most importantly, unless amplified or modified, sounds too real, while music on tape is much more distant. One does not really question it; it is an integral part of the performance and has its own unique reality. This was true at least of the productions in which I was involved.

When you were making pre-recorded music for live theatre, did you manipulate electronic sounds or acoustic sounds?

Mostly I manipulated acoustic sounds, and not necessarily those produced by musical instruments. Sometimes I used the sounds of my own voice: coughing, crying, laughing, singing, whispering, whistling. Also sounds of hitting wood or lighting a match, or once I blew bubbles into a mixture of flour and water; it made a strange “blooby” sound and, when transferred two octaves lower after sampling, sounded like a warning of an earthquake. My favourite objects have always been stones—hit, rolled, rubbed, big and small, round and angular. The initial sound was produced either by a musician or by me, then manipulated with techniques of sampling, multichannelling, effects etc. On top of those natural sounds, usually I engaged one or more musicians to play a “real” composition score and I combined the different elements of natural but “worked over” sounds with, let’s say, a string quartet to produce the usable result.

Every theatre production called for a specific musical direction, with a vast range of possibilities. It was never a matter of just one kind of sound. There was a lot of experimenting in the studio before I achieved a certain goal for the particular production, but along the way very often ideas for other (parallel or future) ones would pop up, so the time of trying things out in the studio was never in vain. It was also my favourite pastime. The sound engineer was wonderful, he never questioned what I was doing or thought it was strange. He was also extremely virtuosic with the technology which meant that we managed to produce a lot of music in a short time.

I never worked with pure computer sounds or ready-made samples; there’s something dead about them. You hear these kinds of sounds in the television ads and I find them boring and uninspiring. For me, in order to come up with interesting music, I need to be ignited by some unusual sound or an idea, so that my imagination can take off.

This is presumably why, when you’re writing for acoustic instruments and for live performers, you use such a huge range of playing techniques and timbres?
Interview with Elena Kats-Chernin

For me, writing music is a kind of game in which I ask, "What happens if...?" What happens if, for example, amidst the whole texture of everything, out of the blue I have a very high held piccolo tone? What happens then? Usually it's either a confrontation or a sound that blends in very well, but it's all just playing around with sounds. Through the years in the studio, I've probably had every possible instrument in there, and I let them do all kinds of things. Some of the sounds were so good that they stuck in my head and I try them again and again, and combine them.

What I really like most is a very strange sound combined with a very normal sound. For example, I might put a tremolo behind the bridge in the cello with a simple chord in the piano and maybe a hugely muted sound on the trombone, and the combination of the three will be unique. Like with food, just one ingredient is enough to make it really special or really unusual. That the sound might be unusual or strange doesn't occur to me, it's just the way the piece gets written.

When I start a piece, the first thing I usually do is write the skeleton of it, maybe just a couple of instruments and lots of empty spaces. After the double bar-line is in, I have to go back and, bit by bit, I fill them up. That's where I think, let's put pizzicato here, or a trill in a very low register for English horn. That's where my real game starts.

Actually, a lot of things I do are not unusual at all. *Col legno battuto* was already done in Mahler's symphonies. It's nothing unusual, and it's my favourite effect. Harmonics: everybody uses harmonics. I don't really use anything out of the ordinary, or techniques that are terribly modern. The effect is in the combination, how they interact, and maybe that's what makes it slightly more experimental sounding than it really is. A lot of it is quite conventional, I must admit.

One thing that's really important for me is that, no matter what I do, it should always be a bit extreme. If it's soft, it's very soft; if it's loud, then loud; if it's fast, very fast; if it's thick, it's very thick; and if it's extreme registers, it's very extreme registers. It's also contrasting: I jump from one to another. It's almost like being in crisis the whole time, but this is my nature. I think my best pieces are extreme, and the ones that are a bit more safe I actually find boring and don't like them at all. I know, where I've done something really good, it was always because I took some risks. It could be just because I took an ostinato rhythm, like in *Clocks* [1993], where I tried to be very radical with one particular regularity, something I didn't allow myself to do before, or didn't want to do or was scared to do.²

**Do you approach writing for the piano differently from the way you approach writing for other instruments?**

Piano's my instrument; I don't play anything else. For me it is more a percussion instrument than a melodic instrument. Sometimes it's also a piece of furniture, and I want it to sound very resonant, like a piece of wood. That's why I use a lot of lower and higher register, for that "woody" sound. I also like the very big loud sound, and the energy of the piano. I like to play with and without pedals, and the change between those. You can even play with your elbows if you want to, as I do in *Variations in a Serious Black Dress* [1995]. Then there's the combination or the contrast of all those things to the middle register as well. The piano has so many colours. Every instrument has lots of colours, but the piano is the one with most registers, the biggest

² In *Clocks*, the tape part—created before the rest of the score was composed and therefore a prescriptive framework for the whole musical fabric—is, 'in effect, a click-track that the audience can hear.' It comprises the utterly regular and menacing sounds of a hammer on a block of wood, a double bass played *col legno battuto*, voices, flutes transposed two octaves down and a ruined piano found in the building where the piece was created and premiered, the Centre for Arts and Media in Karlsruhe. In Germany, unlike in the USA or Australia, the use of such regularity and repetition was 'taboo.' Richard Toop, Sleeve Notes. *Clocks* also forms the soundtrack to a short film on Kats-Chernin by Kirsten Winter, which has screened at numerous film festivals around the world in the past eighteen months.
amplitude. I still think I haven’t written enough for the piano. However, there is almost enough material already for one whole CD just of piano music, and every piece is very different, but I still feel there is more that I can do.3

Do you compose at the piano?

Most of the time, yes, because I like to improvise, just to see what happens when I’m sitting at the piano. Sometimes I don’t even touch it, but I’m already so used to having the music paper prepared on the piano. The way I write music is very different to the way I have my surroundings. In my music I like to change everything, but I like to write every piece in the same setting: similar clothes, the same pen and pencil, the same ruler, the same kind of paper. I have to prepare the layout for each piece differently, but there is a certain set-up for me.

I recently had one note on my piano out of action, and I don’t want to repair it because I had that for the last piece I wrote and thought it was a good thing, a blessing in disguise. That’s another reason why composing is always a game for me. If something suddenly happens, I think that’s meant to be; if a note suddenly stops working, maybe there’s a reason why I shouldn’t use it, so I just avoid it in this particular piece, and see what happens.

There’s a great sense of fun, and a sense of game, that comes across in some pieces, for example in Coco’s Last Collection [1994].

This piece was done in Munich for a dancer and it had to do with Coco Chanel’s first and last years, the very young girl and the very old woman. When she was young she was a singer in a café, and she had this one song, from which she got the name Coco. It was very simple, just three notes [see Example 1a]. I’ve always been interested in those things which are minimal, which have only two or three notes, because I do that all the time in my own pieces. It was fun and a very interesting thing for me to compose the whole 25-minute suite just with that song [see Example 1b for one transformation of the song]. That was the last piece I wrote in Germany before I returned to Australia.

You have written about the problem of eliminating musical clichés from your work.4 How do you actually do that? In several pieces, like Coco’s Last Collection and Cadences, Deviations and Scarlatti [1995], you seem to revel in musical clichés, using them for your own purposes.

A cliché might just be a simple dominant to tonic connection. It’s a tradition, a part of our musical culture; we know the fifth will lead to the first degree because we’ve heard that so many times, it’s implanted in our ears and heads, and I’m impregnated with those materials. I play with those things. In Tast-En, for example, I work with the tense relationship of dominant to tonic [see Example 2]. I like to grab those things which we all know, which are in some ways almost cheap materials, and suddenly give them a different edge by putting them in a foreign context. You cannot get the same effect with plain dissonance, or by putting one part half a tone above another. You can only do that by juxtaposing the cliché with some other materials. Another way to do it is to break the material in the most unexpected manner, for example, with an accent or an anti-accent, by something very soft, so the music suddenly stops. Or you can package it so that you don’t even notice. There are a lot of ways to deal with such material. In the piece I’ve just written for the Brisbane Biennial, Langsam,5 there is an eight-bar series of


4 In ‘An Emotional Geography of Australian Composition,’ Sounds Australian 34 (Winter 1992) 26, Kats-Chemin wrote: ‘Before I start a piece, I like to eliminate all the “clichés” which are naturally implanted in my mind (due to outside influences, music I have heard, etc.). If there is a certain “cliché” I find that I like in particular, I have to be quite vigilant in questioning its purpose.’

5 This work had been scheduled for performance by Perihelion with Margaret Schindler (sop.) on 28 May 1997. The performance of Langsam was cancelled because of the illness of one of the performers, and received its premiere instead on 28 June.
Example 1a: 'Coco's Lied,' Coco’s Last Collection (autograph score, Australian Music Centre), p.9.

Example 1b: 'Accordeon II,' Coco’s Last Collection (autograph score, Australian Music Centre), p.8.

Example 2: Tast-En, bars 90–99 (autograph score, Australian Music Centre), p.4.
chords which just keep repeating, and because they repeat so often they stop being second-hand. Probably my favourite way of dealing with the use of cliché is to stretch it to the absolute impossible limit. For me it's almost a therapeutic practice: I have to work through those materials to brush them off. Then, maybe, I can write something totally pure.

When you've finished one piece and are moving onto the next one, do you try to move in a totally new direction?

I like every piece of mine to be very different to all the others because I get bored so quickly, even with my own pieces. I always try to make the next piece extremely different to the one before.

Does this mean that you never work on more than one piece at a time?

I do work parallel on some pieces, but once I start working seriously on a piece I have to concentrate on it properly for two to three weeks. Before that there is a long process of thinking about ideas, and starting and stopping, and that I can do with quite a few pieces simultaneously. I also have some theatre projects, which always happen on the side; I devote some time to them, but not the whole time, and while that is happening I can do another piece. It's not good for me to work in parallel on two concert pieces, but I can definitely do a concert piece and some incidental music.

Is that because you're thinking of it as a totally different medium?

I'm sure I'm using another part of the brain for those two different types of composition. In the theatre you have a text more often than not—although I also worked for dance, where there was no text—but there is at least a visual purpose, a voice, a text, action, which is missing in concert music. There's an image of the player or the singer, but nothing else. There isn't necessarily a set time, there's no lighting. Once I am doing one type of piece, it doesn't disturb the other, whereas two concert pieces do disturb each other. I think composing for theatre is more like handwork, handcraft; although you have to use your ear and your creativity as a composer, you still work with a director, who works with somebody else. With concert music you are on your own, you are in control. You are much freer, although that has its dangers and difficulties, when you're too free.

When you're starting a work, where does the initial idea come from, particularly with concert works, where you don't have the limitations imposed by the theatre?

Ideas usually happen out of the blue. They could be just from sketches of a conversation I'm having. With Purple Prelude [1996], for example, I was talking to Tamara Anna Cislovska about Rachmaninov on the plane from recording in Adelaide, and suddenly this idea came into my head. It must be some kind of very hidden subconscious connection, because when I had written the piece, Tamara said there is something of Rachmaninov in it.

The way it works is really strange. Mostly I am inspired by either text or something visual, it could be just a kitchen appliance. At the moment I'm very inspired by a shredder, because I like that very fast-moving mechanical sound, as well as the visual aspect when suddenly everything brushes off and cleans out. I'm also inspired by the idea of shredding paper, the shreds and leftovers. It's not just the sound of a motor, it's the visual aspect of how it moves, or maybe how the hand moves when you shred something manually.

It could, of course, be some music I hear, but it's very rare. There are some pieces I have written that are tributes to music by others, like Scarlatti in Cadences, Deviations and Scarlatti.6

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6 Kats-Chernin describes its inspiration by Scarlatti's 'monstrously virtuosic' Sonata in d minor K.141, with its 'brilliantly simple motivic structure' and 'strikingly energetic, motoric character,' derived from the 6/8 perpetuum mobile. The cycle of fifths progression in constant semiquavers evoked a circus roundabout, alongside a sense of infinity, tension and optimism. The influence is reflected in Cadences, Deviation and Scarlatti's rhythmic ostinati, tonal references, and three main motives; Kats-Chernin, Programme notes on file at Australian Music Centre, Sydney. The circus roundabout must have been especially evoked by Kats-
Similarly, *Langsam* is based on two pieces by Schubert, *Death and the Maiden* and *Du bist die Ruh*. I’ve juxtaposed these two and made my own piece out of that. I really enjoy that, because you can fall back on that material of somebody else’s, and they’re masterpieces, so you know it’s something really good and may lead to a good piece.

My inspiration usually comes from a suffering of some sort. Sometimes I have to have some kind of an edge, or turmoil of some sort, even if it’s to do with the piece itself. If I have a difficulty with a piece, it actually gets to be a better piece after a while. The inspiration doesn’t usually come in a dream, actually. I don’t usually wake up in the middle of the night with a fantastic idea. The ideas happen when I sit in front of the piano, and it’s a very conscious process, not just “inspiration.” It’s complicated to start the piece with all these possibilities. It takes a couple of days to come up with a really strong idea. For me it’s really important that a piece has a strong statement and until I find that, I don’t go on to the next stage.

You have written quite a lot for theatre and dance theatre and recently for film; do you have any preferences amongst these non-concert music genres?

I don’t really have a preference. However in the dance theatre, the music is a very important aspect, much more important than in the drama theatre. Without music, dance cannot exist really. Even though there are sometimes silences, most of the time there is music which you hear, very rarely with words on top. In the German dance theatre they also speak sometimes and sing, but it’s different to the drama theatre nevertheless. With the dance theatre, the choreographer comes up with an idea and it’s really his piece or text. But with the drama the text is already there, and I’m really excited to see what directors do with it. I have done some plays twice or three times already, and I’ve seen how directors approach the same work differently and I’ve produced a totally new score every time. That’s actually very exciting.

Now where the film is really interesting is in the certainty. In the theatre you may do a scene that tomorrow is cut, or where you put the music today because the actors made a pause and there was something really meaningful in that scene, that whole scene may have changed the next day and suddenly it just brushes through and there is no more space for the music I’ve done. That’s sometimes very frustrating. With film, it doesn’t change and I like that, even through it’s a little bit more dead than theatre. I haven’t done that many films but I’ve made music for a wonderful silent film from 1921 called *Phantom Charriot*, by Swedish director, Victor Sjöström. That was incredible fun and it was really satisfying that, like in the dance, music is the main part, because it’s the only audio part. You don’t have to compete with the speech or sound effects.  

What influences, particularly musical influences, have shaped you as a composer? I’m particularly interested, because you’ve spent a long time in Germany, in what German influences there have been.

I’ve definitely been influenced by my teacher, Helmut Lachenmann, and a lot of his thinking. I would probably not be writing the way I am if I hadn’t studied with him, or if I didn’t hear his pieces; I’m still following his career. He’s for me, still, the big example. I also love the Argentinian composer Mauricio Kagel, who’s lived in Germany for a very long time already; he’s done a lot of music theatre which is fantastic. That’s about it for influences. I heard a lot of good music in Germany, but nothing struck me as much as these two. However, there is also

Chernin’s first hearing the Scarlatti sonata performed by the virtuoso accordion player, Elsbeth Moser (see Toop, Sleeve Notes), for whom Kats-Chernin wrote Solo Januar (1985).

György Kurtág, the Hungarian; he’s a fantastic composer and the impression of his music on me also played a role in certain pieces I’ve written.

Other influences are general ones. Very often I hear a piece and as a whole it is not really interesting, but one thing may have struck me as such, maybe just a structural thing. I once heard a piece for harp by Hans Otto where there were maybe eight arpeggio chords—nothing special: minor, major, dominant seventh—which kept repeating non-stop, always with the same slow regular rhythm, then suddenly one chord changed. He used a totally different register and a chord, and at that moment it was such a revolution, a breath of fresh air, and you suddenly find those chords really interesting. Sometimes it’s not the main material itself that is really important—although I believe the material should be good—but the way you change that material. I just take what I can, little things, and I learn all the time, while I can.

Do you think your style has undergone any major changes over the years?

Because I try to make every piece very different, it’s very difficult to talk about style or the direction my pieces take overall. My general interest, which has been with me since I started and hasn’t changed, is in minimising the material, reducing it to the bare bones, and then putting a bit of flesh on it later on. That’s why, when you look closely, sometimes the main material exists only as three notes, or three chords, or one note, or one rhythm, something very tiny. It’s an adventure to see how far I can go with the material, and when is the moment I have to switch to the next level in order to survive.

Maybe the way I execute this has changed from piece to piece, but I wouldn’t say it’s changed dramatically. If I were to be critical of myself in the last year or so, I find I maybe have gone a bit too much into tonality, which I find at the moment a little annoying. I feel it doesn’t interest me any more so much. It lost its fresh appeal and suddenly became very stale again. I’ve realised this is not the way I want to go, so I’ve got to think about it now. One piece, Charleston Noir [1996], was again slightly more aggressive and dissonant, a little bit more experimental.

What I really want to avoid is writing safe music because that’s the absolute death of creativity. I have to keep taking risks, even if they are not risks for somebody else; a risk for me could be using a minor scale, a small risk, but it’s what you do with it. My question to myself when I write a piece is always, what challenges do I take on. Maybe I was wrong in saying my direction has changed, a I don’t think it has changed radically, it just changes non-stop, hopefully. I don’t want people, when they hear my piece, to pigeonhole me, to say that’s how Kats-Chemin always writes, we can recognise her.

Is there an element of wanting to fool your audiences?

Not at all. It’s nothing to do with the audience, it has to do with me. I really would hate to be predictable. Some of my pieces lately have been—for me personally—a bit too predictable, too light, too entertaining, too much like an encore or party piece. I never want to fool the audience; the audience is not stupid. I have a huge respect for audiences and for what they can say. It’s certainly an important issue for me. Of course I write for the players and for myself to have fun, but I think the ultimate is really the audience. They decide if you’re an interesting composer, if you’re worth listening to. If they don’t listen, there is no point writing.

Do you feel that audiences in general have appreciated what you’re trying to do?

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8 In the programmes notes for Retonica (1993), which were written for the 11 November 1994 premiere by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra under Edo de Waart, Kats-Chemin signalled a change of direction in her music. Retonica is described as ‘the last of a series of pieces concerned with particular archetypal melodic-harmonic elements familiar from (western) “classical” music,’ in which the composer returned to ideas explored in her other orchestral works Stairs and Transfer (1990) before moving in a new direction in works such as Clocks, the Concertino for violin and eleven winds (1994) and Clip (1994) for solo percussion. Programme notes on file at Australian Music Centre, Sydney.
Interview with Elena Kats-Chernin

Yes. I’ve been very lucky; they’ve always been very responsive. I don’t think my music is very difficult. It’s quite accessible, although I never try to be so, I just don’t think in very complex terms. Listeners who have talked to me have responded in a very positive manner so far. Also, the pieces get performed over and over again, which is a good sign that pieces are liked.

Is it also an issue of audiences these days getting tired or frightened of composers who talk endlessly about abstract theory, and finding it refreshing to hear a piece which is just about music, about sound, not abstract ideas.

It could be less frightening or less endangering. I do like to confront, though, to provoke thought or to evoke images. Very often people say to me after the concert that they’ve had images in their heads. I like the audience to react or maybe to have their heart pumping or to feel the vibrations, although not in the New Age spiritual sense. My music doesn’t go into the sky and it definitely doesn’t have anything wishy-wasy about it. It is very direct and it gets to people quickly, so they don’t have to think about theories so much. I can theorise and I actually find it quite interesting to argue about things. Obviously not absolutely everybody will share my views. However, I guess what makes my music attractive for some people is that there is not too much talk, just action.

Mind you, I don’t have anything against people with lots of theories and I have great respect for people with interesting, challenging thought and very complex music. It’s great if it’s well done. I cannot do it myself, and a lot of the audience doesn’t understand it either but that doesn’t matter. That doesn’t mean it shouldn’t be done. In any case, after hearing such music very often it becomes more easy to understand. It’s very much an issue of education: the more you hear something, the more you like it, or the more you understand it.

...the closer you feel to a piece of music?

It becomes more implanted in you. The main thing is for a person to understand that a piece is an individual piece, and why. At first they all sound the same, but once you’ve heard them many times, you suddenly recognise patterns, and can remember. It becomes like a piece of pop music; you keep hearing it all the time. It’s very much a listening process, where one has to listen more and more often. This is a process one doesn’t have to go through with my music. With my music you don’t even have to concentrate that much. But there are some things you don’t perceive the first time around. Let’s say one instrument, or one material, finishes and another one overlaps but then goes away again; you don’t notice it, and sometimes only after the second hearing you can tell.

It seems to me that, particularly in orchestral works such as Stairs and Retonica, there are very complex, multi-layered textures and one needs to listen to them quite a lot in order to hear everything that’s going on and to really grasp the texture.

It’s because orchestra is a huge, huge organism. You can try things here that you very often cannot do with a small ensemble. With an orchestra you have many instruments who would otherwise just sit around, so you make them play one kind of game while other instruments are busy with something else. For example, you might have the strings playing a melody, the keyboards playing chords and the horns playing low bass notes. Then after a while the bass note becomes something else, the chords become another chord and the melody in the violins goes right down to the bottom of the texture. For me there’s always the possibility that something may become something else, which already was something else. That complexity of an illusion interests me, so I’m glad that comes through.

Actually my favourite ensemble is eleven to fourteen instruments, because that’s where, without having too many instruments like in the orchestra, you still can spread your wings and make the sound big. It lends itself to the complexity. However for me complexity cannot survive unless I have simplicity as well.

When you’re writing for orchestra, do you find it sometimes tempting to write too much?
It is tempting, but I do not always write everything that comes to mind, I do take away. It's not very often that I write for orchestra so I go for it when I do, I must say. I haven't written an orchestral piece since Retonica in 1993, but I'm not dying to do it again because I've got a lot of other things to do. Every piece I've written so far has been for a different ensemble, some other group of people and instruments, so it's really exciting every time. With an orchestra, you can change it slightly but it's a relatively fixed ensemble. I'm just saying this because I'm not writing an orchestral piece at the moment, so I'd better not make it sound too seductive. The truth is, an orchestra is a great thing.

Do you find that orchestral players respond well to your music when they're rehearsing?

I've been very lucky: they've been very good. I've never had a problem with the orchestra. I think the problem with orchestral pieces is that there is never enough rehearsal time. My pieces can get away with it because they're not as complex, but in a lot of cases, new pieces need a bit more rehearsal than they get. It does take a while to get rid of mistakes in the parts, and there are often changes from the composer. The problem is partly the organisation and the orchestral life with its complicated schedules. But I've always had a good time with orchestras so far.

Presumably smaller ensembles can and do take the time to rehearse sufficiently.

Yes, they're great. Sydney Alpha for example is a really fantastic ensemble that plans enough time for rehearsals, and you know you're really taken care of. I must say that many of my pieces, although they look easy, are not. A lot of times many instruments play at the same time and you hear every note that's not together. With some ensembles I've had too small a rehearsal time because they didn't realise this. But Sydney Alpha knew straight away that you need that many rehearsal sessions to make it really clear and precise, and they've done a fantastic job with Cadences, Deviations and Scarlatti.9 I could work with them forever. With any new piece, you've got to take some time to understand it. I tend to under-notate sometimes, so I've got to be at the rehearsal to tell people what I really think.

Some things are impossible to notate anyway.

Yes, the nuances. Let's say I write a crescendo over the whole bar, I might want it to start slightly later than the note starts and finish slightly earlier than the bar finishes, but how do you notate that crescendo in that bar? Sometimes little things like this are hard to notate exactly; only when I'm there can I explain exactly what I mean.

For Sound Ideas, published in 1995, you wrote that composition is, for you, a 'never-ending search for a sound nobody has ever heard/wishing to become invisible while witnessing one's own premiere of the work...eliminating all the wrong ideas/like sitting in my own desert and waiting for the rain...[a] realisation that there are worlds lying between a written and a sounding note/loving each note I have written today and hating each note I wrote yesterday.'10 How do you respond to that now?

A lot of those things are not as true any more as at the time. Today I don't wait for the rain to come. I have many more ideas now, I don't hate anything I've written yesterday any more, I don't feel that it's such a big struggle any more. It's still hard work, but it's not a painful struggle. This is a big change from what I wrote at that time.

And presumably, as time goes on, it becomes easier?

Yes!

9 Cadences, Deviations and Scarlatti in fact won the 1996 Sounds Australian Award for Best Composition by an Australian Composer in both the New South Wales and National categories. The work is included on Sydney Alpha Ensemble's Elena Kats-Chernin: Clocks.