Off the edge

Luke Stoneham

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Abstract

Work which takes from elsewhere forms an important thread in European art music.[1] There is a long tradition of music which variously borrows, thieves, pastiches, plagiarises, ironically 'retakes', hoaxes, impersonates and appropriates.

The music I have written for *Off the edge*, while seeking to honour and add to this thread, also attempts to zoom in upon and make explicit the idea of an ultimate and irreversible composerly self-annihilation, a kind of one-way exit-gate from the world of authored musical works itself made of pieces of music, which so much of this tradition, I feel, points towards. (Of my nine pieces, it is perhaps ***Time to go—only***, with its 'à la suicide note' texts and its music that seems to slide in from far beyond the frame that is 'composer Luke Stoneham', which manages to get closest to this.)

I have chosen the title *Off the edge*, because all of my music tries to capture a sense of nocturnal peripheral vision: be content with catching glimpses of the composer Luke Stoneham, because as soon as you turn to look at him face-on, he disappears.

Introduction

There are composers who clearly come close to the 'grail' of self-obliteration: the work of Donatoni resonates particularly strongly with me. Reginald Smith-Brindle, in *The New Music* (1975), discusses Donatoni's *Etwas ruhiger im Ausdruck* (1967): "To put things in a rather simplistic way, it would seem that Donatoni regards basic sound material as having an identity which for centuries has been smothered

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[1] I use the term 'art music' as an emic concept (as currently used by many musicologists).

by the ego of the 'composer-creator'." In *Duo*, *25* and *No. 1 England, arise!*, I offer "sound material" which is so extremely fragile that it suggests, in a way, that were the ego to trespass upon it at all, it (the ego) would simply destroy the raison d'être of the music. Again, turn to get a face-on view of me, and I am gone. There are resonances here with Feldman, too, of letting sounds have the room to breathe and to be themselves.

Ego is the key word for me. So much art draws the user's attention to the person or people who made it; sets the creator firmly at the centre of things. So much art says, 'look at me being beautiful, brilliant, clever, complex, cool, correct, cute, novel, profound, sensitive, skilful, virtuosic, wacky'. It is about *me*. It is invariably shot through with, saturated by, ego (and incidentally driven by the desire to impress). We so often expect this of our art, and can be bewildered, feel short-changed, if we get anything else. Our culture is one of artist-worship (artist as genius-priest-magician-god) and of artists and 'wannabe' artists chasing and courting this worship. This makes me uncomfortable. We are awash with ego-driven and self-mythologizing work. We enjoy idolizing and seeking self-indulgent solace in the work of artists who are able to articulate for us our own delusions of importance. Alain de Botton puts it nicely in his 'In Praise of the Zoo: Displacing Egos' (2011): "We overstate every aspect of ourselves."

Nature doesn't know it exists—it doesn't know, period; it just is. But of course it is still able to provoke in us responses similar to those provoked by human creativity, by art (de Botton again: "we're not the only show in town"). For me, satisfying work is that which is quietly absorbed in its own thinking, which offers a kind of God's-eye a-perspective and which at the same time looks beyond itself rather than sits back into itself in self-congratulation and congratulation-seeking. True anonymity—of which more presently—could also be said to be achieved in this very particular sort of absorption. This kind of work is virtually drowned out by the 'get me' culture which dominates and which many, certainly younger, practitioners are seduced into. I later mention the visual artist James Hugonin. His is work which is clearly

about dissolving 'me-ness' in a meditative, contemplative, mindful and entirely self-effacing practice, which is somehow able to function with aware unselfconsciousness,[2] on a kind of automatic pilot which manages to bypass ego, which 'hits us' as nature does, but without trying to tell us everything it knows (about itself)—as nature does *not*. I would like to think that the state of mind in which I wrote ***Solo***, ***25b (soli)***, ***Great songs***, ***Triage***, the vocal music in ***Times to go—only*** and the piano music in ***No. 1 England, arise!*** comes near to this. There are musicians like the painter Hugonin, but as I say, I think they are rare.

Context

'Taking from elsewhere' in musical composition, then, goes back as far as at least the renaissance, but achieved traction, as an aesthetic and as a trend, in the nineteenth century with perhaps most notably the explosion of interest among composers in the romantic-exotic. The twentieth century saw, via modernism into postmodernism, widespread experimentation with 'imported' material and polystylism. Satie, Ives and later Maxwell-Davies and Schnittke—who, in his essay 'Polystylistic Tendencies in Modern Music' (1971), also cites Berg, Berio, Boulez, Henze, Kagel, Ligeti, Penderecki, Stockhausen, Stravinsky and Webern among others as polystylists, were key names here; Fritz Kreisler arguably raised impersonation to an art-form with his master-pastiches of earlier music.

But where do the boundaries between the authored, the anonymous, the generic, the specific, the copyrighted and material in the public domain fall? Who claims and who is given credit for what when music fractures in this way?

The general concept of the author, the sole creator, the cause of and

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[2] It is important to be clear about the distinction between doing something with awareness and doing it with mere self-consciousness (i.e. letting the ego have the driver's seat).

authority on 'works' of art and their meanings is socio-historically specific, emerging in Europe in the fourteenth century. Composers' names were attached to scores from around 1400, communicating status from Dunstable on. By around 1800, European art music had become almost entirely work-centred, flowing from the Romantic idea of composer as genius and creator of the autonomous 'work'. This idea "entailed a hierarchized, strictly enforced split between emancipated creators, beholden (in theory) to no-one but the muse, and selfless curators, sworn to submission."[3] The score was the vehicle for taking the composer's unique vision out into the world, and it assumed prime position in European art music's ontology. Neither performer nor audience were able to participate in the music's creation. All emphasis was on the breaking of boundaries, on the exceptional; on the production of 'high' art. There was no room for the 'ordinary'. 'Great', 'milestone' works were held up alongside one another, causal relationships between geniuses constructed. The Canon came into being, along with ideas of insider and outsider. William Weber suggests that "the notion of the 'great composer' is so ingrained in modern musical culture that we use the term instinctively for any period, essentially in ahistorical terms."[4] This ahistorical re-framing reveals much about discourses around authorship and music history: 'art' music is conceived primarily as a text-based product, created solely by the individual composer, rather than as an entity involving performance and reception. In music before the fourteenth century, "the notated work ... constituted freeware, copied widely so long as it was deemed useful, but discarded as soon as it had passed beyond its stylistic sell-by date. Not even in writing was the

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[3] Richard Taruskin, *Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance* (1995).

[4] 'The History of the Musical Canon' in N. Cook and M. Everist (eds), *Rethinking Music* (1999).

composer able to overcome music's perishable nature."[5]

All of my work here tries to connect with the *perishability* of that late medieval 'freeware'. I have sought to unpick this idea of musical authorship with which we have been living ever since Dunstable et al, and to prise open and to wrestle with the contradiction in my using, on the one hand, what I like to think of as my unique sensibility—my Stoneham-ness, my *me*-ness—to erode and corrupt, on the other, my status as a maker of scores (i.e. a somewhat recognized composer who worked, or at least had roots in, the European art music tradition). I would like to imagine, therefore, that we are moving, via the emerging digital media and the Internet, towards a neo-medieval world filled with anonymous creative activity.

Roland Barthes's 1977 critique of authorship, 'The Death of the Author', provides valuable insights into discourses around notions of authorship in modern Europe, as do Michel Foucault in 'What is an Author?' (1984), and Janet Wolff in *The Social Production of Art* (1981). Sean Burke's *Authorship: from Plato to the Post-modern* (1995) is also illuminating, as is, in returning to the subject of 'taking from elsewhere', John Oswald's 'Plunderphonics, or Audio Piracy as a Compositional Prerogative' (1985).

Barthes' primary submission is that the author can no longer be found in the literary work, but has been lost within it. Furthermore, the work itself is lost along with its author. And in doing away with the idea that the authorial voice exists prior to writing (in literature), he suggests that "the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text ... there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally *here and now* ... a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God), but a

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[5] Robert Wegman, 'From Maker to Composer: Improvisation and Musical Authorship in the Low Countries, 1450-1500' *Journal of the American Musicological Society* (1996).

multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash." Barthes suggests that "[t]he reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination ... the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author."

Foucault, in examining the relationship between the literary text and the author, details how authorial sovereignty comes into being; Wolff dismantles what she sees as the fiction of individual artistic production. Foucault contends that authorship is not merely the attribution of a term to an individual, but rather a constructed discourse. He sees a connection between Saint Jerome's definition of authorship for the authentication of Christian texts and modern literary criticism: both maintain that the author's output should be a. of a consistently high quality; b. theoretically and conceptually coherent; c. stylistically consistent; and d. the work of a historically specific person. A name binds a group of texts, allowing them to 'speak to each other', while de-emphasizing incongruities. Wolff reminds us that for a work of art to come into existence, an entire system—comprising social and educational institutions, patrons, mediators (such as journalists, broadcasters, publishers)—has to be mobilized. To reduce discussion of the production of art to the individual artist is simplistic.

So for Barthes, the creator, the 'scriptor', has been sent into the wilderness, and the consumer made king. Wolff rejects this, insisting that the creator, the 'producer', having after all some input in the artistic process, should simply be de-centred. For her, the user is free to construct the meaning of a text, but only within the constraints of its structure (and therefore under the guidance of its producer): "it is one thing to recognize the complex interplay of text, meaning and social structure ... it is another matter, however, to opt for a radical indeterminacy, in which history is perceived as a plurality of texts." There is perhaps not an infinitude of possible interpretations, as Barthes might like us to believe. Wolff's idea of the de-centred

'producer' feels especially potent to me. The pieces in which I have most consciously run with this are *Time to go—only*, *25*, *Duo*, *Great songs*, *No. 1 England, arise!* and *Triage*.

Some of the works in this portfolio (*Solo*, *25b (soli)* and *Triage*) abandon precise synchronization between players and go in search of alternative definitions of ensemble. There is of course a significant body of work by other composers which does just this, and to which I defer. The piece which comes immediately to mind, especially with regard to my *Solo*, is Ligeti's *Atmosphères* (1961). Others include Feldman's *The swallows of Salangan* (1961) and *Durations* (1960-61), sections of Cardew's *The great learning* (1968-70) and many of the works of Finnissy from as early as the mid-sixties onwards.

The works

Time to go—only, *Great songs* and, less explicitly, *Duo*, all have a basic two-lobed or butterflied structure, that is one of two equally weighted and just-touching halves, the edges of which I like to imagine form a figure-of-eight-shaped loop, the mathematical symbol for infinity, the lemniscate, with the sense of movement, of flow, that this carries with it. In all three pieces, these two halves variously mirror, inform and feed back (and forth) onto one another, and yet at the same time are allowed to feel like separate, 'stand-alone' pieces: in *Duo*, some music for two bass recorder players is coupled with a dialogue for two voices; *Great songs* consists of two small choral works; and in *Time to go—only*, there are two CDs, one containing a song for unaccompanied solo voice (sung by me), and the other ten short pieces of instrumental music with a superimposed text (spoken by me). This shape is also suggested on a larger scale when *Solo* and *25b (soli)* (two thirty-minute pieces for the same large, un-conducted orchestra) are brought together. Likewise *25* and *25b (soli)* (both essentially tell the same 'story'); *Duo* and *25b (soli)* (both feature recorders); *Solo* and *Duo* (the former is all about the solitary, the latter about 'two-nesses'); and *Solo* and *25* (both examine what it means to perform, to listen, to *be*, in isolation).

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The premise for *Time to go—only* is that I have found two anonymous artefacts (in builders' skips) and applied some Stoneham to each of them. Artefact A is a rambling hand-written text, and artefact B a cassette (most probably from the 1980s) containing some music (the ten short instrumental tracks). The Stoneham which I have brought to them *and of which I claim authorship* is, for the text, some solo vocal music and for the music, some spoken text. Thus a 'found' text is set to music, and a 'found' music set, as it were, to words. Artefact A is rendered as song by adding music, and B rendered as song by adding text: *song* is what brings these two disparate objects together and turns them into a new piece—a pair of extended songs called *Time to go— only*. It is perhaps as if the two Stoneham elements once belonged together and have been pulled apart—butterflied—and married to two very different 'found' objects. A question is raised: are these in fact found artefacts, is neither, or if only one of them is (and the other assembled by me for the purposes of this project) which one? That idea of nocturnal peripheral vision surfaces here. I like to think I've come some way with this project, in my own peculiar fashion, towards taking the heat from the 'get me-ness' which I speak of in my introduction above, at least displacing the sense of *me* the originator and core 'producer'; pushing, elbowing 'Luke Stoneham' from centre-stage.

I envisage installing *Time to go—only* in a two-room gallery space. In room A we would hear the looping CD of the 'found' text made into the song, and in room B, also looping, the CD of the 'found' music with its spoken text. The photographs of the 'found' text and the 'found' cassette, either framed and hung on the walls or displayed in horizontal vitrines, would be accompanied by the two spin-off products from the making of the work: the copies of the score for artefact A and the printed words for artefact B (please see *Items 1* and *2*, which I have included with the CDs and photographs). Visitors could then pass from room to room at leisure, simply *being in* the

piece. The status of 'found' for both the hand-written text and the ancient cassette would remain intact within the presentation; visitors would simply be left to puzzle, perhaps, over the veracity of my statement regarding this (included as part of the 'programme note' material in the installation), 'that I have found two anonymous artefacts (in builders' skips) and applied some Stoneham to each of them'.

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As I have already implied, *Solo* and *25b (soli)* (both for orchestra), *Duo* (for two bass recorder players, two actors and electronics) and *25* (an electronic piece intended only to be listened to with headphones) together form a tangled cycle: *25b (soli)* is an account of *25* for the same orchestra as *Solo*, of which *Duo* is a sort of extreme distillation or afterimage. I imagine *Solo* and *25b (soli)* being performed together, one after the other, *Solo* preparing the way, clearing the air as it were, for *25b (soli)*.

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Solo frees each of the one hundred members of the orchestra to perform as if he is the only person in the room. Having observed the instructions for starting to play, each performer sets out on her own unique trajectory for the thirty or so minutes' duration of the piece, oblivious to everything else that is happening (the note in the score about earplugs comes from this idea). This is an orchestra of a hundred independent voices, a hundred voices singing as if nobody else is there. Sociological questions arise. What does it mean to impose upon performers who are used to paying close attention both to one another and to their own playing a set of conditions in which the former is made irrelevant and their ability to comfortably achieve the latter is severely compromised? This blinkering certainly ensures that any sense of the conventionally finessed orchestral sound is eliminated. I like that it also perhaps forces compensatory behaviours into play.

And yet, at the same time, all of the players function as a *single* voice, as one huge unison. Everybody is soloing, and yet everybody is doggedly ploughing a similar furrow. No player is more important than any other. The piece is just a single unfurling ribbon, stripe of stuff, made of a hundred variously-coloured threads. The orchestra as an entirety is soloing, in the spotlight, its own master. Inasmuch as the conductor, that supreme soloist, has been banished, there *is* no solo—and no accompaniment; no foreground, no background. There is no vanishing point, no focus, no aerial through which everything is tuned (and for 'conductor' and 'solo' here one could also read composer/author/'producer'). **Solo** is a kind of black hole. A figurative place of emptiness and absence. Or it is a hundred black holes. It is as if, ultimately, **Solo** is about nothing more than routining various types of counting, different ways of marking emptiness, of 'non-playing'. It is as if it is just biding its time.

The music of **Solo** is like a blizzard, a blizzard of code—code for scrambling, and thus perhaps protecting, something precious. But whereas in computer encryption, for example, the code might be used to bury sensitive or confidential information, here it conceals nothing. This is music which, as it unfolds, in fact buries *itself* in its *own* code. Everything is buried. It is a blizzard lost in itself. Code for its own sake. Scrambled emptiness. There *is* no 'sensitive or confidential information'. I am reminded of a quote from Paul Griffiths in his entry on Aldo Clementi in *The Thames and Hudson Encyclopaedia of 20th-Century Music* (1986): "His view is that music's only subject is its own ending, achieved in his own work by an overload that negates the meaning of any detail."

Solo is a music of extreme muting; of closed eyes, closed ears. The orchestra is mumbling, talking to itself—thinking about itself: 'so this is who I am'. It is not performing *to* or *for* anyone. It is a creature trying to hide behind its own body. This is the precise opposite of **25b (soli)**, in which openness, clarity and projection reign. It is a study in the avoidance of the rhetorical, of the declamatory, and in a kind of peripheral listening. In this sense, it could be considered a metaphor

for the 'ego-cooling' and 'meditative, contemplative, mindful and entirely self-effacing [compositional] practice' which I speak of earlier. Like *Triage*, *Duo* and *No. 1 England, arise!*, this piece is designed not to work as a recording or a broadcast: most of it will be barely perceptible. There is perhaps suggestion here then, just as in those three pieces I mention above, of Wegman's 'perishable' 'freeware'.

Solo is a long, slow diminuendo into silence, its colour gradually, exponentially, shifting. Those instruments capable of a much greater dynamic contrast (and whose *'Exactly half way between 'as loud as possible' and 'as soft as possible'*" will be much louder than that of those instruments which offer a much narrower dynamic contrast) will dominate the texture initially, while the gentler instruments will reveal themselves towards the end of the piece. And those instruments which traditionally have the least to do in the orchestra (i.e. the contrabassoon, the tuba, the percussion, etc.) here often have the most to do; those which traditionally have the most (i.e. the violins), often have the least. In this respect, *Solo* is also a kind of dissertation on the 'negative space' which visual artists such as Rachel Whiteread, Bruce Nauman and Robert Overby have explored in their work. The audience is presented with the 'wrong' end of the telescope.

Solo is certainly not about virtuosity. Each 'part'-cum-'solo' looks and sounds generally like a part from a rather conventional and un-adventurous orchestral piece—the notation I have used, for instance, is for the most part quite ordinary. There is no experimentation. Nothing should need explaining. There are no 'extended techniques' or novel colours. The orchestra of *Solo* is one which deals in the generic rather than the unique, specialized or exotic. This is certainly not music which tries to 'tell us everything it knows', or to "overstate every aspect of" itself. With the exception of two 'wild cards' (a sopranino recorder and a Mahler hammer), I have chosen an instrumentation which I consider to be as close as possible to that of the definitive large orchestra. It is as if I have made my one hundred players wear a fossilized form of dress and to play the role of a locked-off, textbook, large nineteenth century orchestra—as if I have

assembled an identikit orchestra for playing identikit music, and then pushed it through a strange and extreme filter. Perhaps *Solo* is a music which is so very experimental that it has somehow earned the right to be made almost entirely of material that is so very orthodox. (The notation—the stuff on the paper on the music stands—is also like a sort of exoskeleton, supporting and containing, in the absence of the conductor, the pulpy innards of the piece.)

I like to think of each 'part'-cum-'solo' as having been extracted from some imaginary orchestral piece by some imaginary composer writing in some parallel universe—indeed many more than just one imaginary orchestral piece and just one imaginary composer: musics from many parallel universes, in fact, from a kind of Borgesian multiverse. The one hundred voices do not all speak the same language. Again, Wolffian de-centreing: 'Luke Stoneham' might just be *one* of those imaginary composers (but then he might not).

While writing *Solo*, I got the sense that I was somehow squatting the symphony orchestra, that I was an illegal presence within the world—social, professional—of the medium. But it was a transient presence. *Solo* is a sort of commentary *on* the medium without being *in* the medium. The piece goes right through it, perhaps, like a very sharp knife, without dirtying itself on it.

Solo is also about extremities. It is about lowness, highness, softness and very occasional loudness; like *Triage*, it is about music on that periphery. It uses all of the lowest notes of the instruments of its orchestra and some of the very highest. I have appended the score with charts containing these notes—the notes which I used, loosely organized into five-note units, as the starter material for each of the one hundred pieces that together constitute the overall work—and information on how I separated the instruments of the orchestra into sub-groups according to their lower-most pitches (see *Item 3*).

I wrote some of *Solo* in a house where a painting by James Hugonin hung. Looking at a Hugonin painting close up is a little like looking at

an aerial view of a city; viewed from a distance, the same painting is just a faintly textured white square. Listening to the opening moments of *Solo* could be likened to listening to the sound of a city (a hundred people playing *'exactly half way between 'as loud as possible' and 'as soft as possible''*); by the end, it is a little like listening to rain, or the wind in a tree, or a person breathing (everyone playing *'as softly as possible'*). (I also like to think of *Solo* as a cheap, plastic, 'mass-produced', 'empire-made' version of 1960s Ligeti, of perhaps his *Atmosphères*.)

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25b (soli) is an orchestral representation or translation of *25*, the virtually identical tuttis at the open and close of *25b (soli)* corresponding to the blocks of white noise which frame that piece. (I say *virtually* identical, because the seven soloists whose music makes up the body of the work only play in the first tutti—hence the gaps, the absences, in the score for the second one.) Unlike the white noise of *25*, these tuttis gradually fade into pianissimo from the initial full-force giant tam-tam swell at the beginning of each, forming very elongated and highly coloured tails. They make me think of chromatographs (I have included an image—see *Item 4*—of a chlorophyll chromatograph with the score), with the colours separating out across the paper from the analyte (equivalent to my giant tam-tam) on the left.

Whereas all of the 'parts'-cum-'soli' in *Solo* work to cancel each other out, here the seven soloists (which loosely correspond to the seven 'voices' to the Left and the Right of the mix in *25*—two women, man, baby, dog, two drum tracks) are like pulsars, naked, 'talking to' one another across and resonating freely within the type of performance space normally associated with the symphony orchestra (these are sounds which are quite definitely allowed 'to breathe and to be themselves' à la Feldman). Indeed, just as the two blasts of white noise in *25* are there to function as a control-tone, to (at least symbolically) prevent the listener from turning up the volume to get a closer earful of those curiously muted sounds which fill the three

minutes between them, the tuttis in **25b (soli)** are there to block any temptation to stage the great arcing central panel of the piece as just a septet, as a chamber work, and in a more intimate venue. A full symphony orchestra is required for the performance, if only to spend some ninety-five percent of it *not* playing, and to ensure, simply by being present, that the piece can only be placed in an orchestra-sized concert hall (and thus enjoy the acoustics of such a space).

And just as the 'parts'-cum-'soli' of **Solo** in turn cue one another (therefore doing away with the need for a conductor), here they track one another by ear, and drop fragments of music into each other's main solo at, and to fall away from, scored cue-points. **25b (soli)** is thus a self-balancing, self-levelling, self-supporting structure—a cat's cradle of interlocking lines. The 'kind of God's-eye a-perspective' which I speak of earlier is very clearly on show here. But if **Solo** tries to be about negation, cancelling and one-dimensionality, **25b (soli)** tries to explore space, exposure, clarity, reverberation, projection and clearly discernible distances.

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25 feels like the core of this group of nine pieces. So many of the preoccupations given air in the other eight are exercised alongside one another here.

In 2009, NMC Recordings commissioned me to contribute to its twentieth anniversary song cycle project entitled *The NMC Songbook*. The (very general) brief that the some one hundred composers invited to participate in the project received was to write 'a song on the theme of 'Britain', for single voice or duet and a range of accompanying instruments'.

25 was my offering. It is composed almost entirely of sounds gathered through the walls to the left (number 23) and the right (number 27) of my then home, a terraced house in Ivy Street, North Manchester—sounds of my neighbours living their lives: singing,

playing music, having sex; sounds of their children, their pets. Except for the thumping dance music, they are all vocal sounds: female, male; adult, child; animal. I think of these, along with the sound of my breathing and the 'tinnitus', as the piece's sound palette (see *Item 5*).

It was as if my home was the 'silent' space, the vacuum, between these two sound sources; it is both the inside of my head, of my body (hence the 'tinnitus' and the breathing), and the space between the ears of the listener. *My home was the song*. I like the idea, too, of bricks-and-mortar walls (those of my and my neighbours' houses) as amplifying membranes, as speakers.

25 is also a lament, observing the passing of a very specific kind of housing and social configuration: late Victorian and Edwardian northern English back-to-back, three-up-three-down, red-brick terraces. Ivy Street is one of only a handful of such terraces remaining in this part of the city. Most had recently been cleared to make way for low-to-middle income, American-style, pseudo-suburban, new-build housing estates (such is the stigma that the kind of housing of **25** carries for many of those who were born and who grew up in it).

As I have already indicated, **25** is to be listened to with headphones, via, for example, an mp3 player: the idea of private listening, of being alone with sound and of 'listening in', in a bubble, is key. Just as my experience of these neighbour-noises was almost always a solitary one, so should my listeners'; just like **Solo**, **25** is about aloneness, about isolation.

So *privacy* is an important word. But there is a contradiction. On the one hand, **25** is about privacy as 'peace and quiet'—mine, disturbed by my neighbours' noise leaking, spilling into, my home (much of it audible without the need to attach microphones to walls) and on the other, privacy invaded—theirs, their private acts effectively eavesdropped upon by me, and by extension anyone who listens to my piece. In making **25**, I felt a little like the voyeur who both derives pleasure from his compulsion and yet, hypocritically, complains that,

through his binoculars, he sees things which he insists offend him. I am put in mind of the Michael Powell film *Peeping Tom* (1960), in which voyeurism both volitional and involuntary is explored within the medium of cinema. **25** is also very much part of the emerging Internet culture of a virtual *absence* of privacy. Almost everything about us all is now out there on the Web for everybody else's inspection, information, contemplation, entertainment. And is there a correlation between the dismantling of privacy via this technology and anonymity?

Alongside privacy come issues of ownership—copyright—of audio material. To whom do these sounds belong? To the people in whose bodies and whose homes they originated? To me, a composer who lived with them, whose home was to an extent defined by them but to whom their sources remained largely invisible, and who made them into a work called **25**, for a project called *The NMC Songbook*? Or to the hypothetical other, who might have bought the CD and therefore paid to eavesdrop by proxy, to 'listen in', on his headphones and in his own private space? We are perhaps brought back, if somewhat circuitously, to Donatoni's "basic sound material" and its autonomous "identity", deserving of recognition in its own right, liberated from the petty constraints of author-ego. There is certainly a kind of dilution at work again here, of de-emphasizing one of the above three entities: 'me, a composer'.

And *where* are these sounds; where do they *reside*? With my neighbours, the source of them, blissfully ignorant of this exercise? Or with the person whose ears receive them, now that they are **25**? Will my neighbours there in north Manchester, England, indeed ever learn of their unwitting participation in my project, ever know what NMC is? **25** also raises questions of social stratification and the bringing together of disparate social strata in a single exercise: working class, uneducated, not engaged with or perhaps even aware of experimental music or interested in such people as Luke Stoneham; Internet-savvy, probably educated, switched on to contemporary culture, 'into' experimental music.

As with *Triage* and *No. 1 England, arise!*, noise-spill, and its reading when coupled with headphones, plays an important role. But there is a difference of perspective. Whereas in *Triage* and *No. 1 England, arise!,* primary strands of musical information are placed as it were *behind* the headphones which are worn by the players or set in the performance space and are therefore only audible to the (group) audience as literal noise-spill, in **25** the headphones are worn by the solitary listener herself, and the spilt noise—all of the sounds perceptible to me through the walls of my house and turned into a piece of music—audible only to her. Other than its two white-noise 'walls', **25** is so soft that it cannot possibly be heard by anyone else present as noise-spill from the listener's headphones—indeed, the piece invites the listener, by virtue of its hushed quality, to apply the super-attentive kind of listening one might take to a string quartet concert, for example, to what could be regarded simply as noise pollution (albeit that which I have cleaned up and made into a highly tweaked product called **25**). The noise-spill here is a secret between just me and my *solo* listener.

Now to confess. Like *Time to go—only*, **25** is about *faking it*. It is a kaleidoscope of ersatz material. Some of its sounds I bought from sound-effect libraries, others I manufactured from scratch. Together they form the artificial soundscape that is **25**—from the continually looping female orgasm in the Right channel of the mix, via the 'tinnitus' which creeps in part-way through, to the 'female' singer heard singing her private, solitary, audience-less song in her room at number 23 in the Left channel *and who is actually me*, singing some words and some music which I wrote for this project. (These words and this music indeed form a kind of sham, generic pop vocalization, routining many of the most common pop song 'power-words', words we have all heard on countless pop records, words like buttons on an accordion, folding into and out of all the other sounds we hear in the piece—the baby, the dog (bitch), her, him, sex-sounds, pulsing, music, singing (see *Item 6*). Ironically, perhaps, this 'song' is the only component of **25** that has actually been composed, been written down on paper and which exists as a score (see *Item 7*).)

And that 'tinnitus'. The tinnitus which I suffer from has been caused by repeated ear infections brought on by my over-zealous use of earplugs to try and mask neighbour-noise. Irony indeed.

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Given that I have put *Duo* in the group that also contains *Solo*, its title might suggest a piece that is a straightforward or literal doubling of that work. But *Duo*'s forces and sound-world are very different to those of *Solo*. Here we have just two live players rather than a hundred, and but one instrument: a bass recorder, the instrument capable of possibly the most fragile pianissimo. It is this extreme softness, though, which connects the two pieces. Both of them contain the instruction to play *'as softly as possible'*. In *Solo*, it is the destination-marking for each of the 'soli', their 'parts' consisting of one super-long, elaborately shaped diminuendo; in *Duo*, it is all there ever is.

So we have two very different kinds of pianissimo. On the one hand the static, monochrome, close-up pianissimo of *Duo* and on the other, the shimmering, kaleidoscopic, out-there-on-the-horizon pianissimo eventually offered by *Solo*'s multitude. Further, once they have reached their goal, the members of this multitude proceed to drop out one by one until the only instrument left is the sopranino recorder, playing material virtually identical to that of *Duo*'s basses: the bass recorder music from *Duo*, transposed upwards by several octaves, is thus revealed, as *Solo*'s blanket of sound disperses, in a very different context.

Extreme softness is examined from each end of the telescope, with the whistle-flute timbre of the recorder (in *Solo* almost at its highest and in *Duo* at its very lowest) present in both places. Another overlap with *Solo*—and *Triage* and *No. 1 England, arise!*, is that *Duo* simply would not work as a recording; this is work which can only speak as a live event. Once again, fragility, transience and ephemerality are important words.

Just like **25, *Duo*** features the sounds of human voices which pollute, sounds which spill into and trespass upon—which come from elsewhere. Whereas in **25** the voices are just perceptible to the far Left and far Right of the stereo image presented to the headphone-wearing listener, in ***Duo*** they are placed literally outside of the performance space: the listener's skull as equivalent to a room in a house in **25** and the actual concert hall in which—and beyond which—***Duo*** takes place could be said to be metaphors for one another.

The script for the recorded dialogue delivered by these voices is taken from Edward Albee's 1962 play *Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?*.[6] I began with the character Martha's last orgasmic '*NO!*' from the final act of the Albee, and extracted every line containing a '*yes*' or a '*no*' uttered by either Martha or her husband George, moving on from this point to the end of the play, and then looping back to the opening of Act One and continuing to where I began. Once recorded, my distilled version of the Albee can in turn be looped during the performance of ***Duo***, to fill the time-frame articulated by the infinitely patient bass recorder players. It is almost as if ego, as represented by two characters from a 1962 play, has been physically displaced within the piece; George and Martha, horns locked in never-ending and unresolvable confrontation are removed, the bass recorder and its two players left alone in the space to 'be themselves' (Feldman again), their super-cooled music really very little more than breathing. All of the following words from my introductory section above can be applied to this no-need-to-be-anywhere oscillation: 'meditative, contemplative, mindful'; 'self-effacing'; 'quietly absorbed in its own thinking'; 'aware unselfconsciousness'; 'automatic pilot'.

The title of this piece reflects the many 'two-nesses' which make up the music: the '*yes*'/'*no*', on/off, female/male, hot/cold of the Albee-derived script; the two (and only two) pitches we hear coming from the bass recorder—just like the Albee '*yes*'s and '*no*'s; the two

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[6] Permission has been obtained to use this text.

performers who share that instrument and who take turns to occupy the performance space—one plays while the other is absent; the two characters locked in the ricocheting Albee cut-down; and the sedate live interior world 'duetting' with the frenetic pre-recorded exterior one.

Duo is ultimately about duet as binary, as plus and minus, as in-breath and out-breath.

.

In *Triage* I wanted to create a music of sifting, screening, categorizing, prioritizing and segregating:

> *triage*
> noun
> **1** the action of sorting according to quality.
> **2** (in medical use) the assignment of degrees of urgency to wounds or illnesses to decide the order of treatment of a large number of patients or casualties.
> verb
> to assign degrees of urgency to (wounded or ill patients).
> ORIGIN early eighteenth century: from French, from *trier* **'separate out.'**
> The medical sense dates from the 1930s, from the military system of assessing the wounded on the battlefield.[7]

Triage is also an attempt to turn music inside out. The conceit is that what I think of as the meat of this piece is thrown to the margins, while material which is written to feel like sets of construction lines or guide tracks is set foremost. Two primary strands of music are suppressed, filtered out, rendered discarnate, and the rest—material

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[7] *The New Oxford American Dictionary* (2nd edition 2005; Oxford University Press).

mostly tending towards the banal—made, by contrast, larger than life. I have tried, therefore, to flip senses of interior and exterior and of private and public. My hope is that the audience will be lead to wonder just what that 'suppressed' music heard only as spill from the iPod headphones is—how it should read, what its status is, within the overall picture—and therefore perhaps question the authority, the validity, of all the 'in-your-face' live material.

This is music which can only exist at one point in time; it is performed once, and then is gone forever. There is no definitive score. The pianist, for example—the soloist, perhaps, in this in(tro)verted concerto—does not receive any of his instructions until the performance begins; furthermore, the order of these instructions is determined entirely by chance (for the première of *Triage* in 2006, I loaded an iPod Shuffle with various unrelated chunks of music—chosen so that they would clearly read to the audience as noise-spill, along with accompanying spoken directions and some 'silent' tracks to provide gaps in the playing, and put the device into a sealed polythene bag. This I then set on the piano next to the music stand, ready to be opened by the player once the performance had begun, and its contents put to use, their secret instructions followed).

Like *Solo*, *Duo*, and *No. 1 England, arise!* (and in contrast to **25**, which can *only* work as a recording), *Triage* is a piece which would be meaningless if recorded. The stipulations regarding placement of the performers, the theatricality, the yawning dynamic contrasts, the general intangibility; all of these ensure that it resists packaging in this way. And as three of the five players and, crucially, the conductor (thus reducing her role to one of virtual automaton—again, the tip of the pyramid has been suitably disempowered, demoted, *de-centred*), wear headphones, any sense of ensemble is disrupted, of *where* and *when* scrambled. The performers, like those in *Solo*, are islands.

The sense of a music which pushes itself to its perimeters and leaves the centre ground unoccupied is carried into the pitch-choices for each of the instruments. The flute and bass clarinet never stray from their

lowermost handful of notes and the strings are thrust into their uppermost registers—as if pressed against the ceiling; the piano is simply barely audible. In common with *Solo*, the territories mapped here are the very low, the very high and the very soft. There is no centre ground and no foreground. *Triage* is a musical equivalent of that nocturnal peripheral vision.

The idea of 'three-ness' (*tri + age*) is also important. The piece is made of four interlocking and superimposed trios: alto flute, bass clarinet and piano; alto flute, cello and piano; bass clarinet, violin and piano; violin, cello and piano. Each of these might function as a self-contained piece.

A tinnitus-like sound creeps in towards the end of the performance. This I made by generating a super-high sine tone and putting it onto a CD for use in the performance with a manual fade-in. I tried to find a sound as close as possible to the tinnitus I experience in my left ear. This very private and personal 'sound' intrigues me. Nobody else can hear it. I don't know where it *is*, exactly—or if it even exists. It is most noticeable when I am in a 'silent' place; it is masked by sound, by music. Putting an approximation of this sensation into the concert hall, sharing it with an audience, having it assert itself within a piece of music which is very much about the barely audible and the spaces between things, feels rather exciting. It is as if, by broadcasting this 'sound', by making it public, I am turning the space in which I do so into a simulacrum of the resonating structure that is my head. (I have used the same audio file for both *Triage* and *25*).

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I began thinking about *Great songs* when I discovered the following quotation from retired United States Assistant Secretary of Defence Richard Perle on an independent news website in 2003:

> "If we just let our vision of the world go forth, and we embrace it entirely, and we don't try to piece together clever diplomacy, but

just wage a total war, our children will sing great songs about us years from now."

It really was one of those 'everything-came-to-me-in-an-instance' beginnings.

In keeping with my liking for what I think of as lemniscate forms (and what is the so-called War on Terror if it is not a war without end, an *infinite* one?), I wanted my setting for children's choir of the Perle quote to have a partner piece which would somehow mirror it and put it into a more resonant context, would give it depth. So I went in search of some songs from the American folk music repertoire and, to my delight, found the two pieces in the two books which I indicate in the notes I have attached to the score: *I'm a warrior* and *Stay in the field*. Just as **Time to go—only** began with a 'found' text and a 'found' music, so the first stage of the compositional process for **Great songs** consisted of an existing text and this pair of existing songs. But unlike the 'found' material in **Time to go—only**, the text here has a very clear provenance, and the music, if anonymous, has at least had a life in print. Yet again, there is a kind of tempering or watering down going on here as far as authorship is concerned. Within this one modest piece of music there are three (or more, given that the folk songs are anonymous) authorial presences rather than just the one with its name inscribed on the first page of the score: the creators of a. *I'm a warrior*, the creators of b. *Stay in the field* and c. ... me. I am arguably just a point on a curve rather than an originator.

Stage two involved taking the music of the two old war songs and 'kneading' it a little so that it would work with the Perle words. The resulting homophony I then turned into a piece for four-part choir. The next stage was to strip the primary melodies from this piece and to project the harmonic residue back onto some of the words of the nineteenth century songs, elaborate it in its new context, and in turn make these words and these fragments of music into a sister piece for the Perle setting.

Thus I had an equally-weighted pair of new 'war songs'. But it is important to point out that Song 1 (*Stay in the field / I'm a warrior*) is essentially a dilution, a second-generation 'bounce' of Song 2 (*Our children (Great song)*). It is as if Song 1 is heard *through* Song 2: the process—and the piece—is also about distance, perspective and resonance. Another visual representation of **Great songs**, alongside the figure-of-eight, might be the zig-zag: Perle, to nineteenth century songs, to Song 2, to Song 1. (For a summary of the process, see *item 8*.)

The key words for **Great songs** are war, America, children, song, words; violence, innocence. And so children will indeed sing **Great songs** about us years from now.

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No. 1 England, arise! began with an invitation from a pianist friend to make a piece for piano solo using the 1888 Edward Carpenter song for four-part choir of the same name as the starting point (see *item 9*). The conceit of my working is similar to that of **Triage**. Almost all of the meat of the piece (the Carpenter, that is music by somebody else) is virtually imperceptible to the audience; the most present aspect of the live experience is a residue of my process and thinking played on the piano.

I first spread the four verses of the song out end-to-end, and laid some simple, mostly four-part, piano chords onto them, taking care not to put too many piano sounds 'in front' of the vocal material. Unlike the four repetitions which form the music of the Carpenter song, this very spare piano piece consists of just a single arc—like the lyrics of the song—equivalent in length to the sum of the four Carpenter verses. The four pages of my printed music are then to be arranged side by side on the piano's music-stand, so that the pianist can read the entire score from left to right and verse by verse without lifting his hands from the keyboard, and as if accompanying the small-stave original Carpenter which runs along the top of each page. The

piano pedal markings have their own rhythm, straddling the Carpenter verses. I then made a multi-track recording of myself singing the original Carpenter song and put this onto an mp3 player.

For the performance, I instruct the pianist to set the mp3 player, with its headphones, on the piano just to the right of the music stand and, having pressed 'play', accompany the recording of the 'Stoneham choir' (which will of course only just be audible as spilt sound from the headphones). The dynamic level of the piano playing should therefore be sufficiently gentle so as not to mask the sound of the vocal material. Thus we have a piece of live music whose overall dynamic profile is dictated entirely by the capacity of the two tiny speakers relaying the recording of my voice singing the nineteenth century song; this is *very* quiet music.

So composer number two (Stoneham) is embedded, singing the work of composer number one (Carpenter), in the actual performance of the new work; his (Stoneham's) literal voice is displaced and absurdly filtered, his 'compositional voice' represented by a handful of rather anodyne piano chords placed within an otherwise perfectly conventional piano recital setting. There are clear similarities with *Triage*. A simple harmonic 'scaffold' (the piano music) made long after the event (Edward Carpenter writing his *England, arise!*) is foregrounded, made present, afforded the privilege of inclusion in a live piano concert, while an arguably far more rounded and complete piece of work is swept to the margins. In fact, *Triage* could be said to be a metaphor for *No. 1 England, arise!*.

Conclusion

I accept that I run a serious risk of hypocrisy here, that I am playing with fire. The ground I have chosen to explore is perhaps uniquely treacherous. It could be argued that, despite my posturing around the idea of anonymity and my pronouncements regarding the adroitness with which I like to think I play this game of hide and seek, that I actually manage, ironically, to do the precise opposite of what I claim

(this is perhaps especially conspicuous in *No. 1 England, arise!*, with the up-front Stoneham and the used-then-emasculated Carpenter). Might I inadvertently be inviting the listener to look for, in all of this obfuscation and oh-so-arch game-playing, the big fat spider at the centre of the web, Luke Stoneham, with his healthily intact ego and appetite for self-aggrandisement? Am I in fact disingenuously putting the figure of the composer and his 'mission statement' squarely in the spotlight? (And might I be relying a little too heavily on irony here? I remember Frederic Rzewski once asking me, of another composer about to embark on a large orchestral work, "do you really need to write for these forces, or is it just that your ego wants to make a big noise?". It is certainly ironic, in writing *Solo*, for example, that I have chosen such forces to pontificate about my ideas around the dissolution of ego.) Much of this music would undoubtedly be bewildering—if not misfire completely—without extensive extra-musical contextualization and extremely careful presentation.

But I think this is a risk worth taking. Despite the mischievous attitude I adopt with so much of my work, I would like to think I am absolutely sincere in my attempting what might have turned out to be something very close to the impossible, and that what I am trying to say both in this commentary and via these pieces of music regarding ego comes from somewhere very real. And it is perhaps precisely this particular species of idiot savant sincerity which, despite what I say in the above paragraph, goes at least some way towards ensuring that this portfolio of work (both the music and the commentary) does not collapse on a conceptual level, and which might in fact ultimately render it unique. My desire to pass into becoming one of the multitude of anonymous voices I envisage gathering out there within and on 'the emerging digital media and the Internet', to migrate to that 'neo-medieval world filled with anonymous creative activity' via that 'one-way exit-gate from the world of authored musical works', pushes my practice beyond what would otherwise indeed be a mere exercise in naively borrowing, thieving or appropriating from, pastiching, plagiarising, ironically 'retaking' or impersonating what so many have done before me: all of the work in this portfolio might

therefore best be viewed as an academic (in both senses of the word) dry run for the real thing.

To close, I shall make a list of things which figure as (pre)dominant images or threads in *Off the edge*, and which bind together and irradiate all nine pieces:

<div align="center">

breath(ing)

the double ***Bind***

diffraction, refraction, reflection

edges, margins, perimeters

headphones

isolation

the lemniscate

loops

pianissimo

self-reference

sensory deprivation

space—architectural, acoustic, actual, suggested, imaginary;

internal, external

speech

singing

solitude

spilt sound

tinnitus

un-conducted work

the un-recordable

vacua, empty spaces

voices

words

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