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Perspectives on the Music of Christopher Fox

Christopher Fox (1955) has emerged as one of the most fascinating composers of the post-war generation. His spirit of experimentalism pervades an oeuvre in which he has blithely created his own version of a range of contemporary musical practices. In his work many of the major expressions of European cultural activity – Darmstadt, Fluxus, spectralism, postminimalism and more – are assimilated to produce a voice which is uniquely resonant and multifaceted. In this, the first major study of his work, musicologists, composers, thinkers and practitioners scrutinize aspects of Christopher Fox's music, each exploring elements that relate to their own distinct areas of practice, tracing Fox's compositional trajectory and situating it within post-war contemporary European music practice. Above all, this book addresses the question: How can one person dip his fingers into so many paint pots and yet retain a coherent compositional vision? The range of Fox's musical concerns make his work of interest to anyone who wants to study the development of so-called new music spanning the latter twentieth century into the twenty-first century.

Rose Dodd (1967) is a composer of instrumental and electronic music. From 1990–94 she lived in the Netherlands studying briefly with Diderik Wagenaar at the Royal Dutch Conservatoire in The Hague. Coming from an acousmatic background with a strong interest in Scandinavian soundworlds, whether electronic or instrumental, the Swedish text sound-art tradition in particular has led to a number of electronic works with text. Dodd has been awarded a number of prizes, including Honourable Mention at Prix Ars Electronica '96, 19th International Luigi Russolo Concorso and Prix de Residence at Bourges Synthèse '97. Engaged in a significant research residency period at NOTAM Oslo, which began in 2011, she is working on a series of works for instruments and electronics. The results so far have been *mobius ii* for Hardanger fiddle (Britt Pernille Frøholm) and electronics premiered HCMF 2011; *Aandacht* for 2 pianos and electronics, performed by Philip Thomas/Lisa Ullen premiered HCMF 2013, and *Waternish Ballad* for Scottish fiddle (Sarah-Jane Summers) and electronics premiered at Scotland's Sound Festival, Banchory in October 2014. She has also written pieces for Ere Lievonen, for the 31-tone Huygens-Fokker Organ, situated in Amsterdam's Muziekgebouw, *Kleurenspletjes* (2015). She was awarded a PhD in Composition in 2006 at the University of Huddersfield, UK, where she studied with Christopher Fox.

Perspectives on the Music of Christopher Fox

Straight Lines in Broken Times

**Edited by
Rose Dodd**

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Notes on contributors

Monty Adkins is Professor of Experimental Electronic Music at the Centre for Research in New Music (CeReNeM), University of Huddersfield, UK. He has published over 20 articles relating to the aesthetics of electronic music and sonic art. He is the co-editor of *The Roberto Gerhard Companion* (Ashgate, 2013), and in 2012 was awarded an Arts and Humanities Research Council grant to research the electronic music of Roberto Gerhard whose work is archived at Cambridge University Library. He holds degrees from the University of Cambridge (MA Hons), University of Birmingham (MA) and University of East Anglia (PhD). His current research is focused on sonic art archived as part of the British Music Collection at the new University of Huddersfield Music Repository, Heritage Quay, Huddersfield.

Stephen Chase is a composer and performer. His work involves live performance, installation, text and walking. He has collaborated variously with EXAUDI, Quatuor Bozzini, Ross Parfitt, pianist Philip Thomas, the 'Music we'd like to hear' concert series, murmuration, Mick Beck, Piggie and Freaking Glamorous Teapot. He completed a PhD at the University of Sheffield on the aesthetics of free improvisation, and co-edited (with Philip Thomas) *Changing the System: The Music of Christian Wolff* (Ashgate, 2010).

Rose Dodd is a composer of instrumental and electronic music. Her first composition teacher at Dartington College of Arts was Frank Denyer; after graduating she lived in the Netherlands (1990–4), studying briefly with Diderik Wagenaar at the Royal Conservatoire in The Hague. Dartington and the Dutch music scene have been formative influences on her subsequent work. She has received numerous prizes for her electronic works, including Prix de Residence at Bourges 1995 and a Mention at Prix Ars Electronica 1999. She completed her PhD in composition at the University of Huddersfield with Christopher Fox in 2006. In 2011 she began a period of new collaboration in Oslo with Norwegian players, resulting in *mobius ii* (Hardanger fiddle and electronics) and *Foraging music no 1* (clarinet and electronics). NOTAM, Oslo, generously supported these periods of residency in partnership with the University of Huddersfield, where she is CeReNeM Research Fellow. Recent work includes commissions for Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival 2013 (*Aandacht*, for two

x *Notes on contributors*

pianos and electronics, written for Philip Thomas and Lisa Ullen), Sound-Scotland, Banchory 2014 (*Waternish Ballad*, for Scottish folk fiddle and electronics) and Stichting Huygens-Fokker (a 31-tone organ piece, premiered at Muziekgebouw, Amsterdam, in 2015 by Masato Suzuki).

Bob Gilmore (1961–2015) was a musicologist writing about contemporary music in western and central Europe and North America, his work falling into the categories of composer biography, music theory and analysis, and the critical historiography of music. Areas of specialization included American experimental music, microtonal and spectral music, and the new music scene in Ireland. He was the author of *Harry Partch: A Biography* (Yale University Press, 1998) (which received an ASCAP Deems Taylor Award for works of excellence on American music) and *Claude Vivier: A Composer's Life* (University of Rochester Press, 2014), and was editor of *Tempo*, the UK-based journal of new music. He was director and keyboard player of Trio Scordatura, an Amsterdam-based ensemble specializing in music that explores alternative tuning systems. He taught at Queen's University Belfast, Dartington College of Arts and Brunel University London, and latterly was Research Fellow at the Orpheus Institute in Ghent.

Roger Heaton, clarinetist and conductor, studied at the Royal Academy of Music, the University of Huddersfield and King's College London. He performs with such groups as the Kreutzer Quartet, the Smith Quartet and the Gavin Bryars Ensemble, and was a member of the London Sinfonietta. He was Music Director of the Rambert Dance Company during the 1990s, conducting performances at major opera houses and theatres across Europe and America. He was Clarinet Professor at the Darmstadt Ferienkurse für Neue Musik (1982–94) and is Professor of Music at Bath Spa University. His most recent CDs include the chamber music of Hugh Wood, solo works by Tom Johnson, clarinet quintets by Morton Feldman and Christopher Fox and a solo disc of works by Pierre Boulez and Horațiu Rădulescu. His publications include *The Versatile Clarinet* (Routledge, 2006) and chapters in the *Cambridge Companion to Recorded Music* (Cambridge University Press, 2009) and the *Cambridge History of Musical Performance* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Björn Heile is Head of Music and Reader in Music Since 1900 at the University of Glasgow. He is the author of *The Music of Mauricio Kagel* (Ashgate, 2006), the editor of *The Modernist Legacy: Essays on New Music* (Ashgate, 2009), co-editor (with Martin Iddon) of *Mauricio Kagel bei den Darmstädter Ferienkursen für Neue Musik: Eine Dokumentation* (Wolke-Verlag, 2009) and co-editor (with Peter Elsdon and Jenny Doctor) of *Watching Jazz: Encountering Jazz Performance on Screen* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming). He is currently preparing a large collaborative research project on the performance practice of Mauricio Kagel's experimental music.

Nikki McGavin (née Cassidy) is a composer and producer in the field of contemporary music. In June 2014 she joined University College Birmingham, where

she is a Lecturer in Events Management. Prior to this she worked as Festival Manager (and later Executive Producer) of the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, producing eight editions of the Festival. She is co-founder/co-director of OUT OF THE MACHINE LTD and a member of the International Festival Circle. She studied composition with Professor Christopher Fox at the University of Huddersfield and with Professor Martin Butler at the University of Sussex.

Claudia Molitor is a composer and artist whose work draws on traditions of music and sound art practices but extends to video, performance and fine art. Her work frequently explores conventions of notation and performance as well as qualifications and hierarchies of listening and seeing. Considering the possibilities presented by the spaces between notions of artistic disciplines is central to her work. She is regularly commissioned, performed and broadcast throughout Europe, working for example with Wien Modern, Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, Spor, Tête à Tête, BBC Proms, Tate Britain, Sonica and Cryptic. Current work includes *Sonorama*, with Electra Productions, Turner Contemporary, Southeastern Rail and the British Library; *Vast White Stillness* for Spitalfields Music and Brighton Festival; and *TwoLO*, for NMC's 'Objects' project with the Science Museum. She is a Lecturer in Music at the University of Kent, UK.

Philip Thomas specializes in performing experimental notated and improvised music as a soloist and with Apartment House (winners of the 2012 Royal Philharmonic Society Award for Chamber Music and Song). Recent performances with Apartment House have included a portrait concert of John Cage at the Queen Elizabeth Hall as part of the International Chamber Music Series. Recent solo projects have included premiere performances of works by Michael Finnissy, Howard Skempton and Christian Wolff; programmes of Canadian and British experimental music; a 12-hour performance of Cage's *Electronic Music for Piano*; and a survey of Christian Wolff's piano music. CD releases include a triple-CD set of Wolff's solo piano music; music for multiple pianos by Morton Feldman; performances on the *Wandelweiser und so weiter* box set; music by Christopher Fox, Tim Parkinson, Michael Pisaro and James Saunders; and improvisations with Chris Burn and Simon H. Fell. He has also performed recently with pianists Mark Knoop, Catherine Laws, Ian Pace and John Tilbury, and with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. He is Reader in Music at the University of Huddersfield and co-director of CeReNeM. He co-edited (with Stephen Chase) *Changing the System: The Music of Christian Wolff* (Ashgate, 2010).

Preface

I first became aware of the composer Christopher Fox in July 1990, when, having just graduated, I went to the Darmstadt Ferienkurse for the first time. He was to be found with Michael Finnissy, Andrew Toovey, Chris Newman and James Clapperton – at that point the quintessential British New Music ‘in’ crowd.

Later that year my studies took me to the Netherlands, and it was not until 1998, when I moved to Huddersfield, that I next encountered Fox’s music, since he was then part of the teaching staff at the University of Huddersfield. Whether being played in departmental concerts or as part of the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, his music seemed to be everywhere. What particularly drew me to his work at this point was the number of consistent substantial commissions he accumulated from the Netherlands in the early years of the new millennium. To my ears his music did not match my experience of the early 1990s Dutch scene: the music of Louis Andriessen, Martijn Padding, Gus Janssen, Steve Martland, Richard Ayres, Yannis Kyriakides or Calliope Tsoupaki. How Fox wrote appeared to have commonalities with these composers’ musical strategies, but he diverged from them in an elusive way that piqued my interest. His associations with Donnacha Dennehy’s Crash Ensemble and the intriguing Apartment House under the direction of Anton Lukoszevics were also well underway. It was a compulsive mix, and I began to pay more attention.

It was clear that around this time Fox was writing music for the who’s who of an evolving contemporary music scene, but he also confounded the expectation of what British New Music should be. He was enjoying a period of enormous creative output and growth, which was exciting to witness. Determinedly true to his socialist northern roots,¹ Fox’s music seemed to transmute effortlessly to fit contemporary music scenes in London, Dublin, Amsterdam and Berlin. His music could not quite be captured and categorized as simply as that of some of his contemporaries. Perhaps its shifting nature is one of the reasons for Fox’s success in differing aesthetic contexts.

1 Ian Pace, ‘Northern Light’, *The Musical Times*, 139/1863 (1998), p. 43.

Fox is undeniably a continually evolving creator, not hemmed in by categorization or expectation. He dances to his own tune. Each creation marks an interesting journey with twists and turns. Fox is not only erudite in conversation and in his writing about music (whether journalistic or academic), but this facility also translates into a fascinating variety of approaches in each composition. Each work begins anew with a fresh angle, combined with any variety of continuing musical preoccupations explored across the years. His work is never predictable but is constantly surprising and asks searching questions of us as listeners.

Since 1990 Fox's music has gained momentum. His output is prodigious. However, it is fair to say that he does not waste notes. Scrutiny of the list of his compositions shows that he works fairly constantly, although sometimes pieces are set aside or put on the back burner for years before being completed (for example, *Three Constructions after Kurt Schwitters* was conceived in 1987 but realized only in 1993; *Too Far*, begun in 2004, was completed only in 2015). Intriguingly, Fox is a composer confident enough to tackle musical projects involving multi-approach aesthetics with distinctive and confident flair; however, the length that some works take to complete might indicate some moments of rumination and problem solving. In his illuminating article about Fox, Ian Pace remarks,

Fox's work bewilders many, and confounds many assumptions about music. It is almost impossible to talk of a 'Fox style'; his music stands at a distance from styles and genres, interacting with many but embracing none. In the age of the sound bite, where critics like to sum up a composer in a few stylistic adjectives, this drives many to dismiss that which they cannot so simplistically comprehend.²

Certainly, Fox does not write for traditional ensemble line-ups. How does a composer musically balance the needs of a mezzo-soprano, viola and microtonally tuned sine-wave keyboard (*für Johannes Kepler*, 2007–8)? Or create a piece for three or more sustaining instruments, of which at least two must be able to sustain sounds for up to 40 seconds (*BLANK*, 2002)? Or maintain a consistent interest in music for string quartet (from *Heliotropes 6*, 1987, to *The Wedding at Cana (after the Master of the Spanish Kings)*, 2013), not to mention his writing of 13 pieces for solo piano or prepared piano (from *Second Eight*, 1978–80/1982, to *L'ascenseur*, 2010–12)?

There is more to Fox's musical writing than merely the adhesion of extra-musical factors onto each work. His is an approach that intrinsically integrates each component, whether expressly musical or not, from the initial conception of a work. The range of styles and genres with which he experiments is vast, yet the work involved in implementing each detail of each distinct compositional approach is undertaken with zeal. It is clear that Fox often steps outside

2 Ibid., p. 33.

musical conventions, yet he remains a firm favourite of festival directors and music ensembles in equal measure. Perhaps what unites them all is the slight element of frisson that a Fox commission provokes. What will he construct for the next ensemble, player, venue, or festival? Truly, you are never sure what you will hear, see or encounter next.

This volume brings together contributions from contemporary music scholars and practitioners with divergent interests and backgrounds, creating a unique platform from which to regard Fox's work. Some of the contributors have been quite closely associated with Fox, but in the niche world that is contemporary music it would not be hard to apply the 'six degrees of separation' rule.³ This study provides the scope for the various contributors to engage with what fascinates them in Fox's music and to explore themes around appropriate works from the Fox catalogue. Fox's resistance to the pursuit of a single, cohesive perceivable compositional style has meant that to some degree when either listening to his music (minimum level of engagement possible) or performing his works (maximum engagement level) it is necessary to contextualize what he produces, so that it makes musical sense; his music is not a passive pastime. Those who have written here will already have actively engaged with his work prior to their involvement in this volume. It is this level of historical engagement that gives the contributions their unique strength.

One immutable fact concerning any piece by Fox is that there is always a level at which it is intangible. In Pace's words, 'Fox, a true heir to the Brechtian tradition, takes the familiar and makes it strange'.⁴ This inscrutable musical nature is explored at various points in this volume. The Brechtian analogy is apt, for just as Brecht was a socialist creative practitioner, so too has Fox aligned himself with Darmstadt, his own German heritage and the Labour party.

'Deft' and 'dexterous' are the words that most occur to me when describing Fox's work. To meet him is to meet a quintessential English gentleman – genially exuberant, gliding with ease between academic establishment, contemporary music ensemble, concert hall and broadsheet.⁵ Yet beneath the apparent natural aplomb Fox confirms the 10,000-hour outlier principle,⁶ for he works consistently and simultaneously on multiple composition projects and has done so since he first began composing at the age of 12. He has worked hard at his craft and, good northerner that he is, grafted in order to progress to Professor of Music at Brunel University London from his first job as a lecturer in Performing Arts at Ilkley College. He has not had time to waste on artistic angst nor the inclination.

3 The idea first put forward by sociologist Stanley Milgram in the 1960s, which suggests that any living person on Earth is connected to any other person by a mere six people; it was a game feverishly played in relation to Hollywood actor Kevin Bacon in the 1990s.

4 Pace, 'Northern Light', p. 43.

5 Fox regularly contributes to *The Guardian*.

6 The idea that it takes roughly 10,000 hours of practice to achieve mastery in a field; Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers – The Story of Success* (London, England, 2008).

xvi *Preface*

Relentlessly upbeat, his temperament is to the point, succinct, witty, pithy, yet elevated – much like his music. No word mis-spoken, not one note too many.

As the first study of the music of Christopher Fox, I hope that these writings will create a foundation from which further research may develop. The chapters aim to reflect the multi-layered compositional approach Fox generates in his work. I would like to express my profound gratitude to each contributor for supporting me into this first foray into Fox's compositional world. Soliciting contributions was a pleasure, and the idea was greeted overwhelmingly positively and affirmatively.

Many have helped sustain the progress of this volume. My warm thanks extend to colleagues at NOTAM, Oslo, notably Jøran Rudi and Cato Lagnes, who greeted me on every visit with discussions about the Norwegian contemporary music scene, providing me with a unique vantage point from which to press on with this project on the music of the quintessential Brit Christopher Fox. Further thanks go also to Susanna Eastburn, Graham McKenzie and Laurence Crane for the right word at the right time as well as to Josephine Bryan, copy editor, for her capable organization of the task at hand. Particular thanks are due to Professor Geoff Rodgers, Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research at Brunel University London and to CeReNeM (Centre for Research in New Music), University of Huddersfield, for their support of this project.

Christopher Fox has made time, in the midst of many other work commitments, for lengthy interviews with contributors, allowing access to his sketchbooks and personal archive for information to be gathered for this work. He has been chipper and encouraging throughout the whole process.

My children, Ethan, Luke, Annis and Finn, have put up with a kitchen table endlessly strewn with the latest paper-clipped chapter versions instead of supper.

Finally, special mention must be made of one contributor in particular. Characteristically when asked whether he felt able to participate in this venture, Bob Gilmore responded 'Hooray! I metaphorically crack open the champers in your general direction – well done you for getting this together!'⁷ His enthusiasm egged me on when the inevitably protracted nature of a multi-authorship project threatened to unhinge me. It is with great sadness that the start of 2015 saw Bob's extremely premature demise. The contemporary music world has felt his loss keenly. It is a fitting testament to a great friendship that Bob's beguiling writing on the music of his good friend Christopher is published posthumously.

This book is dedicated to Bob Gilmore (1961–2015) and to the memory of my father Kenneth Christian Dodd (1924–1990).

Rose Dodd

7 Bob Gilmore, email to the author, 3 May 2013.

Christopher Fox

Christopher Fox was born on 10 March 1955 in York, the eldest child of Raymond Fox (1925–90), a lawyer who was also born in York, and Barbara Fox (b. 1925), who grew up in Pomerania (then in Germany, now in Poland). When he was nearly two his parents moved to the nearby village of Copmanthorpe; he went to junior school in the village and then to Tadcaster Grammar School. In 1973 he went to the University of Liverpool to read music, attracted both by the prospect of studying with Hugh Wood, the university's composer in residence, and of being in the same city as Liverpool Football Club. From Liverpool he went to Southampton, studying with Jonathan Harvey for a year, before returning to York to complete a PhD in composition, supervised by Richard Orton.

In 1978 he married the singer Amanda Crawley. Both of them sang in a chamber choir formed to perform in that year's inaugural York Early Music Festival, and during rehearsals Fox met a fellow tenor, Roger Heaton, rather better known as a clarinettist. They began a close collaboration and it was at Heaton's suggestion that Fox went to the Darmstadt Ferienkurse for the first time 1982. The *succès de scandale* of Fox's *DaNCE* (1980), performed at Heaton's instigation during the Ferienkurse, led to many further opportunities in Germany (including a DAAD Berliner Künstlerprogramm residency in 1987) and elsewhere in continental Europe. Further close collaborations with soloists and ensembles have been a feature of Fox's life as a composer, most notably with the pianists Ian Pace, John Snijders and Philip Thomas, the cellist Anton Lukoszevics, and the ensembles Apartment House, EXAUDI, The Clerks and the Ives Ensemble.

As well as composing, Fox has earned a living as a lecturer, teaching art and media history in the Art School of Bradford College for 10 years, before joining the music departments of the University of Huddersfield and, more recently, Brunel University London. He also writes about music, producing newspaper features, radio scripts, musicological journal articles and book chapters, and editing books on Michael Finnissy and the history of the Darmstadt Ferienkurse. Recordings of his works are to be found on many different labels, but publication of his music is exclusively with his own imprint, the Fox Edition; he was one of the first British composers to make a success as an independent publisher.

He is the father of two children from his first marriage, Ben and Anna, and stepfather to Hannah and Scarlet, the daughters of his wife, the writer Susan McNally, with whom he has lived in London since their marriage in 2006.

9 **Abstruse Bagatelles**

Music for solo piano by Christopher Fox

Philip Thomas

Despite the relatively small number of written discussions about Christopher Fox's music, it has already become something of a cliché through these and in verbal discussions over the years to cite Fox as a composer who inhabits no single stylistic abode. Philip Clark's profile of Fox begins with the caption 'a British composer whose music is impossible to categorize' and goes on to slyly suggest 'He's a minimalist, maximalist, central European, conceptual, pastoral, German, English composer/sound artist'.¹ Ian Pace, in the first major article on Fox's music, wrote 'It is near-impossible to talk of a "Fox-style"; his music stands at a distance from styles and genres, interacting with many but embracing none'.² Fox himself has written:

I have always been suspicious of ideology, which is one of the reasons why I resist the categorization of my music. In the 1980s, I suffered the possibly unique distinction of having my work critically pigeonholed as both 'minimalist' and 'complex' and, more recently, I have found myself labelled as a 'microtonal' composer. Terms like these come into existence because initially they provide a helpful shorthand in critical debates, but they also have a limited useful life, usually less than a decade, after which they are as much a hindrance as a help to constructive discussion.³

While the diversity of Fox's material types (tonal, atonal, microtonal, pitch, noise, acoustic, electronic) and notational characteristics (complex, reductive, graphic, indeterminate) would appear to support the perception of Fox as a pluralist, I believe these to be merely surface features. Underlying the array of apparent stylistic influences is a remarkably coherent personal aesthetic, which pays its dues to many composers (most prominent among them are Beethoven, Ives, Stravinsky,

1 Philip Clark, 'Christopher Fox', *Gramophone*, 15 (2013).

2 Ian Pace, 'Northern Light', *The Musical Times*, 139/1863 (1998), p. 33.

3 Christopher Fox, 'Hybrid Temperaments and Structural Harmony: A Personal History', *Contemporary Music Review*, 22/1–2 (2003), p. 123.

John Cage, Christian Wolff, Mauricio Kagel, Walter Zimmermann⁴) but which is as distinct and personalized as any of them.

Performers familiar with Fox's music are likely to recognize a consistency of language and aesthetic, in part through his distinct handwriting, which portrays a clarity and focus typical of the music.⁵ One of the great pleasures for me of playing Fox's music is responding to the individuality of his notation, in terms of both style and technique. Composers' handwriting has always fascinated me, and I prefer to play from the handwritten score, which is so often suggestive of a particular performance approach – from the glorious utopia of Michael Finnissy's notation, the fastidiously honed qualities of Bryn Harrison's complex notations, the scrappiness of Christian Wolff's handwriting, and the clarity and roundedness of the scores of both Howard Skempton and Laurence Crane. The fullness of Fox's notated pitches, combined with the neatness and clarity of the metric notations (time signatures, bars, rhythmic relationships), suggest a love of sound in reaction to a strict temporal framework (which brings to mind how Cage instructed the young Wolff in the importance of laying out a score). Those works that are notated using more unconventional methods are no less reflective of these same qualities.

It is perhaps fanciful to suggest that the qualities of Fox's handwriting in themselves suggest a unifying approach to his music, but there are other qualities that are common to almost all the works I have performed (as soloist and ensemble member) over the past 12 years. First, the clarity of Fox's handwriting demonstrates the clarity of his musical material, which is always compelling: direct, strong, well-defined, and transparent, immediately lending each piece a distinct character. No matter the astonishing variety and contrast of material types employed by Fox, the material is always presented uncluttered, with a directness that could be likened to the music of Varèse, Satie, Stravinsky or early Philip Glass. Such focus is for me one of the most attractive qualities of the music, both as a performer and as a listener. It suggests a performance approach whereby the onus is upon the performer to articulate and project the material as clearly and evenly as possible, considering issues of touch and tone quality carefully, but with less regard for an 'expressive' interpretative approach that would normally depict, prioritize and project certain shapes and relationships.

For example, the ensemble work *something to do with belief* (2008–10) requires the performers to engage in a variety of activities described as 'preparations' and 'actions'. I, as the pianist in the premiere, had to perform actions as well

4 To get a sense of the breadth of composers and genres of music Fox finds of interest, consider the range of articles he has written for *The Guardian* over the past few years, links to which can be found on his website (<http://foxedition.wordpress.com/writing>). Fox's inclusive approach to music and composers is refreshing within a musical culture that continues to advocate a 'who's in/who's out' tendency. See also Christopher Fox, 'Why Experimental? Why Me?', in James Saunders (ed.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Experimental Music* (Farnham, 2009), pp. 7–26.

5 For the past 10 years, for reasons associated with his eyesight, Fox has composed using Sibelius software unless the requirements of the notation demand otherwise. I for one regret that the handwriting that lends such unique qualities to *More Light* (1987/8), *Prime Site* (1997) and the other earlier works for piano is unlikely to recur in his music.

as sounds, such as lifting my hands high above the keyboard, raising and lowering the piano case lid, placing objects inside the piano, and so forth. Performing in this way requires precisely the same clarity of action as those works by Fox that involve playing more normally on the keys. An overly dramatized performance, one that adds theatrics above and beyond what I was required to do, would have lessened the impact of the actions themselves. Expressivity, as Wolff noted in 1964, *follows* rather than leads the music and, by implication, the performer.⁶

Second, Fox's material is always imagined and conceived within the context of a clear and straightforward sense of structure, which not only frames the sounding content but also shapes and defines it. His music favours structural 'blocks', within which the material and compositional concerns of the piece are investigated. These blocks might be likened to 'panels', such as the divisions of some of Jasper Johns's cross-hatch paintings; within the piano pieces, *Prime Site* (1997) and *Thermogenesis* (2005) are both examples of this type. Elsewhere, such as in *Republican Bagatelles* (2000–3), the blocks are a product of the work's variation-form structure. In some ensemble works the blocks are individualized, such that players are provided with distinct material types that are distributed and superimposed by the fact that the performers are playing at the same time, in the manner of Cage. The *Generic Compositions* (1999–2001) are a good example, as are *Komposition mit schwarz, rot und gelb* (2002–3) and *something to do with belief*. Other works are 'single-block' pieces, rigorously exploring a single type of musical material across the whole duration of a piece. Whatever divisions a piece might take, the clarity of form matches the clarity of material, combining to make music that is notable for its boldness, directness and accessibility, though by the latter I make no claims that the music is readily understood. Indeed, very often the most striking aspect of Fox's work is that despite the clarity of form and content the music remains puzzling and strange.

Third, there is most often some form of process underlying either or both the micro or macro level of the structure, either within the block(s) or as a wider formal conceit that informs the function of the blocks. These processes may be subliminal or may be immediately apparent. *L'ascenseur* (2010–12) is an example of a macro-level process being obviously transparent (the music ascends from the lower registers of the piano to the higher), while the micro-level process (how the music actually makes the ascent) is less apparent, as is discussed subsequently. It is, like many of Fox's works, a 'one-direction' piece, journeying from A to B. How one gets from A to B is at one level ludicrously straightforward – the music gets higher – and at another level mystifying and surprising and somehow ungraspable.

In some of Fox's works there is a sense that there is a process at work, but what that process is, and how it functions, is obscured by the complexity of the material. It is most probable that in such cases the process is worked out through complex number games or chance processes. Very often, however, it is the material itself that aligns with aspects of minimalism, such as the early music of Glass and Steve Reich, or the rigorously process-based music of Tom Johnson, though

6 Christian Wolff, *Cues: Writings and Conversations* (Cologne, Germany, 1998), p. 54.

Fox is never as puritanical as these. The clarity of the musical material might also relate to the period of Cage's output between 1946 and 1950, a period much admired by Zimmermann (who can be seen as one of the closest European relations to Fox's musical aesthetic and sonic sensibilities). This short but significant period of Cage's output, including the ballet *The Seasons* (1947, in versions for solo piano and orchestra); the *String Quartet in Four Parts* (1949–50); the *Six Melodies* for violin and keyboard (1950); and the chamber work *Sixteen Dances* (1950–51) is marked by its reductive employment of material and sense of transparency. Indeed, Cage's music from this period might stand comparison with the mid-late music of Stravinsky, one of Fox's acknowledged musical heroes.⁷

Despite a closeness of musical material and aesthetic between Fox and the minimalists, it is with the chance processes of Cage that Fox is more at home. Cage's use of chance processes, via the *I Ching*, in the mammoth piano work *Music of Changes* (1951) could be likened to the rigours of Reich's early works such as *Piano Phase* (1967) or *Pendulum Music* (1968): once the process is established (i.e., the parameters are set, such as selection of pitch material, limits of density, range of durations available, etc.) it is left to run, leading to results that cannot be predicted. Hence in *Music of Changes* while the number of bars was fixed, the duration of the work was unknown until the composition had been completed, due to the chance-determined tempo variables. It is these unknowns that most attract Fox and which set him apart from the so-called process composers such as Tom Johnson. And while Fox is more relaxed about chance procedures than was Cage in general, and he uses them in quite different ways and for different purposes, the distancing effect that chance has upon material is something that is clearly attractive to him.

Strange things happen in Christopher Fox's music, some intentional but others probably as much the result of unpredictabilities arising from two or more processes, or rules within a process, colliding. Fox's music seems to thrive on the tension between a more or less explicit large-scale process and rules governing that process, which yield surprising and curious results along the way. In this sense he seems to fall mid-way between 'music as process' as defined by Reich and 'music of chance' as demonstrated by Cage. Examples of this might be the odd juxtapositions between chromatic and diatonic material in *L'ascenseur* or the peculiar rhythmic relationships leading to more straightforward relationships in the same piece. How these same rhythmic relationships might be understood entirely differently is dependent upon the register of the piano. In *Amnesia* (2006–7)⁸ resulting features include the ways in which harmonics combine to forge strange microtonal melodies, or how the after-resonance of notes seem to follow surprising waveform patterns. Performers would do well to avoid 'chasing' such effects, or highlighting disjunctions of material, as often occurs in Fox's music. Instead I would argue that

7 Philip Thomas here alludes to Fox's Stravinskian tendencies discussed at length by Stephen Chase in this volume, pages 112–125, but also to Fox's own acknowledgment of Cage's influence on his compositional procedures and thinking, pages 99–105.

8 *Amnesia* is a version of *at the edge of time*, from the collection of pieces entitled *hearing not thinking* (2006–8).

Fox's music fits within a very clear context of experimental performance practice, whereby the focus is upon the work that needs to be done in making the sounds and/or processes clear, without the need for interpretative intervention.⁹

Fourth, it is clear that Fox is also a composer who is concerned with drama – not in the sense of projecting narrative, necessarily, but in the dramatic potential of material, structure and process. This sense of the dramatic is combined with a natural playfulness, a curiosity and delight for what musical material can do and has the potential to do. It is as though the composer in all his pieces is thinking 'What would happen if ...?' It is this that perhaps most perplexes some commentators, who wish to place the composer neatly in a box, such as 'experimental' or 'modernist' or 'minimalist'. For those who wish to think of Fox as an experimental composer, his natural bent towards projecting musical drama fits uncomfortably. However this sensibility is as much informed by Ives and Cage (both highly theatrical composers, despite writing very few works for theatre) as it is by Beethoven and Stravinsky. The superimposition of disparate musical material, for example, is clearly an Ivesian idea, and the consideration of the location of performers in a number of Fox's ensemble works could be said to derive from Cage's *Variations IV* and later pieces in the series, as well as the multiplicity inherent within the Cage–Cunningham works. Similarly, asking questions of musical (and other) material is fundamentally a Cage-ian notion.

However, unlike Cage, Fox is a composer who is keen to engage with the political and social world. Often the dramatic conceit of a work is politically motivated and as such follows in the line of composers who since the 1970s have grappled with the role of the composer in a socio-political context, such as Luigi Nono, Wolff and Frederic Rzewski.¹⁰ Likewise, the musical and social resonances of musical material, instruments and combinations of instruments, the concert hall and other performing contexts are recognized by Fox in ways that are untypical of other experimental composers such as Cage, Morton Feldman, Johnson and others. Like two other, very different composers who resist categorization – Finnis and Kagel – Fox is happy to play with connections, resonances and associations and, where appropriate, tackle these honestly, sometimes with humour and sometimes with a provocative sense of the dramatic.

Fox's piano writing

The next part of this chapter focuses upon two solo piano works that demonstrate the characteristics outlined previously. While I could examine any number of

9 See Philip Thomas, 'A Prescription for Action', in James Saunders (ed.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Experimental Music* (Farnham, 2009), pp. 77–98, for further discussion of experimental performance practice.

10 Fox declares himself to be a leftist thinker and is a member of the Labour Party. In an interview in 2005 Fox notes that a recurrent theme in his music is of 'freedom and democracy' and, in a manner reminiscent particularly of Wolff's own practice, argues that 'artists can register the fact that we know things are going on that should not be going on. I suppose the old-fashioned Marxist term is consciousness-raising' (Nicholas Wroe, 'Trouble and Strife', *The Guardian*, 11 November 2005).

ensemble, choral or other solo works, I have come to know the solo piano works closely over recent years and believe they aptly reveal aspects of Fox's compositional aesthetic and methods.¹¹ In particular the characteristics of Fox's music are revealed in my own interpretative decisions as a performer, and these decisions in turn have informed my understanding of the music; increasingly I have taken a performance approach that favours clarity and evenness of touch, an attention to qualities of pitch, intervals and harmony, and a non-gestural interpretative manner.

Given the range and quantity of Fox's output it would be an exaggeration to argue that the piano, rather than any other instrument or genre, has been central to his work. However it is true that the piano has been a continuing thread through his work, with solo piano pieces stemming from 1978 (*Second Eight*, 1978–80/1982) through to 2012 (*L'ascenseur*, 2010–12). Of the 142 acknowledged works listed in his catalogue at the time of writing,¹² 18 are for solo piano (if *lliK.relliK* (1991–3) is considered as one work, and works that form part of larger ensemble works are included, ranging in length from a few minutes to around 23 minutes. Additionally *Generic Composition #2*, from the large collection of pieces *Everything You Need To Know* (1999–2001), is for a keyboard instrument and is well suited to the piano. Altogether there are 24 ensemble pieces that involve piano, including an extended 35-minute work for two pianos (*A Kind of Prayer*, 1986).

Although there are more pieces that do not involve piano, especially in recent years (perhaps reflecting Fox's investigations into microtonality), as a body of piano music it is impressive. It covers a wide range of technical and performing challenges, from rigorous explorations of rhythmic and pitch patterns (*More Light* (1987–8), *Prime Site* and *L'ascenseur* are good examples), to manipulations of piano sounds through preparations (*Block* (1992) and *Amnesia*), to technically virtuosic works, making full use of the piano registers and dynamic capabilities (*lliL.relliK*, *Thermogenesis* and *Republican Bagatelles*). Furthermore the piano itself, its history and playing methods are both honoured (particularly in the Beethovenian *Republican Bagatelles* but also in *lliK.relliK*, which pays tribute to the piano style of Jerry Lee Lewis) and subverted (through use of gloved hands in *Thermogenesis*, or independently moving hands in *Prime Site*, or the seven played pitches of *Amnesia* producing only one pitch). However, perhaps it is in *Prime Site*, one of the most curiously abstract of the piano works, that one finds piano writing that is the most personal to Fox – clear, with a heightened sense of pitch as it is projected at the piano, requiring a sensuality of touch that at times recalls the late Feldman style best found in *For Bunita Marcus* (1985).

11 As well as performing a number of Fox's solo works, I have been closely associated with some of his ensemble works through my work with Apartment House. While Fox's prolific output is very varied, the works with which I have been associated appear to typify much of his working practice. My performances of four of the solo works, including the two discussed here, are recorded on *Christopher Fox: Works For Piano* (hat[now]ART 192, 2014).

12 If works that form part of larger works but which can be played apart from those larger works (and frequently are) were to be included then the total number of works is 212.

The remaining discussion in this chapter focuses on two works, both of which I commissioned and premiered: *L'ascenseur* and *Republican Bagatelles*. Analytical discussion (made possible by the generous and free access I have had to the composer's sketches¹³), which might be thought to downplay the more elusive aspects of Fox's music, only serves to highlight that the mystery of Fox's music is as real to the composer as it is to the listener. Rather than being the hidden preserve of the composer's private methods and workings, the questions at the heart of each piece invite the listener to join the investigation.

L'ascenseur

L'ascenseur is a bold statement – the title itself ‘gives the game away’, thus requiring the listener to attend to the acoustic idiosyncrasies of the instrument as the pianist maintains an equilibrium of touch and dynamic across the register of the piano. Having performed the piece many times on a number of different pianos and in different spaces, I feel that it is as if the piece articulates and probes both the piano and the performing space – this is what *this* piano sounds like and how it responds to *this* space. It is a piece that is very much *about* the piano: the range of the piano keyboard,¹⁴ the resonance of the piano, how it interacts with the space in which it is played, and the particular qualities of each individual piano.

Like many works from the so-called experimental tradition, the work requires an attitude of ‘surrender’ on the part of the listener. The title indicates the direction the piece will take and thus the interest lies in *how* the music makes its ascent. In more rigorous process-based or exploratory experimental works, such as La Monte Young's *X for Henry Flynt* (1960), or Reich's *Pendulum Music*, or some of Alvin Lucier's works with instruments and sine tones, the process itself is clear; the focus becomes centred upon the acoustical or technical peculiarities of the music and its system. In Lucier's *Music for piano with slow sweep pure wave oscillators* (1992), for example, the attention is drawn to the ways in which the piano tones interact with the sine tones to create beating effects as the sine tone moves away or towards the pitch of the piano tone in conjunction with the acoustical features of the space in which the piece is performed. In *Pendulum Music* the complexities arise from the changing nature of the feedback created when each microphone passes by its speaker, as well as the phasing rhythmic/temporal relationships between the feedback of one microphone/speaker set-up and another. In *L'ascenseur* there is a similar fascination arising from the changing nature of

13 I am most grateful to Christopher Fox for his time spent discussing his music with me and for the loan of compositional sketches.

14 Only 87 of the available 88 notes of the standard keyboard are played. The missing pitch is A#0, the second lowest note of the keyboard. Its omission is simply the result of the chance processes used to generate pitch (see subsequent text) and the fewer possibilities for all notes to be used in the lowest range of the keyboard due to the right hand starting at a higher point. At the end of the piece, in the upper range of the keyboard all notes are accounted for due to the chance processes seeming reluctant to bring the work to an end for some time!

the piano sound, as what appears to be the same or similar material is played across the piano's register, with the sustaining pedal held throughout, always rising in pitch in some way. Changes of timbre, of attack sound, of pitch quality and of extra-harmonic resonance may be discerned so that, typically, the percussive nature of the piano is more clear in the upper registers; the way in which the attack forms a more prominent component of the total sound is revealed, in a manner not far removed from some of Helmut Lachenmann's piano music (*Ein Kinderspiel* (1980) and *Serynade* (1997–8) in particular).

Conversely, whereas in Young, Reich and Lucier the process may be clearly discerned, thus drawing attention more exclusively to the products of that process, in *L'ascenseur* the nature of the process is less clear. It is possible to detect certain types of patterns (different rhythmic relationships between the hands – some relatively simple, others more complex), a shifting temporal scheme, varying numbers of repetitions of groups (including no repetitions) and of course the overall drive to raise the pitch level, but the coordinating principles behind these features are unlikely to be discernible. There is both a mystery and a sense of playfulness at work here. Oddities occur, such as what appears to be a section of entirely chromatic pitch material being followed by something that sounds diatonic but which is not part of an overall move toward diatonicism,¹⁵ although neither is there a sense that on the whole this is a particularly chromatic piece. Likewise, a rhythmically complex pattern, with hands moving at entirely different temporal relationships, may be followed by a pattern that is entirely consistent in its pulse. When the two are combined – chromatic material tied to complex rhythm is followed by more diatonic material tied to a single pulse – the effect is most startling. For example, bars 75 and 77 both feature the two hands in starkly contrasting tempi¹⁶ and within each the material is chromatic (the 10 pitches of bar 75 are all different, while the seven pitches of bar 77 are not characterized by any particular tonality). In contrast the two lines of bar 76 are united by a common pulse (a consistent dotted semiquaver pulse is articulated), and the combined pitches could be said to form an F# minor tonality, albeit with a bluesy flattening at the end of the bar (Example 9.1).

Similar disruptions caused by contrasting material types can be found not long before and after this example, and these are made particularly vivid by the fact that the pitch clarity of the material is at its greatest around the upper-middle range of the piano register.

Other curiosities arise from the repetitions of bars. When the rhythmic relationships are most simple the repetitions are more readily perceived, whereas when the rhythmic alignment is more muddled it can take longer to apprehend that a

15 This is characteristic of Fox's use of and delight in consonance/dissonance, see James Saunders 'Christopher Fox', in James Saunders (ed.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Experimental Music*, (Farnham, 2009), p. 262.

16 These tempo differences are notated using a combination of rhythmic relationships that signify an increase or decrease in the basic pulse and durational differences, all within the same overall tempo of dotted quaver = 88 / quaver = 132. These are explained in the following paragraphs.

$\text{♩} = 88$ ($\text{♩} = 132$)

16:15 8:9 x5
 9:12

9:10 x6 8:9
 8:10

x6 4:5 x9
 9:10 8:9

Example 9.1 Fox, *L'ascenseur*, bars 70–8.

pattern is being repeated. The majority of bars are not repeated (only 34 of the 106 notated bars are not repeated), but the total number of bars (which themselves are nebulous, given their very different lengths) amounts to 438 when all repeated bars are accounted for. Thus the overriding impression is of patterns that are repeated; when a bar is then *not* repeated the effect can be jarring, more so when two or three consecutive patterns are unrepeated and it takes time for the music to settle again. When shorter patterns are repeated the music can become quite playful, such as bar 77 (see Example 9.1), and its complex rhythmic alignment results in a warped ‘music box’ effect.

Another curious aspect to the piece is the pacing of the ascent, which follows no consistent trajectory. For example, the left-hand line takes 51 notated bars (208 bars, accounting for repeats) to move on from the pitches of the lowest two octaves – almost half the piece – and a further 18 bars (70 bars, accounting for repeats) to be rid of the next highest octave. Similarly, the right hand takes 64 bars (255 bars, accounting for repeats) to rid itself of its first three octaves. In contrast, it takes only seven bars for the left hand to move through its next octave, and nine bars for its next; the right hand moves through its fifth octave in seven bars and just four bars for its sixth octave, while the final nine bars make use of the top five notes of the keyboard only in the right hand. Thus there is a marked shift in the rate at which the music makes its ascent in the second half of the piece, with the left hand taking exactly the same number of bars to move through its fourth, fifth and sixth octaves as it took to move through the first alone, ending with a slowing of the ascent, as if the music had become stuck at the top register.

All such strange occurrences, however, are the result of the chance processes set up by Fox in the early stages of composition. Following Cage, Fox sets up parameters, or rules, affecting different elements of the composition: pitch and

numbers of pitches, rhythm and metre. Unlike Cage, however, Fox is happy to ‘tinker’ with the results if they are deemed impractical.

Pitch is generated first by each hand (separately) in each bar, with a possible three, four or five pitches to play with (the exact number being determined by chance). In each consecutive bar there is a change of one pitch only per hand. If the number of pitches in a given bar is less than the previous bar, there needs to be an omission of pitches from the first of the two bars while also changing one of the remaining pitches. If there is an increase of one pitch, that new pitch constitutes the change. If, as could happen, there is an increase from three to five pitches, the rule is adapted to allow for two new pitches. The new pitch is selected using chance and is changed in relation to either the pitch that it replaces or, if an addition, to the final pitch of the previous bar’s group. The six available intervals (a convenient and practical number when using chance), which are expressed in the sketches as ratios, are an octave (1:2), fourth (3:4), major third (4:5), minor third (5:6), major second (8:9) and minor second (15:16). The final rule that governs the pitch selection – the most obvious and crucial one – is that *overall* within the bar (not necessarily in each hand) there should be a rise. This may be a rise in the lowest note of the group or it may simply be a rise of one of the inner pitches. Example 9.2a shows the pitch selections for the first five bars; Example 9.2b shows their working out.

Example 9.2a Fox, *L'ascenseur*, bars 1–5: pitch cells.

Example 9.2b Fox, *L'ascenseur*, bars 1–5.

Since all the factors described here are determined by chance, the rate at which the music makes its ascent is very much dependent upon the size of the intervals allocated to the change of pitch and the numbers of pitches available in each bar. For example, bars 22–30 are entirely focused on the same pitch range in the right hand, mostly C–F# (even dropping to include the B in bars 27–8) until the G is introduced in bar 31 (see Example 9.3).

$\text{♩} = 88$ ($\text{♩} = 132$)

4:5 10:8 4:5 x5
10:8 9:10 15:10
16:15 x5 12:15 x4
8:10 16:15 x6 x10
9:10 18:15 15:16

Example 9.3 Fox, *L'ascenseur*, bars 22–31.

The left-hand part is similarly slow moving, though a more consistent rise in the lower pitches of the left-hand group can be noticed. Whereas in bar 70 (see Example 9.1) the sudden drop of the G from the previous bar accounts for the rapidity of the ascent around this time, and then quite soon after, by the introduction of the F in the higher octave in bar 77, the rate of ascent is jolted further, altogether creating a quite disorientating effect for the listener accustomed to the more gradual process of the first half of the work.

James Erber wrote of Fox's earlier piano works that 'A central preoccupation of three of the larger piano pieces is the way that our perception of a work's form alters as the music unfolds in time',¹⁷ and certainly the processes described here

17 James Erber, 'Conway Hall: Ian Pace Plays Christopher Fox', *Tempo*, 208 (1999), p. 68.

contribute significantly to an increased disorientation as to the formal design of the work.

The metric scheme for the entire work is also ordered according to chance processes. A link to the intervallic scheme is established by using the same six ratios to govern the relationships between the hands. For example, bar 1 has the hands moving at a 5:4 relationship,¹⁸ bar 2 at 1:2 (which is essentially an equal relationship with the pulse being the same for each hand), bar 3 at 8:9, and so on (see Example 2b). As can be seen from bar 3, the relationship is not necessarily a direct mapping of the ratio numbers, so that (as here) an 8 may become a 4, or vice versa. There is no attempt to unify the rhythmic ratios with the intervallic ratios, in the manner of Henry Cowell or Stockhausen; instead the same numbers simply offer a limited set of choices from which chance determines the independent results of both interval shift and rhythmic relationship.

The overall metric scheme also relates obliquely and perhaps fancifully to the ratio set, consisting of bars of either 15/16, 12/16, 10/16, 9/16 and 8/16 (which, if the 10 and the 12 are simplified as 5 and 6, correspond to the four smaller intervals from the preceding list). Within these metric restrictions, Fox is then free to arrange the pitches as he wishes. Intuitive principles are established, such as each bar having one of the hands provide a more or less regular pulse against which the other hand may be measured, or ensuring that the last note of either hand within a bar differs from the first note, so that it is not immediately reiterated at the repeat. As long as in each bar the rhythmic relationships between the hands and the pitch collection are adhered to, the composer is free to compose the music, considering issues of practicality (fingering and hand choreography) and continuity (or otherwise).

For the pianist the emphasis is upon clarity and evenness of touch, so that the idiosyncrasies of the piano being played are revealed (so adapting one's touch across the different registers is an intervention that unhelpfully clouds the compositional endeavour). The main difficulty arises from the instant shifts of pulse from one bar to the next. Sometimes these can be worked out in relation to the previous bar, but very often the relationship is obscure, and the degree of slowing or increasing the pulse needs to be learned carefully in rehearsal. Changes in pulse are best felt to be immediate and without gesture or emphasis, so that the listener is perhaps confused or startled by the shift and not 'force-fed' each and every change.

Though perhaps one of the most rigorously worked through of all the piano pieces, *L'ascenseur* is also one of the most surprising. There is always a sense of 'play' but also a sense of aesthetic distance, as chance – within the very carefully considered parameters – is set to work, yielding curious and entrancing results.

Republican Bagatelles

A sense of direction and compositional rigour is no less apparent in *Republican Bagatelles*, but the piece could not be more different from *L'ascenseur*. The

18 Though comparing with the initial sketch as shown by Claudia Molitor (see Chapter 2 in this volume), this first bar shifted from a 15:12 relationship to a 5:4 one.

starting point for *Republican Bagatelles* is the sets of variations composed by Beethoven and Ives upon the tune known by Beethoven as ‘God Save the King’¹⁹ and by Ives as ‘America’ (the former for piano solo, WoO78 (1803), the latter composed in 1891 for organ and titled *Variations on ‘America’*). The ‘grand narrative’ of Fox’s work is a simple one²⁰ – the variations of each composer are combined in more or less systematic fashion, over the course of which the pitch content transforms from those of the original theme to those of socialist anthem ‘The Red Flag’.²¹ Dutch composer Louis Andriessen attempted a similar transformational process in *Volklied* (1971), a work for indeterminate instrumentation that, over the course of its duration, transforms the pitches of the Dutch national anthem into those of ‘The Internationale’. Andriessen’s process is explicit, consisting only of the unison melodic line, whereas Fox’s process functions as the material upon which the Beethoven/Ives permutations are based. Furthermore, once the process of transformation in *Republican Bagatelles* has been completed – at the midpoint of the piece – a second stage of the pitch transformation begins that flattens out, or reduces, the pitch content towards the final section, which consists of a single note.

Republican Bagatelles reflects many of the composer’s concerns and influences: the dramatic tensions of both Beethoven and Ives, combined with both composers’ concern for formal design as the carrier of such tension, a marriage of experimental and classical aesthetics, a fondness for process, and a leftist political sensibility marked by a contemporary-realist pragmatism. The work could not have finished at the point at which the transformation from national to socialist anthem occurs. Instead, a response is required – a next stage that suggests the utopian ideals of traditional left rhetoric have proved not to be viable, or perhaps not to have been realized, or that the trajectory of left-wing British politics has disappointed. Fox does not say what the response should be, and it would be wrong to make any claims for the signification of the formal narrative.²² Some might consider the final section to be aggressive in the extreme, as an increasingly small number of bass notes are pummelled unrelentingly. Others might detect a

19 Henceforth in this chapter the theme will be referred to as this title, though British readers at the time of writing may more commonly refer to it as ‘God Save the Queen’. The author of the original melody and text is unknown; it was first performed in 1745 and was soon sung and performed regularly, becoming known as the British National Anthem at around the time Beethoven composed his variations.

20 In Fox’s recent piano works the overall formal design is rooted in a simple, often naïve, conceit, such as the ascent of *L’ascenseur*, the revealing of pitch as the hands become ‘ungloved’ in *Thermogenesis*, or the increased revelation of the same pitch played by different keys through the use of harmonics in *Amnesia*.

21 ‘The Red Flag’ has a long association with the socialist and British labour movements, including the Labour Party at whose annual conference it is sung. The text was written by the Irish activist Jim Connell in 1889 (for the full text, see www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/redflag.asp). It is sung to the melody popularly known as the German carol ‘O Tannenbaum’.

22 Similarly, Robert Adlington suggests that the reading of Andriessen’s process in *Volklied* is multilayered and other than the politicization of the avant-garde common in the early 1970s (Robert Adlington, *Composing Dissent: Avant-garde Music in 1960s Amsterdam* (Oxford, 2013)).

position of defiance. Others might hear the resulting harmonics (from having the *sostenuto* pedal sustain a low cluster) as being a rich sonic exploration, with roots in early minimalism or the music of as diverse composers as Helmut Lachenmann or Horațiu Rădulescu.

Republican Bagatelles was composed between 2000 and 2003, in the middle of Tony Blair's tenure as British prime minister and a time when the profound differences between Old and New Labour were keenly felt. In March 2003 the USA invaded Iraq, supported by coalition forces, led by the Republican president George W. Bush and opposed widely across the world. While it is clear that the 'republican' of the title of this piano piece by Fox points to its meaning in the British sense of being anti-monarchy, advocating a nonhereditary head of state, at the same time its American usage and what the right-wing Republican Party represented at that time in particular may be reflected in this final explosive section.²³

The formal design of *Republican Bagatelles* marries the musical characteristics of each variation by Beethoven and Ives in cyclical fashion. Beethoven wrote seven variations and an extended coda; Ives wrote five variations with an opening section (itself a variation of sorts) and two interludes. Fox writes 35 sections – the result of combining each Beethoven variation with each Ives variation such that every combination is accounted for.²⁴ (Thus after the first, second, third, fourth and fifth variations of each composer have been combined, the sixth bagatelle combines Beethoven's sixth with Ives's first, then Beethoven's seventh with Ives's second, then Beethoven's first with Ives's third, and so on.) One might expect this to reasonably compose itself; certainly, the approach adopted by other systems-based composers might suggest so. But Fox is not that kind of composer, and within this entirely logical formal design his imagination and composerly instincts are given free reign as to the character of each bagatelle. In general his approach is to take one or more aspects of each variation and pursue them single-mindedly over the course of each bagatelle, such that the musical language remains distinct and transparent. In so doing there is much within the Beethoven and Ives sets that is not absorbed into the final work, and certainly each bagatelle cannot be said to represent everything contained within the variations by Beethoven and Ives. As in other Fox works, there is a very clear sense of a system at work, but quite what orders that system and the selection of material is not at all clear.

The marriage of Beethoven and Ives across the 35 bagatelles ranges from explicit combinations of elements of both, through to extracting elements of each and making something quite new, to at best vague references to aspects of

23 Fox has an interesting personal connection with 'The Red Flag'. He was contacted to ask if he would be interested in arranging it for the infamous 1992 Sheffield rally at the end of the Labour election campaign in a 'Last Night of the Proms' sort of arrangement with Welsh male voice choirs, brass bands and a solo soprano; he said yes, but 'the party leadership decided to go for rock music instead' (Christopher Fox, interview with the author, 22 November 2013).

24 Each of the 35 is numbered in the score. Though the Beethoven and Ives models are variations, Fox gives his set the title 'Bagatelles' – a description that suits Fox's music in general. Henceforth in this chapter each 'number' is labelled a 'bagatelle'.

character, rhythm, pitch and interval. The two most closely identifiable references to the earlier sets of variations are bagatelles 28 and 29 (Example 9.4c), which transcribe fairly closely the Coda and Adagio from the Beethoven set (28) and the Interlude that separates Ives's fourth and fifth variations (see Examples 9.4a and 9.4b).

The image displays two musical excerpts. The first, labeled 'Coda', is in 4/4 time and features a treble clef with a melodic line of eighth and sixteenth notes, and a bass clef with a simple accompaniment. The second, labeled 'Adagio', is in 3/4 time and features a treble clef with a melodic line of quarter and eighth notes, and a bass clef with a simple accompaniment. Both excerpts are transcriptions of piano music.

Example 9.4a Beethoven, *Seven Variations on 'God Save the King'*, Coda and Adagio.

The image displays a musical excerpt labeled 'Interlude' in 3/4 time. It features a treble clef with a melodic line of quarter and eighth notes, and a bass clef with a simple accompaniment. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The excerpt is a transcription of piano music.

Example 9.4b Ives, *Variations on 'America'*, Interlude, bars 142–5.

The midpoint itself, bagatelle 18 – which of course is the midpoint also of the Beethoven and Ives sets (combining variations 4 and 3 respectively), and which functions as the turning point, marking the end of the move from 'God Save the King' to 'The Red Flag' – is a reference to the Interlude between Ives's second and third variations. Here, Ives creates a canon between the upper and lower parts using an abbreviated form of the melody in F major in the upper part and, a bar later, in D \flat major in the lower part, recalling the stories of Ives's father's experiments in bitonality and how he encouraged his son to explore similar territories (see Example 9.5a). Fox responds by having the pianist's right hand play 'The Red Flag' in A \flat major (in what might be considered 7/8 time, with the basic pulse

The image shows a musical score for 'Abstruse Bagatelles', measures 28-29. Measure 28 is marked with a tempo of $\text{♩} = 54$ *adagio* and a dynamic of *mp*. It features a complex rhythmic pattern with slurs and ties. Measure 29 is marked with a tempo of $\text{♩} = 132$ *allegro* and a dynamic of *ppp*. It features a complex rhythmic pattern with slurs and ties. The score is written for piano and includes a *rallentando* section with a tempo of $\text{♩} = 48$ and a triplet of eighth notes.

Example 9.4c Fox, *Republican Bagatelles*, bagatelles 28–9.

lasting seven semiquavers) over the left hand playing ‘God Save the King’ in F major (and in a straight 3/4) (see Example 9.5b).

What was a fairly crude canon in Ives becomes a more isorhythmic motet in Fox, but it also recalls Ives’ later experiments in polytonality and polythematicism as well as perhaps something of the lumpen character of the Beethoven fourth variation, which is in play here.

The next bagatelle, number 19, combines the two sources in a more elusive but no less rigorous manner (see Example 9.6). The pitch contour and triplet rhythms of the right hand of Beethoven’s fifth variation are combined with a lower part that reiterates the (simple-time) melody of ‘The Red Flag’, this time in F major (the key allocated to ‘God Save the King’ in the previous section), mirroring the simplicity of Ives’s fourth variation, which states the theme above a polonaise rhythm in the left hand and pedals.

Interlude

Example 9.5a Ives, *Variations on 'America'*, Interlude, bars 75–83.

♩ = 88 pesante

Example 9.5b Fox, *Republican Bagatelles*, bagatelle 18.

Earlier in the piece, bagatelle 5 similarly combines the same pitch contour and rhythm of the right hand of Beethoven's fifth variation with a modified version of the pedal line of Ives's fifth variation, again maintaining the same basic pitch contour. The left-hand part of the same variation by Beethoven is transcribed in bagatelle 12, this time with a close, though modified, version of the right hand of Ives's second variation.

A more distant response to the source material can be found in bagatelle 13, which finds a compromise between the dotted march rhythms in Beethoven's sixth variation with the more 'giocoso'-like compound rhythms of Ives' third variation by framing the 'long-short' durations within a 14/16 time signature (an entirely

♩ = 76 semplice

Example 9.6 Fox, *Republican Bagatelles*, bagatelle 19.

reasonable meeting of the 16/16 of Beethoven and 12/16 of Ives). Rhythmic character is referenced at other times, sometimes overshadowing or at the expense of other elements. For example, the dotted rhythms of Beethoven's sixth variation mentioned previously are also found in bagatelle 6 (which also references the sixth intervals from the same variation and the chromatic demisemiquaver figurations in Ives's first variation) and bagatelle 27. The fluidity of the semiquaver movement in Beethoven's second variation and Ives's first variation are matched in Fox's bagatelles 15 and 16 (which are continuous), which seem to favour this combination over the supposed combination of Beethoven's first and Ives's fifth, to which bagatelle 15 should be related.

Curiously, the dotted rhythm that is the dominant feature of bagatelle 2, and which brings most obviously to mind the dotted rhythms of Beethoven's sixth variation discussed previously, are entirely unrelated to the second variations of both Beethoven and Ives and to which, according to the scheme, this bagatelle should relate. For, despite the examples given here, the method of combining the sets of variations is not a straightforward matter, and the relationship between each section and the sources is not easily detectable. Indeed the very first four bagatelles are ambiguous in their relationship to the sources, and while it is possible to surmise connections – such as the chromaticism of Ives's second variation reflected in bagatelle 2, or the opening arpeggios of Beethoven's third variation and the relentlessness of that variation informing the motivic character of bagatelle 3 – it is just as easy to make connections with other variations (such as the aforementioned bagatelle 3 being more influenced by the upper-part fanfares of Ives's first variation, or the inner chromaticism of bagatelle 4 being derived from that of Ives's second variation). The simple chordal movement of bagatelles 1, 7, 17 and 26 cannot be related gesturally or texturally to anything in the Beethoven and Ives sets, relying instead upon pitch relationships, which are themselves obscured.

The very opening bagatelle is in fact more a response to Fox's work from a couple of years earlier (though contemporaneous with the conception of *Republican*

Bagatelles) – *an der Schattengrenze* (2001–2), a work for ensemble and piano, which features a second player creating harmonics and percussive sounds on the inside of the piano. This work ends with an extended sequence of piano chords, on a regular pulse, rising from the lowest register to approximately the same register that ends the opening bagatelle. I was the pianist in the premiere performance of *an der Schattengrenze*, and I recall that when the first pages of *Republican Bagatelles* arrived in the post there was a clear recognition that the composer was picking up where we left off when I last performed his music.

Most usually it is the case that a bagatelle takes one or more elements from each variation and uses these as the material that propels and characterizes the music. This may be the use of particular intervals, such as octaves (Beethoven variation 4, Fox bagatelle 4) or sixths (Beethoven variation 6, Fox bagatelles 6 and 20, Ives variation 4, Fox bagatelles 9 and 14); metre, such as combining compound and simple metres (Beethoven variation 1, Ives variation 3, Fox bagatelle 8); texture, such as alternating hands (Ives variation 5, Fox bagatelle 10); harmony, such as triadic movement (in the Alberti bass of Beethoven variation 3 and the exclusively triadic movement of Fox bagatelle 10); motivic ideas, such as descending scales (Ives variation 1, Fox bagatelles 21/22); and tempo, or energy (Ives variation 5, marked ‘as fast as the pedals can go’, Fox bagatelles 10, 15/16; Beethoven variation 4, Fox bagatelle 25). The extremely wide range of responses to the source material again demonstrates that Fox is a composer who celebrates the unpredictable as well as the playful.

The transformation from ‘God Save the King’ to ‘The Red Flag’ and its subsequent reduction, which governs the pitch material of each section, is comparable to the process that governs the ascent in *L’ascenseur*. At first the pitches of ‘God Save the King’ are laid out, over a single stave, as a sequence of three pitches per bar across 14 bars, without rhythmic value and reducing the decorative and passing notes of bars 11 and 13 so that the three primary pitches of each bar remain (see Example 9.7a). The theme is presented in F major, and thus covers a range of a sixth, from E to C, though this line is not used in the work itself. The trajectory is thus towards line 18, which presents the pitches of ‘The Red Flag’ in similar manner, three pitches per bar over 14 bars across a single stave, also in F major (see Example 9.7b). Compromise has to be made to reduce a 16-bar theme to a 14-bar theme to match that of ‘God Save the King’; all the pitches of ‘The Red Flag’ remain but the metric arrangement is inconsistent with the scan of the melody.

In the resulting pitch rows bar 1 of both themes is an exact match and bar 7 marks the rise to the fifth. The rule that governs the move from the first theme to the second is simply that a pitch may change from one row to the next only by a semitone and in the direction of the corresponding pitch of the second theme (see Example 9.7c shows the first, fifth and tenth rows). Thus the pitches of bar 1 remain unchanged throughout the first 18 rows, as do the first two pitches of bars 8 and 10, as well as other isolated pitches in the sequence. The first transformation, which is that for bagatelle 1 and thus constitutes the first pitch sequence proper, shifts every pitch allowable (i.e., all pitches other than those that are consistent across the two themes). Subsequently, the points at which each pitch moves a

further semitone are mostly fairly evenly spread across the 18 rows, though there are some irregularities in the pacing of the semitonal shifts. Some pitches, such as the first pitch of bar 3, are effectively shifted for the first and last time at the very first transformation (see Example 9.7c), while others, such as the first pitch of bar 4, have considerably further to travel – here, nine shifts, thus moving every other row.



Example 9.7a Fox, *Republican Bagatelles*, pitch row: ‘God Save the King’.



Example 9.7b Fox, *Republican Bagatelles*, pitch row: ‘The Red Flag’.



Example 9.7c Fox, *Republican Bagatelles*, pitch sequences 1, 5 and 10.

Having reached bagatelle 18, exactly the same process is followed to transform ‘The Red Flag’ row into the 35th and final row, which consists solely of the pitch F (the first pitch of both original themes). Given that the mid-point of ‘The Red Flag’ theme (and also of the ‘God Save the King’ theme) is the furthest removed from the final pitch (a move from C down to F is required), it is the middle part of the row that takes the longest to reach the F, such that the 34th section consists mostly of F, with the exception of bar 7, which includes two F#s.

The ways in which these 35 rows are then used in each of the 35 bagatelles varies. In many bagatelles the sequence directly maps onto the melodic or harmonic contour. Bagatelle 3 uses the sequence to inform the triadic movement, transposing the sequence down a minor third to form a sequence of major chords upon each crotchet beat: D–D–E–D–E_b–F–G–F–F#–E–E_b–E_b, and so forth. The next bagatelle maps the pitch sequence, here transposed down a semitone, to the octave doublings that surround the chromatic contours of the semiquaver line; the upper pitches of the sixth dyads that characterize the sixth section follow the pitch sequence, transposed down a fourth, exactly until the last two bars. Approximately half the sections map the exact pitches from the generated sequences on to either the melody, an inner voice, or the primary notes of a group. At other times the pitch sequence is used partially (for example, in the first two sections),

or is decorated in some way. In a few bagatelles the pitch selection is used more obliquely, perhaps to generate intervals, or it is there in disguised format, grouping sequences of semiquavers according to compositional number games. As ever, there is a sense of the composer playing with his craft, enjoying the challenges set out by the structural confines and the technical means for the piece, with the result that there is a very clear sense of unity across the piece, even though at times this is hidden by other processes and priorities.

L'ascenseur and *Republican Bagatelles* demonstrate many of the same aspects of the composer's music: rigorously worked through material, within and informed by clear structural confines, that at the same time celebrates the peculiarities the process (the combination of structure and material) yields and the opportunities for play. While there is no doubting the sophistication of Fox's work itself, at the heart of his music lies a curiosity, possibly even (like Wolff) a naïveté, which is shared by composer, performer and listener. The invitation to both apprehend and be confounded by the musical material and structure places all who accept it on a level playing field that underpins Fox's democratic values.