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'...sometimes the actual sound of the voice is my own': an interview with Garrett Sholdice

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Mark Fitzgerald talks to composer Garrett Sholdice whose *Winter* features on the debut album from Ficino Ensemble, released on the Ergodos label on 3 May 2019.

MF: Perhaps you could begin by talking about your background in music. I know you started as a chorister in Saint Patrick's Cathedral Dublin. Do you feel that had an influence on your development as a composer? Is it naive to link such things as the frequent request in your scores for 'reverb, either natural or artificial' with your experience of singing into this large, often relatively empty, resonant space?

GS: No this idea is not naive at all. Singing in Saint Patrick's had an enormous influence on me. It's an experience I am deeply grateful for today. When I was a child, for me music *was* the theatre of the Anglican service. I still occasionally attend evensong in St Patrick's or Christ Church. It feels weirdly more and more important to me now and not as a religious experience – I don't take succour from the liturgy but I do find the ritual compelling. It was compulsory for choristers to study piano and mostly what I remember from when I started learning is enjoying wild, Cecil Tayloresque improvisations on the piano (not knowing at all at the time who Cecil Taylor was) and getting very into the tactility of playing it, playing it really violently and really loving the kind of instant feedback and physicality of it. It was also during this period that I started to compose; I wrote some choral music and also an organ piece, which to my delight the assistant organist played as a voluntary.

What got into the blood most at this time was the evensong service. In particular I have this memory of an evensong service sometime in late summer, perhaps an August evening with that summer dusk light. Very likely there was no one at the service! We had just finished an anthem; I can't recall what it was but I imagine it was something by Byrd or Tallis. I just remember gazing down at this piece of music and having a real out of time moment and then snapping back to reality and feeling like I had traversed the whole earth. It was my first experience of being really very deeply moved by music and I guess that is my formative experience around music. Possibly it is the experience I am always chasing in my music: that resonance running through the cathedral and the moment where everyone is just holding their breath, creating this magic.

MF: Did what English composer Harrison Birtwistle referred to as the extreme melancholia of Anglican church music leave an imprint?

GS: That description feels apt to me. I think the melancholic aspect of this music—the austerity of it maybe?—I think this made a real impression on me. I am thinking, in particular, perhaps, of Reformation music like the Dorian Service by Thomas Tallis, his five-part Litany and his anthems in English. For me these pieces have a wonderfully spare elegance. It is so clear what they are doing and they're so unadorned. They're also so beautifully orchestrated, everything just sits on the breath and when it's done by a really great choir, the harmonies are incredibly resonant.

MF: What about your relationship to the wider world of what is frequently termed classical music? Some people see themselves as belonging directly to a tradition, some see themselves as writing against it or completely isolated from it. Others see themselves as outside the tradition but holding onto its outer garments such as the symphony orchestra or the string quartet. Where do you see your music situated?

GS: There are of course lots of difficulties around any ideas of tradition. I'd say first that I am interested in the tradition of the instruments; I really am in love with the media: the string quartet, the symphony orchestra, the four-voice choir and the piano. I feel incredibly lucky to be able to work with such refined traditions of musical practice. But thinking more deeply about the idea of a classical tradition, I think a good juxtaposition to think of is Beethoven and Cage: what they have in common is that they notated what they wanted to have happen and they both had the same publisher! For me, that juxtaposition is revealing. In other words you can actually negate everything the tradition seems to stand for, as Cage did, and you can still be part of the family. *4'33"* is still a "classical" piece of music—it's still part of that tradition. And I would say I drawn to *that* conception of the tradition—it feels open to me.

I've had lots of really important first experiences with music, like the first time I played in Temple Bar Music Centre with my rock band when I was seventeen, playing jazz, playing gamelan, my first experience of standing in front of a symphony orchestra and hearing a *tutti* come at me, but, yes, St Patrick's was really formative. I like the idea of tradition as a starting point, the idea that you know where you've come from (for me that is Cathedral music, and more broadly, classical music) but you are not caged by that, if you will forgive the unintended pun.

MF: A lot of your earlier music was concerned with exploring aspects of just intonation, something that is largely absent from your later work.

GS: I'd say the music I wrote when I was studying with Donnacha Dennehy as an undergraduate forms one group of pieces, where I was exploring layering and looping of material. After that, when I was studying in England, the music I composed was defined by a heavy interest in the harmonic series and just intonation. I sometimes think that all of those compositions are attempts to write the same piece.

MF: On the other hand they each have a rather individual character. For example *fliehen/nehmen* with its unusual scoring (voice, adapted viola, radio and synthesiser), its bizarre text and its covert symmetries seems very different to a piece like your first string quartet or *Sonate* with its spaces for improvisation. At the very least it has a distinctive strangeness.

GS: Yes, it is peculiar and strange; there are lots of things about it that are I suppose, relatively speaking, familiar but then there are lots of things that are very unfamiliar. And it has a logic and a kind of symmetrical scheme, but you don't really hear that. This was a commission for Trio Scordatura and I wanted to write them something extremely elegant like those gorgeous pieces of James Tenney, *Forms 1-4*. I wanted to write something that was architecturally really beautiful, something that was stark and gorgeous like a Mies van der

Rohe building. What I actually wrote is absolutely not that. However, in retrospect, I think I'm glad I wasn't able to write the geometric theorem-like piece and that I wrote this work with a kind of otherness to it instead.

The text is a sequence of German irregular verbs (given to me by Benedict Schlepper-Connolly)—in English it would be “to lose / to flee / to take / to engage / to bite / to struggle / to see / to scatter.” There's no intention behind these statements, it is not trying to convince you of anything: they are just very abstract and yet very personal statements. The work has a kind of an abstract underlying structure that you can't directly appreciate as a listener but of course it affects how you hear the piece—you don't hear the structure, but you feel it. I had this palette of pitch material that was all derived from the Harry Partch 43-tone scale and I decided that more and more pitches were going to be allowed through the net as the piece progressed. Initially it is just a kind of a blues scale and then it becomes extremely knotty and saturated and there's a sense of mixing the paint until it gets very dense. Although normally I'd be doubtful of using a radio in a piece, I like the way in which a familiar thing (the radio) is rendered strange in this context.

MF: One gets a sense, when one hears or sees a performance of it, of three people enacting a ritual that they seem to be entirely convinced by, and which you sense there is a mad sort of logic behind, even if you are not sure what it is.

GS: That's exactly what I'm after with it and that's more and more what I'm after now. In a way there is an inevitability about it—it has to feel inevitable. I love art that is totally inevitable but completely on its own terms. Strangeness is a very crude word for it. It is more of an unfamiliarity. It's a quality I am searching for, and occasionally I've got it into my music.

MF: Quite a number of your pieces operate as a type of palimpsest, where we can detect the remains of earlier compositions. There are examples from the earlier stage of your career such as *Prelude 4 after Thomas Tallis* or *Sonate* which digs into a chord progression found in the opening two bars of the first movement of Bach's Sonata in G minor BWV1001, but this method of working became increasingly common via the work you composed for Ergodos during your time in Berlin (2011–15). What drives this fascination with working over found objects of music?

GS: In these pieces the source objects are usually not presented in their actual or original form and if they are presented at all to be heard, it is in a way that is extremely reductive. The reduction or the kind of whittling down to a skeleton essence is about holding the object in my hands and feeling out its essence. A useful metaphor is that of the archaeologist carefully brushing the object, unearthing the precious thing and holding it in their hand. The reason then for my piece is that it is an outgrowth of this essence; I am trying to conjure something around it or map something onto it. For example, the piano piece *Tanka for Aki Takahashi* has a quote embedded in it of a chord progression from the second movement of the Schubert B flat Piano Sonata. And that's, if you like, me listening to Takahashi's recording of the Schubert over and over again and then playing just the first 8 bars and eventually reducing it

down to a two-voice idea. That's for me a very rich experience, reducing something down to two-part counterpoint, playing it really slowly and listening to how the voices work. On the other hand, sometimes they are the little artefacts that are unearthed after a process within the piece such as in *the dreams flow down, too* where the piece of music evolves according to its own somewhat delirious logic and what is unearthed at the end of it is a tiny little fragment from Schubert's *Nacht und Träume*.

I suppose now I am more conscious of a critical perspective on that kind of practice, the idea of taking these objects and incorporating them into my music as a way of claiming the elegance that is there in the original and maybe wanting to absorb that. On the other hand there is a distinction to be made between what I do in these pieces and a more gratuitous type of borrowing. These objects don't end up in my music by a blunt process. So my defence (!) is ultimately that the processes whereby fragments end up in the music are not straightforward, they are extremely personal and they do absolutely stem from total love for the source material.

MF: This idea of working with pared-back fragments seems to be linked with a more general interest in short, fragmentary forms.

GS: I have often been interested in dealing with very small amounts of material in relatively short periods of time and finding a way to put material centre stage with a spotlight on it and watch the shadows fall in different ways. You change the light, change the angle or look at it another way. I suppose it comes back to a personal tactile response to what musical material is. There is a magic in even the most basic musical material. For example, I find any given mode interesting in and of itself, as an object; the idea that every single step in the mode can have different meaning. The whole opening of my Piano Concerto is about that, what happens if we come to rest on a particular degree of the mode, what happens if it's chord sequences rather than linear sequences—how can these elements be charged in different ways.

MF: It is noticeable at a surface level that there is a quite radical shift from your just intonation work to a much simpler modal type of language in the music you composed in Berlin.

GS: When I was working with just intonation often I was working with more complex harmony but I think the rhetoric in the music was similar to the music you refer to. But also, in a piece like *Verleih mir Gnade zu dieser Frist*, although it is modal, it is treating a twelve-tone equal tempered mode as a kind of a mistuning of an idealised set of pitches drawn from the harmonic series and the way things are voiced is according to the harmonic series. So for example, because I am conceiving of a fundamental that's in a particular position, an F sharp, say, can only occur above middle C because F sharp is approximating the 11th harmonic (and the 22nd, 44th etc. etc.). In other words, initially I was using the same thinking as I had been in the just intonation music and the shift is only in terms of sonority. There was also, I suppose, a feeling of freedom in not working with just intonation harmony, having done so

exclusively for a period of time. Part of it was about falling back in love with the twelve-tone equal temperament sound, and of course the piano has its own seduction.

MF: Could you tell me something about how you think formally when composing. As you have said a lot of your music deals with small amounts of material but it is noticeable that, particularly in your longer pieces, you embrace discontinuities. For example at figure S (11”15’ in https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kgtDD_baeBI) in *The Root and the Crown* it seems like everything we have been dealing with is dropped and we enter, as the score puts it, ‘a different world’.

GS: *The Root and the Crown* was composed in memory of my friend Bob Gilmore. That particular moment you refer to was very much created with him in mind—these slices out of the harmonic series.

I feel very comfortable with the idea of inflecting material, and varying it. But stark shifts, shifts that are not implied by the logic of the current material, are very attractive to me. I suppose I am now interested in the idea of, at certain points, opening windows to somewhere else entirely and saying ‘just look at this now’. I’d like to explore that further although, I’m not sure I’m capable of the kind of virtuosity you get in pieces by Jennifer Walshe like *The Site of an Investigation*. It feels extremely sophisticated to me and very virtuosic, the way she’s chopping from one idea to the other. They are often very different worlds, each feels revelatory, and then the way in which the material is ‘turned’ within each world feels personal.

I am also deeply concerned about what the experience of a form is for a listener and I’m concerned about how to play with the attention of a listener over whatever duration the piece lasts. I suppose that move that you are talking about in *The Root and the Crown* comes up a lot in my music and often at around that point of a work. Put crudely I want to intensify an experience at that point and provide something that is compelling. I wouldn’t think of it as a jolt, it is more of an intake of breath. Have you seen Haneke’s *Cache*? So much of what happens in the film has to do with an extraordinary very well-machined sense of creeping dread – a sense of constant nausea. There is a moment in the film where there’s a certain explicitness, quite at odds with the pacing thus far. It functions very potently in the form—but doesn’t necessarily offer any specific answers.

In some ways my material implies its own manner of inflection and I follow that as it continues to imply its own way of progressing. I feel out the weight and the densities. It isn’t a goal-oriented process, it doesn’t have an end point. It has a beginning but often you could pick any other point and that might be the beginning instead. I quite like the idea that you can be immersed in one world and then decide to immerse yourself in something different.

MF: But at the same time there is clearly a structural reason for placing that more fined-down material at the end of the work.

GS: Yes, it is about feeling out a kind of a balance and it is very deliberate. I suppose what I am talking about is in terms of a long self-contained section of music. I can figure out what

the moves are and I can inflect that material but then I don't necessarily have to continue with that or make it mean anything other than itself. I can just go somewhere else. But this section of *The Root and the Crown* happens at that moment because I just wanted something that would totally clear everything out and then—to use a cathedral metaphor—we have the blessing!

MF: You also tend to avoid narrative in works with texts like *fliehen/nehmen* or your opera *Recueillement*.

GS: I think maybe everything ultimately becomes narrative—in that we can map a feeling of story on to anything. But you're right: in my music with text, I don't tend to get involved with what you might call a “consensus” idea of narrative. Maybe I don't know how to.

MF: You don't know how to or you don't want to?

GS: Yes, maybe that's it. With *Recueillement* I knew that I wanted to write an opera and I knew that I didn't want there to be a traditional narrative—and there was nothing contradictory in that for me. In calling the work an opera I was saying I'm going to make music in the theatre—I'm going to present it using the trappings of the theatre and I'm going to consider the kind of three dimensionality of that space and what that situation is. What I wanted to communicate was different shades of a single emotional colour. *Recueillement* can be translated as “meditation”. I wanted to meditate on these Baudelaire texts, to be immersed in them, to turn them over and over. I was searching for some kind of abstract transcendence—nothing I can put into words very effectively.

I should say that the critical response at the time was negative, and certainly there were difficulties with the work—my own shortcomings. But I don't regret it, and I don't feel it was a dead end. I sometimes think that maybe some of the most compelling contemporary plot-driven opera is happening now in contemporary screen media. Perhaps this is where you find a particularly engaging confluence of visual craft, story and music? I wonder, then, if opera in the opera-house or theatre can offer something else, something less constrained by traditional ideas of narrative? *Neither*, the Feldman-Beckett opera always seems suggestive to me in this regard. And I've seen a lot of contemporary dance over the last few years that, for me, seems to point towards rich possibilities for opera.

MF: Would you say you are interested in what happens between the cracks in narrative rather than being encumbered by a plot?

GS: In music we can sort of drill down into things. As well as that Feldman opera, I think of *Satyagraha* or *Einstein on the Beach* by Philip Glass. There are narrative things you can maybe grab onto—for example, ideas of character and history—but the nature of the musical form and the nature of the theatrical form make room for other kinds of experiences to unfold.

I'd like to do more large-scale work; if someone asked me to write a concerto for violin and full symphony orchestra I'd be very interested, definitely. But if I was to write an opera I'd still want to do something on a smaller, more intimate scale, working with amplified voices

without operatic vibrato. And to try and open up a different kind of experiential space, where meaning might be delivered in the absence of ideas of plot.

MF: What about your relationship with the audience? Due to the fact that we are completely saturated with easily accessible music people are often less deeply engaged by it, more willing to accept it as a background feature and perhaps feel it is not worth the effort to give it full attention. But it strikes me that you want people to be fully concentrated on and immersed in the music as it happens.

GS: Absolutely. I do care whether the listener comes into that fully committed space where the performance takes place; I want the listener to come into that. It's not okay for me if the music is just happening in the corner. I'm always thinking about where a piece is going to be premiered, who is going to be playing it, what are the acoustics going to be like, what the theatre of that situation is and who will be listening. All musical performance is inherently theatrical for me. And that incredible exchange of energies from the stage to the audience and audience back to the stage endlessly fascinates me—it feels like alchemy.

Of course sometimes in today's environment with this constant information assault it feels like it is asking a lot to suggest people should completely immerse themselves in something—and sometimes it feels to me that it's certainly asking too much. So I feel the music has to try to respect that ask and I hope that when it works, it repays that investment.

MF: What do you think about the suggestion that due to the stillness and lack of overt conflict in your music it represents or dwells in a fully realised utopia?

GS: We are definitely not living in a utopia by any stretch of the imagination and I don't feel that writing music that has this stillness is about communicating or constructing a false utopia. It's about trying to overcome the constant noise of the mind and trying to get in somewhere deeper. It's not fairy-tale music. My music isn't resigned. My music is not an anaesthetic. It is not a dulling of the senses, it's a heightening of the senses—it is trying to come into a very full embodiment.

MF: The Ficino Ensemble are launching a new CD which includes your piece *Winter* composed for clarinet, harp, violin, viola and cello. Can you tell me something about this work?

GS: *Winter* was composed last year. It was the first piece I had written in a while that wasn't conceived in some kind of modal language. I was inspired by some harmonic theory by Tom Johnson—a way of constructing sequences of chords where pitches are assigned integers, and the chords add up to the same number. You can arrive at a series of harmonies where the voicings share certain qualities. I began with this idea and moved away from it, freely revoicing the chords I had constructed. I was just using my ear and it felt appropriate. I wanted to move away from what I had been doing in other recent work where I would start with a mode and then inflect it with chromaticism, and then maybe do the reverse of that—rendering it more or less transparently what it is. I wanted to get involved with continuities that featured

both familiar shapes (e.g. minor triads) and more abstract pitch collections. The idea was to take myself out of my familiar pattern of working.

The opening image for the piece is a low chord voiced on cello and viola because I knew the piece was going to sit next to some Brahms. When I think of Brahms I think of the dark C string on the viola and that kind of autumnal richness, so I wanted that type of double stop on the viola and the piece grew from there. The cello-violita chord is the first image. It suggests inflections, variations, changes of colour. There are subsequent chords that are, to use Cage's term, 'brushed into existence', and chords that are stabbed into existence. Once I got involved with the stabbed chords, then I felt maybe there was room for a kind of rhythmic continuity—so a certain kind of "flow" emerges in the harp. There is no goal or narrative arc. It is just the same chord, different linearization. This way of working is not an original method, of course. But it is a way of speaking or a way of forming what I want to say that feels important to me and hopefully sometimes the actual sound of the voice is my own.

Garrett Sholdice is a composer and co-director of Ergodos.

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