

***Something New, Something Old, Something Else (2)***

Philip Thomas - piano

Laurence Crane  
Howard Skempton  
Laurence Crane

***Chorale for Howard Skempton (1997)***  
***senza licenza (1974)***  
***Derridas (1985-6)***

1. Jacques Derrida Goes To A Nightclub
2. Jacques Derrida Goes To A Massage Parlour
3. Jacques Derrida Goes To The Supermarket
4. Jacques Derrida Goes To The Beach

Laurence Crane  
Michael Finnissy

***Birthday Piece for Michael Finnissy (1996)***  
***First Political Agenda (1989-2006) WORLD PREMIERE***  
**(complete)**

1. Wrong place. Wrong time.
2. Is there any future for new music?
3. You know what kind of sense Mrs. Thatcher made.

---INTERVAL---

John White

***Piano Sonatas 154 ('Carbon Footprints in the Snow'),***  
***166, 162 ('MayDay') (2007-8)***

Howard Skempton  
Bryn Harrison

***Second Gentle Melody (1975)***  
***I-V (2003)***

Laurence Crane

***Piano Piece No.23 'Ethiopian Distance Runners' (2009)***  
**WORLD PREMIERE**

This concert is the second of two given as part of the *five40five* series, grouped together under the title *Something New, Something Old, Something Else*. The primary intention is that a major new work is commissioned from a composer whose music I find to be radical, original and ultimately inspiring. Then, an older work by the same composer is chosen to go alongside the new work and the programme is completed with works by other composers, from any musical period or style, that might demonstrate connections, traces, influences, or even disparities. These works have been selected after discussions between the composers and myself.

The two composers who have written new works for this project – Markus Trunk for the concert in May, and Laurence Crane for tonight's concert - are composers whose music I respond to at a very intuitive level. The material they select to work with has a very immediate, direct impact and what they then choose to do with that material is both curious and surprising. I have known them and their music for about 7 years and it is a great pleasure and privilege to be able to commission new works from them.

As a listener, the music of Laurence Crane (particularly the more recent, longer pieces) invariably has the same effect on me. At first I am completely captivated by the startling beauty of the musical sounds and language he adopts, and astonished by its capacity to, despite its surface simplicity, draw me into the soundworld established. Sometime afterwards I find my attention becoming less focused as I acclimatise to the musical landscape and allow it to wash over me. At which point, Crane (and his judgment as to the timing of this is remarkable) subverts all expectations and, through some slight change in harmony or even a radically new theme, seems to take the music in more unpredictable areas. His sense of form and scale is for me what especially marks him out from other composers and what makes him the original

composer he is. Crane's new piece for solo piano, *Piano Piece No.23 'Ethiopian Distance Runners'*, his longest by some considerable margin, achieves these things even more than other works by him I know. Its form is ambitious, and its musical content bold and direct, making it a captivating and surprising work.

Perhaps what is *most* often talked about in discussions of Crane's work is, however, the musical language he adopts. Crane works in a tonal idiom, and yet his use of these chords with which we are so familiar has the function of *de-familiarising* them and presenting them within a clear (uncluttered) framework. Thus when a straightforward minor triad is used it is presented in a way which seems to best illuminate its textural and intervallic properties so that our attention is focused upon *it* and less upon its function. This is not a regressive music, romantically idealizing a past idiom, but instead it reclaims and re-presents material which is generally avoided by contemporary composers. The attention given to the material is what links Crane to an experimental tradition, which may not usually be associated with such a language but which is characterized by the desire to express nothing other than the sounds themselves (Crane's idiosyncratic titles hardly ever give anything away concerning the musical content). The clarity and simplicity with which material is presented means that nothing gets in the way between production and reception (other than poor playing – Crane's music is deceptively difficult in performance). The slow tempi and use of repetition also means that historical resonances and associations that arise from the material soon fade away. As a result, the listening experience almost becomes one of innocence and child-like delight and the music sounds fresh, standing alone, as if the whole of music history has been erased.

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***Chorale for Howard Skempton*** was commissioned by ABRSM for the second volume of *Spectrum*, their ongoing series of newly commissioned short works by contemporary composers that was founded by pianist Thalia Myers. I composed the piece in October 1997, the month of Howard Skempton's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. [LC]

Arguably at the heart of Howard Skempton's music is the series of piano miniatures he has been composing since the late 1960s. My first experience of these pieces in the early 1990s was revelatory and marked the beginning of my explorations of experimental piano music. ***senza licenza*** was written for left hand only in 1974 and dedicated to the English composer Benjamin Britten, who himself had written a work for piano and orchestra for the pianist Paul Wittgenstein, who had lost his right arm in the first world war.

The four pieces collectively known as ***Derridas*** have their origin in a collaborative performance work that I contributed to in 1986. Writer, director and critic Andrew Renton's interest in the work of French philosopher Jacques Derrida led him to devise a piece called *Dériva*, an evening long amalgam of spoken text and live music; the original texts were by Michael Bracewell and Andrew himself. The music consisted of four solo piano pieces and two pieces for chamber organ, composed by myself, and four tape pieces, which I composed in collaboration with Andrew. The performance was structured through quotations from Derrida's text *Signéponge*, which contains a series of breaks or ruptures in the narrative. These were the moments that signalled shifts in the mix of elements in live presentation. In the performance, by James Duke, Michael, Andrew and myself at Nottingham University on 19<sup>th</sup> June 1986, the pieces of music were titled *DERIVA 1-10*. After the performance I decided I wanted to play the piano pieces in concerts and re-titled them with the possible intention of exploring the everyday life of Jacques Derrida. I gave first concert performances at various events in London between December 1986 and December 1988. The individual pieces can be

performed separately but when played complete the order should be as on tonight's programme. [LC]

### ***Birthday Piece for Michael Finnissy***

In the summer of 1996 the pianist Ian Pace asked 26 composers to write a short piano piece to celebrate Michael Finnissy's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. He played them all in a concert at the British Music Information Centre in London on 11 July 1996. My piece lasts around 2 minutes. [LC]

### ***First Political Agenda***

Michael Finnissy is a composer frequently (always?) concerned with expressing his experience and understanding of the world through his music. Often this is made explicit through the titles of his works, which is clearly the case here. For Finnissy it is important that he positions his work in some relation to political and social issues, either those of his own or, as an act of solidarity, those of others. In particular, the experiences of the oppressed, the outsider, the alien, are recurrent themes in his music. *First Political Agenda* draws upon Finnissy's own experiences – as a composer in England – and in this sense could be said to be autobiographical. The first movement - 'Wrong place. Wrong time.' – immediately speaks of Finnissy's view of himself in relation to the world (both the real world and the, at times, un-real world of new music). It draws upon a wide range of source material from Finnissy's collection, possibly by composers with which he (unfashionably) identifies. The second movement – 'Is there any future for new music?' – draws upon the extraordinary Benedictus from Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, a spiritual response to the complexities of contemporary music production? The final movement – 'You know what kind of sense Mrs. Thatcher made.' – takes as its material one of the most English of all musical emblems, Parry's music for Blake's 'Jerusalem'. Finnissy treats the music in reverse (which, he notes, oddly recalls Puccini's 'Nessun Dorma', famously used as the theme for the football world cup tournament in 1990), but flattens all musical meaning through the extreme dynamic and rhythmic stasis, a potent reflection upon Englishness.

John White has thus far (to my knowledge) composed 167 piano sonatas, the earliest being composed in 1956 when the composer was 19 years old. The three being performed today – **Piano Sonatas 154, 166 and 162** (my ordering) – are among the most recent but remain typical of many of the sonatas in their characterization. Like Finnissy, White regards composition as in some way documenting life, but for White this means (in his piano sonatas) reflecting the worlds of music he responds to. High art and low art converge in his sonatas; the kinds of influences one might detect include Schumann, rumba, Broadway shows, Skryabin, Debussy, Nintendo music, Messaien, Busoni, Satie, jazz, Billy Mayerl, Franck, Bernstein...

***Second Gentle Melody*** (dedicated to the music scholar Donald Mitchell) exemplifies Howard Skempton's approach to melody, which is succinct, clearly structured and presented, usually tonal and with an unobtrusive, gentle accompaniment.

***I-V*** by English composer Bryn Harrison is a characteristic blend of complexity and simplicity. Formally the process is straightforward: each movement derives from the previous by being slower, quieter and emptier. That is to say, notes are progressively removed from the initial piece resulting in an increasingly more sparse and fragmented texture. However, both the musical content and the perceptual nature of the music are complex. Four entirely independent lines are superimposed, laid out upon a fixed temporal grid, and characterized by a rhythmic irregularity, a kind of elasticity which is

fully notated. The result is a pulseless, dense texture of interweaving lines, which simply runs continuously through each piece. There are no climaxes or goals; the music exists as if it were a smallest glimpse of eternity. The work was written for Jonathan Powell and first performed by him at the 2003 Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival.

### **Piano Piece No.23 'Ethiopian Distance Runners'**

In the sport of marathon running and distance running on the track, Ethiopia is currently one of the strongest nations with a line up of runners that include Meseret Defar, Tirunesh Dibaba, Kenenisa Bekele and Haile Gebrselassie.

Most of my piano music was composed between 1985 and 1991 and consists of short individual pieces and sets of short pieces. *Piano Piece No.23 'Ethiopian Distance Runners'* is my first attempt at an extended work for solo piano. It is cast in a single movement, lasting around 22 minutes. The movement divides up into 10 sections, which play without a break.

The work was composed between February and June 2009 and was commissioned by Philip Thomas with funds provided by Britten-Pears Foundation and Arts Council, England. It is dedicated to Philip Thomas. [LC]

**Laurence Crane** was born in Oxford in 1961 and studied composition with Peter Nelson and Nigel Osborne at Nottingham University. He lives and works in London.

His music is mainly written for the concert hall, although his list of works includes pieces written for film, radio, theatre, dance and installation.

Crane is closely associated with the British ensemble Apartment House, who have given around forty performances of his works and have also presented two portrait concerts; in October 1998 at the Three Two Festival in New York City and in October 2001 at The Warehouse in London as part of the BMIC's Cutting Edge series. He has written two works for Apartment House; *Riis* (1996) and *John White in Berlin* (2003). The personnel of Apartment House include players who have been regular collaborators for many years; clarinetist Andrew Sparling, flautist Nancy Ruffer, guitarist Alan Thomas, pianist Philip Thomas and cellist Anton Lukoszevieve. Other performers of his chamber works have included IXION, Plus-Minus, Lontano, Ruth Wall, Rhodri Davies, Claire Edwardes, Duo Contour, Noszferatu, 175 East (Auckland), Continuum Ensemble (Toronto), Ensemble Kore (Montreal) and the London Sinfonietta.

Crane has written a number of works for Dutch musicians, including *Movement for Ensemble* (2002) for Orkest de ereprijs, *Movement for 10 Musicians* (2003) and *Chamber Symphony* (2007) for the Ives Ensemble, *Ullrich 1 and 2* (2006) for Orkest de Volharding and *West Sussex Folk Material* for the Netherlands Radio Kamer Filharmonie / Thierry Fischer. His music has been presented at festivals in Britain and abroad, including Bath, Brighton, Cheltenham, Huddersfield, MaerzMusik (Berlin), Gaudeamus (Amsterdam), ZaterdagMatinee (Amsterdam) and Ultima (Oslo). Several of his works have been broadcast by BBC Radio 3. *Ullrich 1 & 2* was presented by the BBC at the International Rostrum of Composers in Paris in 2007. In June 2008 the Divine Art CD label released a recording of his complete piano music, played by Michael Finnissy. His *Octet* was shortlisted for the Royal Philharmonic Society award for chamber-scale composition in 2009.

**Philip Thomas** (b.1972, North Devon) specialises in performing new and experimental music, including both notated and improvised music. He places much emphasis on each concert being a unique event, designing imaginative programmes that provoke and suggest connections. Philip's most recent solo projects have included a survey of



the piano music of Christian Wolff, including the European premiere of his latest work for solo piano 'Long Piano (Peace March 11)' at the 2007 Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, alongside premieres of new works by Stephen Chase, Tim Parkinson and Michael Parsons; concerts of music composed by improvisers, including premieres of new works by Mick Beck, Chris Burn and Simon H.Fell. Future plans include a programme of recent music by young American experimental composers. Philip's debut solo CD 'Comprovisation' was released in 2007 on the Bruce's Fingers label (BF66). Based upon his recent series of concerts featuring music exploring improvisation and notation, it features music by Mick Beck, Chris Burn, John Cage, Simon H Fell, Michael Finnissy and Paul Obermayer.

Philip is a regular pianist with leading experimental music group Apartment House. Recent performances with them have included organizing and performing in a re-creation of the 1958 New York Town Hall John Cage retrospective, culminating in a major performance of John Cage's *Concert for Solo and Orchestra* at the 2008 Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival (subsequently broadcast on BBC Radio 3); premieres of new works by Rytis Mazulis together with works by George Maciunas at the 2008 ISCM New Music Days, Vilnius, Lithuania; a concert and live broadcast at the WDR studios, Cologne.

Since 2005 Philip has worked with the renowned pianist Ian Pace in programmes of experimental music for two pianos, including music by Cage, Brown, Wolff, Feldman, and Fox. In 2006 he formed a piano and electronics duo with composer James Saunders which performed at the 2007 Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival and was subsequently broadcast on BBC Radio 3. Philip was also the pianist in residence for the 2008 International Computer Music Conference/Sonorities festival, Belfast, performing with the 'Roots Ensemble'.

Philip was awarded a PhD from Sheffield University in the performance practice of contemporary piano music. Between 2000 and 2005, he was Head of the Sheffield Music School whilst pursuing an active performing and teaching career. He was appointed Lecturer in Performance at the University of Huddersfield in 2005, and Senior Lecturer in 2007. He is currently co-editing and contributing to a book about Christian Wolff and recording Wolff's complete works for solo piano.

*Piano Piece No.23 'Ethiopian Distance Runners'* was commissioned for tonight's concert with funds from the Britten-Pears Foundation and Arts Council, England, to whom I am enormously grateful. The two concerts in the series were additionally funded by Arts Council, England without which these concerts would not have been possible and to whom I particularly thank for consistently supporting my work for the past 8 years.

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