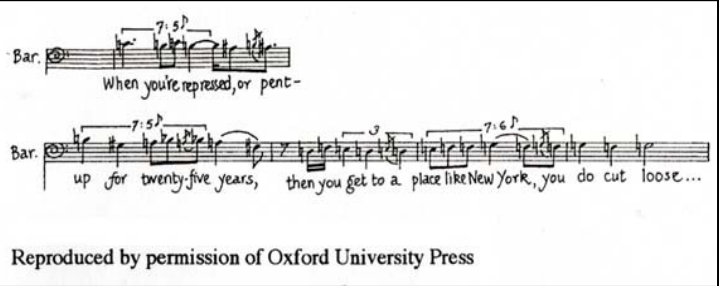




highlights his signature use of grace note appoggiaturas and irrational rhythmic values: (7:5) and (7:6), in this example, to notate more carefully the prosody of the sung text which evoke love, suffering, death, and hope.



Reproduced by permission of Oxford University Press

These two musical excerpts give a glimpse into Finnissy's compositional signatures and to scratch the veneer of the processes at work. Whilst the surface tension at the epidermal level may be overwhelming due to the score's inherent visual complexity, that is only one level. Understanding the connections Finnissy is drawing together in hypodermal layers (whether they are non-musical such as philosophy, art, religion, or sexuality) will give the listener the tools necessary for a better appreciation of the work.

Guiding his compositions is an over-arching Janus-like approach which takes equal views of art/folk music, music of the past/present, that of a sacred/secular nature. If there is one unifying kernel which emerges from his work, it is the notion of 'one voice' set against a chorus or in harmonic concordance. It is from this perspective of 'one voice' in a participatory democracy that he/individuals protest and represent different polemics. His willingness to engage the world around him promotes an exchange of discourse between cultures, and draws attention to society's various malaises. By virtue of extension, our engagement with his music challenges us to take notice and to act. Michael Finnissy is, quite simply, a musical alchemist, able to draw together divergent source materials across cultural, social, historical and national boundaries to produce works of exceptional rigour and emotive power.

Text by Colin J.P. Homiski, Academic Liaison Research Support, Music music@shl.lon.ac.uk

© Senate House Library 2006

NEXT EXHIBITION in the series **CELEBRATING BRITISH MUSIC:**
'Elizabeth Lutyens, The Centenary of Her Birth' on display from October 2006

CELEBRATING BRITISH MUSIC: MICHAEL FINNISSY AT 60

Michael Finnissy (born 1946 in Tulse Hill, London) is a prodigious composer with around 250 works covering every genre: orchestral, theatrical, choral, vocal, chamber ensemble, and solo instrumental. We celebrate his sixtieth birthday, noting his significant contributions to British musical life and to the University of London in his capacity as Professor of Composition at the Royal Academy of Music (UoL) and University of Southampton.

An accomplished pianist (having trained with Edwin Benbow and Ian Lake at the Royal College of Music), Finnissy has devoted a significant output of his overall *oeuvre* to the pianoforte solo. He follows a long tradition of composer-pianists particularly Franz Liszt in the 19th century and Ferruccio Busoni in the 20th century. It is their notion of transcription which carries as a common thread through much of Finnissy's work.

Transcription has a variety of meanings: the reduction of a series of instruments to just one instrument, as J.S. Bach transcribed Vivaldi concerti for his organ works; the notation of vocal or instrumental folk music by giving it printed form in Western notation, such as the Hungarian folk tunes captured by Béla Bartók; the appropriation of material from another time or another culture, filtered with the imprimatur of the composer's style. It is this final meaning which most closely describes the approach of both Busoni and Finnissy.

Busoni described composition as 'transcription of an abstract idea, then [recomposing] it according to one's set of aesthetic concerns and priorities.' Thus, transcription reveals as much about the transcriber as it does about the transcriber. Finnissy has certainly acknowledged the influence and kindred spirit in Busoni. Large-scale transcription can be found in Finnissy's *Verdi Transcriptions* for piano solo, which derives its material components from lesser-known Verdi opera arias, and the *Gershwin Arrangements*, which overtly expose Gershwin's melodies with enigmatic harmonisations and elusive conclusions which leave the listener suspended and longing, much like the content of the text on which it is based.



However, it is not just the Western canon on which Finnissey draws for his source material. Folk music from China, Japan, Romania, Yugoslavia, Sardinia, India, America, Mexico, Korea, his native England, Australia and dozens of other countries have found their way into many of his works.

This excerpt from *Red Earth*, which was written after spending a couple of years in Australia, illustrates the simultaneous influence of Australian

indigeneous people and the American iconoclast, Charles Ives, on Finnissey's writing. Whereas Ives may layer his orchestral work with ragtime dances, military band marches, or various American melodies or hymns, Finnissey draws on a global repository of folk music. In this particular piece, he creates a sonic landscape by layering flutter-tonguing in the flutes, staccato punctuations in the other woodwinds, tremoli in the timpani, and *sfz* accents in string harmonics.

Like Ives, Finnissey uses these textures to obfuscate the entrance of the

Reproduced by permission of Oxford University Press



aboriginal didjeridus. Once the veil of textures is lifted, the listener can focus on the coupling of the didjeridus with the haunting line of the oboe.

By drawing attention to the primal sounds of these native instruments, Finnissey is attempting to address those marginalised by society, making political statements about society's views of indigeneous cultures and colonial acculturation.

Going beneath the complexity on display at the 'surface-level,' one finds that Finnissey's pitch source material is manipulated and intervals ordered according to techniques which derive from the Second Viennese school of Schoenberg, Webern and Berg. However, Finnissey's use of pitch manipulation is never as pedantic as that eschewed by the Viennese three. His use of folk or other Western music as a starting point requires a more flexible view of harmony. In the final analysis, this view of reordering and concatenation of material to its constituent pitches pays homage, but is not a slave to, the techniques of the Second Viennese school.

Whilst reduction to its constituent pitch elements may be attributed to structuralist principles (*à la* Levi-Strauss according to some who have analysed his work), the organisation of oppositions becomes more transparent through the discourses of linguist Roman Jakobson. Here, binary oppositions on the colouring of phonemes: grave/acute, compact/diffuse, voiced/voiceless establish basic operating parameters from which one might formally organise composition.

Application of opposition principles extend to deeper levels of meaning, such as the themes guiding his various works. Compositions devoted to themes of deep spirituality such as *Anima Christi* or the *Seven Sacred Motets*, which utilise Marian hymns and text from others such as Hildegard von Bingen, are juxtaposed against works like *Shameful Vice*, an opera based on the life of Tchaikovsky, and *Unknown Ground*, for baritone and piano trio, which invite discourse on controversial notions such as homosexuality and society's hypocritical notions of equality.

The following example is a vocal line from *Unknown Ground* which draws text alternatively from AIDS sufferers and Russian poets Sergeï Esenin, Nicolaï Kluyev and Mikhail Kuzmin. The vocal excerpt

FOR FURTHER READING

Brougham, Henrietta, C. Fox and I. Pace, eds. *Uncommon Ground: the Music of Michael Finnissy* (Aldershot, 1997) **ML 780.92 [Finnissy.Brougham]**

Cross, Jonathan: 'Vive la difference', *The Musical Times*, Vol. 137, No. 1837 (March 1996), pp. 7-13.*

Ferneyhough, Brian: 'The Piano Music of Michael Finnissy', *Brian Ferneyhough: Collected Writings*, ed. J. Boros and R. Toop (Amsterdam, 1995) **ML 780.4 [Ferneyhough]**

Finnissy, Michael: 'Biting the Hand that Feeds You', *Contemporary Music Review*, Vol. 21, No. 1, pp. 71-79.*

Fox, Christopher: 'Michael Finnissy's History of Photography in Sound: Under the Lens', *The Musical Times*, Vol. 143, No. 1879 (Summer 2002), pp. 26-35.*

Pace, Ian: 'The Panorama of Michael Finnissy: I & II', *Tempo*, no. 196 (1996), 25-35; no. 201 (1997), 7-16.*

REPRESENTATIVE SCORES

Finnissy, Michael. *Collected Shorter Piano Pieces* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991. **MUSIC SCORES M 786.4 [Finnissy]**

Finnissy, Michael. *Gershwin Arrangements: for piano solo* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990. **MUSIC SCORES M 786.4 [Gershwin.Finnissy]**

Finnissy, Michael. *Red Earth* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. **MUSIC SCORES M 785.4 [Finnissy]**

Finnissy, Michael. *Seven Sacred Motets: for small choir or four unaccompanied voices (SATB)* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993. **MUSIC SCORES M 783.4 [Finnissy]**

Finnissy, Michael. *Unknown Ground* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991. **MUSIC SCORES M 784.81 [Finnissy]**

SUGGESTED LISTENING

Red Earth – BBC Symphony Orchestra, Martyn Brabbins, conductor (NMC D040S)

Seven Sacred Motets – Voces Sacrae, Judy Martin, director (Metier B0000479CI)

Lost Lands – Topologies (Metier B000083GPI)

Gershwin Arrangements – Ian Pace, piano (Metier B00004S920)

English Country Tunes – Michael Finnissy, piano (Etcetera KTC1091)

Other Finnissy recordings can be found at <http://www.nmcrec.co.uk/>

* Full text of these articles can be downloaded electronically via JSTOR from the Library's catalogue: <http://www.shl.lon.ac.uk> For additional assistance or queries, email music@shl.lon.ac.uk