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Citation: Pace, I. (2007). Complexity as Imaginative Stimulant: Issues of Rubato, Barring, Grouping, Accentuation and Articulation in Contemporary Music, with Examples from Boulez, Carter, Feldman, Kagel, Finnissy. Paper presented at the Tempo, Meter, Rhythm. Time in Music after 1950, 11-04-2007 - 14-04-2007, Ghent, Belgium.

This is the accepted version of the paper.

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Complexity as Imaginative Stimulant: Issues of Rubato, Barring, Grouping, Accentuation and Articulation in Contemporary Music, with Examples from Boulez, Carter, Feldman, Kagel, Finnissey

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Paper given at conference 'Tempo, Meter, Rhythm. Time in Music after 1950', Orpheus Institute, Ghent, April 11-14, 2007.

[Large sections from this paper and its companion 'Making Possible the Irrational' formed part of my 'Notation, Time and the Performer's Relationship to the Score in Contemporary Music', in *Collected Writings of the Orpheus Institute: Unfolding Time: Studies in Temporality in Twentieth-Century Music*, edited Darla Crispin (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2009), pp. 151-192. The appropriate musical examples can be found there]

There is a certain narrative construction of music history with which I imagine most of you will be familiar, to do with the relative importance of composer and performer and the concomitant developments in notation. This narrative goes roughly as follows: in the Middle Ages and to a lesser extent to the Renaissance, musical scores provided only a bare outline of the music, with much to be filled in by the performer or performers, freely improvising within conventions which were essentially communicated verbally within a region or locality. By the Baroque Era, composers began to be more specific in terms of requirements for pitch, rhythm and articulation, though it was still common for performers to apply embellishments and diminutions to the notated scores, and during the Classical Period a greater range of specificity was introduced for dynamics and accentuation. All of this reflected a gradual increase in the internationalism of music, with composers and performers travelling more widely and thus rendering the necessity for greater notational clarity as knowledge of local performance conventions could no longer be taken for granted. From Beethoven onwards, the composer took on a new role, less a servant composing to occasion at the behest of his or her feudal masters, more a freelance entrepreneur who followed his own desires, wishes and convictions, and wrote for posterity, hence bequeathing the notion of the master-work which had a more palpable autonomous existence over and above its various manifestations in performance. This required an even greater degree of notational exactitude; for example in the realms of tempo, where generic Italianate conventions were both rendered in the composer's native language and finely nuanced by qualifying clauses and adjectives. Through the course of the nineteenth century, tempo modifications were also entered more frequently into scores, and with the advent of a greater emphasis on timbre, scores gradually became more specific in terms of the indication of instrumentation. Performers phased out the processes of embellishment and ornamentation as the score came to attain more of the status of a sacred object. In the twentieth century, this process was extended much further, with the finest nuances of inflection, rubato, rhythmic modification coming to be indicated in the score. By the time of the music of Brian Ferneyhough, to take the most extreme example, all minutest details of every parameter are etched into the

score, and the performer's task is simply to try and execute these as precisely as he or she can.

Now, there is of course some truth this narrative, or else it would surely never have attained the acceptance that it has, at least in some quarters. But in many ways it remains simplistic. I am no expert in the performance of early music, but do know that the extent to which performers in early times freely improvised and embellished, or simply adhered to fixed conventions that may have been no less rigid than those which in later centuries would have been written, is at the very least ambiguous, in light of the paltry information that has survived concerning such matters. Such issues remain debated at least up until the Classical Period and also beyond; the degree of freedom that was available to or expected of performers varied significantly, depending upon whose music they were played. The nineteenth century saw parallel and opposing tendencies, with the cultivation of both the star composer and the star performer at the same time, each of which demanded their own degree of autonomous freedom from the other, and it is by no means established for sure whether late-nineteenth or early-twentieth century performers necessarily took less liberties with the score than their early-nineteenth century counterparts.

But the model of twentieth-century developments of both notation and composer-performer relationships is the most inadequate, in many respects. Most obviously, developments in terms of notational detail have progressed hand in hand with graphic scores and varying types of performer choice and improvisation which differ markedly from practices in earlier eras. I am not planning to deal with those types of works in either of my lectures here; rather I wish to look at music with highly detailed notation to examine its relationship to performance and the possibilities it engenders.

But first I want to offer you an alternative model of notation itself which will inform what I have to say in both this and my second lecture. The whole historical construct I have described is, it seems to me, founded upon a rather positivistic view of how notation works. By this I mean the notion that the score tells the performer what to do, and they can elaborate on this (through use of varying micro-dynamics, rubato, tempo modifications, etc.) depending upon the degree of notational exactitude. The alternative model I wish to propose draws more upon structuralist thinking; instead of seeing the score in a *prescriptive* sense, telling the performer *what* to do, I suggest that instead it delineates the range of possible performance activities by telling the performer what *not* to do.

Let me give a very simple example of this. A score indicates a group of three quavers played as a triplet. Now, from a positivistic point of view, this would imply three notes each played for a duration of exactly one-third of a crotchet beat. Any deviation from this would represent some form of rubato. Now, in light of the fact that I believe that a metrically regular approach to triplets may be the exception rather than the rule, I find this sort of definition inadequate. Instead, I suggest that we should see this triplet as defined by what it *excludes*. There are a great many ways of playing a triplet, as in the following example (the only one not from the contemporary repertoire that I will use today!). This is the beginning of Chopin's Impromptu in G-flat, Op. 51.

[Put up transparency of the first page of Chopin Impromptu in G-flat Op. 51, and play.]

Most of the melodic or accompanying figurations here are triplets, but you will hear that I play them with a variety of rhythmic inflections, reflecting other aspects of the melody and harmony, including sometimes with the hands desynchronised. But supposing I did this:

[Play first line with some syncopated rhythms in]

Those syncopated groups, I would suggest, are clearly *not* triplets in any meaningful sense, though the other groups I play are. So in sense it may be difficult to establish with any degree of certitude what a triplet *is*, but we can identify what it is *not*. Similarly, there are an infinite number of different ways of playing *mezzoforte*, but a *mezzopiano* (let alone a *piano* or a *pianissimo*) would be strictly wrong, at least as the dominant dynamic for the passage marked as such. On discretely-pitched keyboard instruments, notation does indeed work in a positivistic sense (there is only one pitch that constitutes an A-flat within a particular octave, for example), but on a stringed instrument, say, such a pitch could be played in various marginally different tunings, depending on the tuning system involved, whether it is a leading note to be sharpened or not, for reasons of expressive intonation or other inflection relating to its harmonic function (or the tuning of other players with whom one is playing), and so on. So here an A-flat is not exactly a specific pitch, rather a range of possibilities that can be demarcated by considering what is excluded – an A natural, a G, or maybe an A-quarter-flat or three-quarters-flat as well, for example.

So, if a performer thinks of notation in this way, it becomes less a matter of whether something is played ‘right’ so much as one of whether it is ‘not wrong’, which I hope makes sense. This may seem a contrived way of conceptualising notation, but it is one which I believe has positive benefits in ways I hope to demonstrate at various points in these lectures. I choose an example from Chopin deliberately because his music begs these questions as much as any from the standard piano repertoire. In reports of his playing of various mazurkas, for example, the three beats in a bar were so stylised that some believed it was written in four. That might seem to reveal a weak point in my model of notation (as something in four would be strictly wrong); but I believe, poetic license in such a report in mind, that still most sensitive listeners would perceive the difference between a highly stylised mazurka rhythm in such a manner and something that’s actually being played as if it is in a time signature of four.

To look at what is at stake in the interpretation of notation in contemporary music, I’d like to start with a reasonably standard example, well-known to many pianists who play new music, Elliott Carter’s short piece *90+*. The work seems extremely precisely notated in terms of pitch, rhythm, dynamics, articulation, and so on. But there are a huge number of questions for the performer to answer for themselves, nonetheless. Let us look first at the opening:

[Put up example with first page of *90+*]

For the first two lines and a bit, there is a continuous chordal progression, each chord consisting of three or four notes from a six-note chord. Around this, in highly characteristic fashion, Carter presents various types of ‘punctuation’ in the form first of single pitches from the same six-note chord at varying dynamics and articulations.

Then with the introduction of the D at the end of bar 6, the pitch gamut widens; furthermore, in bar 4 the dynamics indicate that the ‘punctuation’ pitches begin to form lines, by the use of hairpin dynamics. This much is clear. The tempo direction consists solely of a metronome mark, crotchet = 96, with no other expressive indication. As this marking will on the next page undergo a metrical modulation to 120, one can fairly assume that at least when that modulation approaches, the original tempo is to be maintained in some fashion. But in the intervening bars, is the pulse to be kept quite strict, or is there room for some local deviation for ‘expressive’ purposes? I will demonstrate in a moment examples of how some might wish to do this, but first let us examine other basic questions that arise from the very outset.

The opening chord consists of four pitches all marked *piano*. But how is one to voice this? If one plays all the notes literally at the same dynamic, there will be a slight imbalance as the lower notes are stronger [demonstrate] – this aspect becomes more pronounced in more widely-spaced chords. Some of certain schools of playing may wish to top voice the chord slightly [demonstrate]; whilst there is nothing to indicate this, there is nothing *not* to indicate it either. Bearing in mind that Carter frequently works with performers trained at American music colleges, where the top-voicing approach is sometimes standard practice (especially amongst those who have studied with expatriate Russian teachers), he would presumably be aware of this. However, later in bar 37 Carter writes ‘*bring out upper line, cantando*’ in a passage of a similar nature; from this we can fairly assume that this is thus to be differentiated from the opening (or else he would surely have written such an indication there as well)

If one plays the chord with a very subtle voicing so that each note is very slightly louder as one goes from bottom to top, it is possible to create an *audible* equality between the pitches [demonstrate], rather than a *literal* one as I played before. None of these possibilities are necessarily ‘right’ in the sense of implying others are ‘wrong’; none of them are clearly ‘wrong’ either according to the notation. There are other possibilities as well; one might wish to bring out the presence of an E-flat triad within the chord by playing the F slightly softer than the other pitches [demonstrate], which arguably would make the ‘contradiction’ of the tonality provided by the following E-natural more pronounced, if that is what one wishes. And other distinct voicings designed to foreground certain harmonic properties of later chords are equally possible. Peter Hill writes of how Messiaen was enthusiastic about many possibilities in this respect in the *Catalogue d’Oiseaux*, in which such questions are even more complicated by virtue of the presence of various dynamics within chords, which can themselves be interpreted in a variety of ways; the situation is exacerbated even further by the dynamically complex chords in the first two of Stockhausen’s *Klavierstücke*.

So, moving on from simply the first chord, let us consider the dynamics and articulation of the ‘punctuation’. The first note in the bass, E-natural, is indicated *mf*, with an accent and a tenuto marking. Leaving other dynamics to one side here, consider how one interprets and executes this accent. It might be seen to imply that the note is slightly louder than the basic level one determines to be *mf*, or it might be read as to imply a certain sort of attack. I would play the B-flat and G with the second and third fingers, and then use a slight rotary throwing motion to aid the approach on the E, absorbing the reaction from the key with a certain resilience in the joints and wrist [demonstrate]. For reasons I do not have time to explain at length here, such a

mode of touch, from a clear distance above the key, will produce a degree of ‘key noise’ (the sound of the finger striking the key), which merges to the ear with the sound produced by the hammer hitting the string, so as to give a slightly sharper-edged beginning to the note. But this is only one possibility; the E could be played from closer to the key so as to minimise the possibility of such key noise [demonstrate]; once again, those of certain (especially Slavic) schools of playing would frequently favour such an approach, as a note with a sharper-edged attack is to them often deemed harsh and unacceptable. Then there is the question of the release of the note; I could raise the finger briskly from the key (after holding it for its full duration) with a further rotary motion, causing the damper to fall rapidly and produce an abrupt end to the note [demonstrate]. Alternatively, I could retard the release of the finger, and thus cause the damper to hit the string more slowly and less abruptly, by the use of an upward wrist motion whilst releasing [demonstrate].

The right-hand B-natural is marked staccato and *mezzopiano*. Again I can use a throwing motion to play this if I so desire (personally I would do, to an extent) [demonstrate] or play from closer to the key followed by a quick release (this approach would also likely produce a slightly less abrupt release as well, even without a wrist motion) [demonstrate].

Now consider how various combinations of these possibilities affect the audible result and how it may be perceived. The question of attack for the punctuation (or, for that matter for the chords; though I have not detailed those possibilities, they raise similar questions). The extent to which one differentiates the attacks of the ‘punctuation’ from those of the chords will affect the extent to which the different layers of musical information are perceived as being stratified.

[Demonstrate first with throwing actions and sharp releases, then with more moderate release, then closer to the keys]

At the risk of hideous over-generalisation, I might suggest that a less-stratified approach constitutes something closer to the interpretative aesthetic associated with those who concentrate primarily on the standard repertoire and come from relatively traditional and well-established schools of teaching, whereas the more-stratified one might be seen as a more ‘modernist’ approach. This is not at this stage to imply any dogmatic value judgement as regards these different approaches (and all the other possibilities), though I do observe that the former seems very much more in fashion today with respect to Carter performance (or indeed that of much other contemporary music) than the latter. I will return to this point in a moment.

Carter indicates in the score that the pedal is to be used solely to join one chord to another. But this can be done in different ways, depending on the exact point at which it is released, and the manner of doing so. A quick release exactly on the attack of the new chord causes a clear progression in which the chords are connected, indeed seamlessly, but form a line in an essentially accumulative manner. A slower release, or a release very marginally after the attack, blurs the overlap somewhat, creating a sense of a particular manifestation of line as something over and above the simple sequence, even as a type of aura which further exacerbates the difference from the punctuation.

[Play in both ways]

When the punctuations start to form themselves into lines, there are various ways in which one can use small tempo modifications to heighten this feature if so desired. The end of bar 4 contains a written out *accelerando*, but a slightly quickening of the pulse *on top of this* might make the relationship sound less predicated upon precise metrical relations. Similar principles might be applied in bars 6 and 7 if one wishes for a less mechanistic result.

[Demonstrate in both ways]

If one looks at the end of bar 7 and beginning of bar 8, this could be played as if the E-flat is an appoggiatura, thus helping to consolidate a sense of a temporary tonality of B-flat in the left hand. This can be done by playing the E-flat slightly louder than the notes on either side of it, whilst maintaining a basic dynamic of *mezzoforte* [demonstrate]. In order to further accentuating this effect, one could play the B-flat slightly later than indicated, and the D slightly earlier, so as to marginally compress the figure.

These are just some of the various decisions for performers, even in these eight bars alone (I have not talked about, for example, how one gauges both absolute and relative dynamics, which is another big issue). If one tried to rethink these questions anew with every single note, it is unlikely the piece could be played without spending a huge amount of time learning just a single page. Many performers will have simply established a set of conventions for themselves with respect to these aspects of performance practice, which they apply across a range of distinct repertoire; thus playing a part in developing some sense of unified performing style that can be promoted and marketed as part of their commodified personality. I believe that whilst obviously at some point a performer needs to make decisions, even if temporary ones, and get on with playing the piece (furthermore that a spontaneous approach to such things in live performance can be most fruitful), it is worth their while being aware both of the range of choices available, how many different ways there are of playing ‘what is written’, and perhaps most importantly what the result of different approaches entail in a wider context.

To show what I mean by this, I’d like to play the first page in two slightly extreme forms, to make a point. The first is what I would think of as in large measure a conventionally ‘musical’ interpretation, in a reified manner:

[Play that way]

The second way takes a certain perhaps rather mannered form of modernist alienation to a comparable extreme:

[Play that way]

These very different approaches both derive from strategies with respect to the parameters I describe above (and to others). Overall, I would say the first stresses continuity, integration between parts and lines, and organic development, whereas the second stresses stratification of simultaneous lines, sharp delineation of

characterisation, and non-integration, including in a temporal sense (the metrical ‘edges’ are not smoothed over, because of a strict approach to pulse). If you know the recordings of Carter string quartets by the Juilliard Quartet on one hand, and the Ardittis on the other, you might recognise how these approaches are mirrored to an extent in the playing of either group. If both, in the form I have presented them, are caricatures, my own preferences lie closer to the latter than the former, not least because of a profound scepticism to what I might call the ‘jargon of the natural’. The first approach grounds the music in familiar (and institutionalised) performance practices in the wider classical music world, whereas the latter (though in extreme form these can become equally reified) stresses the non-identity and non-assimilability of the piece entirely within such practices and the musical aesthetics they imply. Above all, I would say they stress the extent to which the piece is *unique*, how it exceeds the boundaries of any previous models. And that to me makes a positive virtue out of Carter’s subjective individuation of the composing process, as opposed to subsuming his work within a more normative and anonymous field of practices. The ideological implications of such distinct approaches should hopefully be clear; these things are very much pressing concerns in the field of contemporary music performance at present, and especially in the construction of Carter as the *eminence grise* of new music, made acceptable when his music can be made to sound as ‘old’, and thus detached from the complexities of modern life, as he himself is in a literal sense. This recent construction of ‘Carter’ seems to me to say ‘Look, with this composer you can escape into that idealised organic world of the supposed past, it’s not really ‘modern’ at all’, or even ‘Carter isn’t modern, he is just ‘badly’ played’!

Now I want to show you an example where the notation works somewhat differently, specifically to *defamiliarise* musical material that would otherwise imply a certain idiomatic approach. This passage is from Mauricio Kagel’s extended piano piece *Passé Composé*.

[Put up Kagel *Passé Composé* p. 5]

This passage, from bar 63 onwards, uses a notational strategy common in many of Kagel’s later works. Were the dynamics, phrasing and articulation left free, one might be inclined to play it somewhat as follows:

[Play in a ‘natural’ manner]

The phrasing and voicing in this manner (of course one of several possibilities) gently reinforces the contours of the melody and a harmonic basis, in particular balancing the E and D-flat so as to create the impression of C# or D-flat minor. Whilst the latter key is implied by the writing, I believe, it is never unequivocally resolved because of how Kagel writes it. Furthermore, the dynamics are quite radically counter-intuitive; look for example at the final semiquaver in bar 65, marked at a higher dynamic than the two notes on strong beats which surround it. The balance of voicing between then hands is continually in flux, neither ever clearly assuming the role of a *Hauptstimme*.

[Play as marked]

But this is not simply a form of belligerent anti-idiomatic writing, simply ‘different’ for difference’s sake. The first two-and-a-half bars in the right hand roughly

correspond to what one might ‘naturally’ play; what alters things is the presence of the left simultaneously, whose dynamics serve to gradually build the sense of a D-flat pedal point, which is on the third system of the page revealed to be a dominant harmony of G-flat. The right hand then seems to react to the ways it is disoriented by the left, so that the final semiquaver of bar 65 sounds like an attempt to ‘compete’ with the latter, then ‘corrected’ with the next note which balances the voices. After this the right hand gains confidence, building to a sustained *forte*, cognisant of what the left hand is doing. This sort of highly distinctive interplay could only be achieved by such counter-intuitive notation as Kagel uses. There are numerous other comparable examples throughout the piece and elsewhere in his output.

When once rehearsing Kagel’s Piano Trio with two string players, I remember comments from them about how Kagel supposedly did not understand bowings, as the bowings they encountered seemed so unidiomatic. Despite my own expressed sentiments to the contrary, I was unable to persuade them not to rewrite them. This missed a fundamental aspect of Kagel’s music – the very fact of writing ‘against the idiom’ in order to forge radically individual modes of expression that are contrary to habitual expectations. Yet their very strangeness, at least at first, unfortunately tends to count against performers in the eyes (or rather ears) of many critics. There was one work of Kagel’s that was performed in London by a student group several years ago. The performers had done a similar thing, changed Kagel’s markings in favour of something supposedly more idiomatic to the instrument. In rehearsal, he insisted that they did what he asked; alas, after the performance, I remember one critic in particular bemoaning the fact that the phrasing and articulation sounded ‘unnatural’, or words to that effect. Such a critic, I believe, was looking for a musical expression that offered the comfort of the familiar; Kagel’s music, and the forms of negation he employs through notation, work precisely to counteract such things.

Let us look at an example which raises the issue of how to interpret notated beaming, and the implications in terms of meter.

[Place up example from Boulez Second Sonata – p.21]

In the second movement of Boulez’s Second Sonata, a passage of rather complex counterpoint, built from manipulation and development of small cells, ‘clarifies’ as the music approaches a climax (with a long-range crescendo), by the use of regular periodic units in each hand: quavers in the right, dotted semiquavers in the left, so as to produce a 3:4 ratio. Here is the passage in question played by Maurizio Pollini [play from c. 5’13”].

I would venture to suggest that in that recording, from the third line onwards, we have a sense of a simple 3/8 meter (or 6/8, possibly), and the music could have been notated in two parts with simple beaming in groups of three and four notes in either hand, as in the following:

[Put up Sibelius example]

Actually the right hand in Boulez’s notation consists entirely of staggered groups of four quavers as indicated by the beaming; similarly the left hand consists of groups of four dotted semiquavers. This notational configuration acts as a negation of the

wholly regular pulse that would result from the version I wrote out, and which I hear in Pollini's performance. It demands some imagination from the performer to clarify this defamiliarisation of what would otherwise be a regular pattern (and would as such serve an overly cathartic function in the context of a high degree of metrical irregularity otherwise). One way to do this is to put a slight stress on the first of each beamed group of four, and play the last of such groups a little less than the other notes, combined with an ultra-legato touch in both hands to emphasise the connectedness of notes within a group [Demonstrate].

But there is the further question of how to 'think' the pulse, an issue I will return to in my lecture on Saturday. By this I mean which metrical unit the performer thinks as the pulse, and plays the other part relative to. The easiest possibility in this case is for the pianist to think in quavers, and that is what I believe Pollini to do, and I was doing then. But Boulez marks '*reprendre un peu en dessous de la nuance*', suggesting a certain emphasis on the bottom part. Let me now play it with a mental metric modulation on the third quaver of the bar, so that a dotted semiquaver becomes my basic pulse. [Demonstrate]

Then the passage links more clearly with a passage on the previous page in which there were regular semiquavers in one hand combined with triplet quavers in the other (also with beaming in staggered groups of four in each hand). There it is easier for the pianist to think in terms of semiquavers or quavers as the basic pulse. In either case, I believe one's choices create audible hierarchies, but one should ask why? I would venture to suggest that it is almost certainly the by-product of a certain small, unconscious stylisation of whichever group is *not* the thought pulse.

In Morton Feldman's long piano piece *For Bunita Marcus*, the 'spelling' of the notation (in the sense of the choice of accidentals) indicates a variety of things that are worth considering. The piece is entirely notated at a single dynamic (*ppp*), with a pedal indication at the beginning and otherwise just two places where he marks no pedal for identical mini-flourishes, after which the pedal is retaken. There are also no slurs or articulation markings. In terms of how exactly to play the work within the notated dynamic, in terms of subtle nuances and so on, we have only the beaming, barring, bar grouping with respect to repeats, and spelling to go on, combined with apprehension of other musical properties of the work. Most of the piece is taken up by interactions and dialogues between several categories of material, mostly consisting of just a few pitches which are permuted, rhythmically modified, shifted by the octave, or occasionally subject to pitch development. A passage roughly in the middle of the work makes much of a group of three pitches, C# an augmented octave above middle C, the E above that, the D# above that, and a high F a diminished 10th above that, always notated as a grace note. The minor third formed by the simultaneous resonance of the two lowest pitches clearly implies a C# minor tonality, the high F reinforcing this by acting somewhat in the manner of an appoggiatura. The passage I am about to play you starts from well within the reiteration and permutation of this pitch cell. Feldman returns to another cell based upon F#, C#, D and E, which has already been extensively developed earlier in the piece, like a fading memory, before returning to the other pitch cell. But at the top of page 37, he does something remarkable, unlike anything elsewhere in the piece. He sharpens the E to an E#, and lowers the high F to the A# below, thus creating a sense of modulation into the tonic major. This is very short-lived, as Feldman flattens the E# back to an E after this has

been repeated once, then makes matters more murky by flattening the C# to a B#, and reintroducing the A#, so that the combination of E# and B# can be seen to resolve chromatically onto E and C#, giving the earlier seeming modulation into the major a retrospective context.

[Play p. 36 up to mid p. 37]

Now, in light of what I am describing in terms of the harmonic progress (unusual within the piece because of the use of pitch development), one should consider the notation at the top of page 37. The large rest in the middle of the group blurs a sense of time relationship between the two bars containing notes; with the pedal depressed, they sound almost identical in terms of pulse (making the first bar with notes in the following group between repeat signs more striking for its rhythmic contrast). As the first E# heralds a quasi-modulation, should it be stressed very slightly, as one might do with a comparable process in a more traditional work? Or just let it emerge without any such heralding? I would suggest that maybe neither of these options is best, on account of the particular grouping of bars. This depends whether one interprets the use of repeated groups as being merely a notational convenience, or whether it signifies something of greater musical consequence? I am inclined towards feeling the latter, though that is a purely instinctive judgment, which as such has to be taken as read in the context of what I am saying here! Both of the two preceding groups begin with a C# followed by a D#, a quaver apart, as does this one. As such the other pairs of notes in each group might be interpreted as an extension and enrichment of the sonority, and might be played very marginally quieter, as 'weak bars' compared to the 'strong bars' at the beginning of the groups. Then the tonic major modulation can sound quite different, growing out of such enrichments rather than necessarily heralding a major harmonic shift, and in this manner attaining a more melancholy rather than affirmative character.

[Demonstrate both ways]

The pitch cell most extensively used in the piece consists initially of A-flat below middle C, G a major seventh above, C above that, and B-flat above that, notated as two temporally staggered, arpeggiated dyads in either hand, as you will see on page 31, second system, third bar. This comes almost right after the second mini-flourish, which serves to herald the introduction of such material. Soon afterwards, all pitches are shifted up a semitone, and this becomes the basic unit. Pages 45 and 46 give one example of how this pitch cell is reiterated and temporally permuted.

[Play from fourth system of p. 45 to fourth of p. 46]

I first got to know this work well from a recording which I had for maybe two years before I purchased a score of the work. This material had always sounded like an axis of relative tonal stability, establishing the dominant key as that of A major, combining a minor seventh in the right hand with a major seventh in the left. And if I had transcribed the work from my recording, I would have notated it as A, G#, C# and B. But this is not how Feldman notates it, as you can see; the intervals he presents are an augmented sixth in the right hand and a diminished octave in the left. If this were written for strings, it would be possible to make this clear by different tunings, but no such option exists on the piano. How to try and make Feldman's particular spellings

manifest in sound is a difficult challenge in this piece. What I have come to realise is that a certain unconscious tendency to think of this cell as being 'in A major' implies a certain type of voicing, in which the A and D-flat are very slightly more prominent than the B or A-flat. But this 'A major' feel can be shifted by a different approach, entailing the playing of the D-flat and A-flat at a very even dynamic so as to stress the interval of a perfect fourth. If the D-flat is slightly more than the B, then it is less likely to imply the interval of a minor seventh. But at the same time, the barring should be taken into account, over and above what might seem a 'natural' harmonic voicing. If the beginnings of each bar are stressed very slightly, the tonality is defamiliarised even more. At the same time, the pairs of pitches in the left hand can be played with the first A very slightly louder than the A-flat, so they sound like a dyad. This would thus make the low A the strongest pitch, followed by the A-flat and D-flat (both played equally), with the B the quietest; the latter modified in line with the barring. Let me play you the result to show the difference.

[Play bottom of p. 45]

This is of course one of various possible solutions; whichever one chooses, the counter-intuitive notation, working *against* the assimilation of this music into a notion of 'tradition' (in terms of particular forms of tonality), should be borne in mind, even if this makes the music less amenable to a 'chill-out' form of listening, a manner of appropriation I fear is all too frequent in Feldman performance today (with a few notable exceptions).

My final examples are taken from the music of Michael Finnissy (the abstract also mentions Sciarrino, but because of the modified order of these talks, and pressures of time, I will leave him for Saturday), specifically works which explicitly allude to different 'traditions', and as such raise to the fore the question of the relationships between Finnissy's pieces and their sources in performance. The first of these is from his first book of *Gershwin Arrangements*, in this case his setting of 'They're writing songs of love, but not for me'.

[Put up example]

You will see that Finnissy has a continually developing figuration in quavers in the left hand (itself an allusion to Liszt's first *La Lugubre Gondola*). In the second, fourth and some later bars, he adds a dot to the first quaver. Now, the means of interpreting this has always fascinated me. When I first asked him about the piece, I wondered if this simply was a shorthand for a certain expressive holding back at these points, a slightly vague way of simply saying to do precisely that. He said that these certainly were a notated rubato, but were precisely *that* rubato in the score. Now thinking in this manner radically changes the result. For if seen as a vague indication of a holding back, the natural tendency would be to slightly anticipate the dotted quaver with a minute elongation of the previous quaver, and do the same with the quaver that follows the dotted one, so as to ease smoothly into the expansion and back out again. Similarly, on the third system, the extra quaver rest at the end of the bar (breaking with the patterns of groups of three), could be interpreted simply as a comma or 'breath', and similarly anticipated by a small rit in the preceding group.

[Play in that manner]

But this is not what I believe Finnissy intends. If the basic quaver pulse is kept reasonably steady (except where the *poco accel* is marked) then the dots, tempo modifications and rest produce a markedly different form of psychological expression. Instead of *expansions* of the pulse, the dots become *interruptions*, like half heartbeats that are missed. The accel, and the tuplet group before the rest, if also played in such a context of an otherwise steady pulse, become moments of a certain nervous tension as the pulse is compressed, anticipated by the close chromatic harmony in the third bar of the third system. Then the rest becomes a momentary void, after which the music begins to ‘try again’ in an almost Beckettian sense, thus defamiliarising the cadence into G major.

[Play this way]

This approach accords much less with a received ‘musicality’, but produces a more striking psychological complexity even within such a short passage, and to my mind is integral to the work’s modernity, presenting fragmented and unstable consciousness as an alternative to nostalgic refuge in a sense of organic wholeness. But one’s decisions in this respect may reflect what type of piece one believes this to be, or more broadly what type of role for which one would like to appropriate Finnissy. Is this music a slightly more chromatic neo-tonal homage to an archaic idiom, or rather an attempt to reconfigure such an idiom in a manner that is wholly contemporary, or simply deeply personalised. The former is likely to win more plaudits from critics for whom something called ‘modernism’ is essentially a dirty word and once again value music of the present to the extent to which it can be situated within that they already now and feel comfortable with.

This issue is even more acute with the fifth piece in Book 1 of Finnissy’s *Verdi Transcriptions*. This piece has caused me no end of interpretive grief, and to this day I still have mixed feelings on how to play it. Finnissy takes the melody from the Septet with Chorus ‘Vedi come il buon vegliardo....’ from Part 1 of Verdi’s *Ernani*, set in such a way that makes necessary (for simple practical reasons) a reading significantly slower than usual tempos for the original. He configure this with a certain degree of added chromatic harmony, though to such a degree as to subvert the clear tonality. However, the right hand consists of a two part atonal, very free, canon, seemingly independent of the left, in a relationship of neo-Ivesian co-existence. Finnissy clearly marks the hands *equilibrato*, and has often insisted on this to me, yet how to make this audibly meaningful in performance is by no means easy. The ‘identity’ of the left hand is much more obviously distinctive because of its tonal harmonic progression, whilst the right hand has no clear sense of linear direction. When simply played literally ‘equally’, the left hand still tends to occupy the foreground (also because it is in a stronger register; other comparable Finnissy pieces (including others in the revised and expanded Verdi cycle) with the tonal material in the right hand sound significantly different). It is very easy to play down those right hand notes which cause greatest dissonances with the bass, thus rendering them as passing notes and further consolidating the bass tonality; this heightens the cathartic function of this movement, in a way that all other pieces in this book seem to be heard relative to this ‘tonal centre’.

[Play in this manner]

In performances of this type (including some of my own in earlier years), without fail I hear listeners always identifying this piece as their personal favourite; I am confident that this is the result of its containing the largest amount of tonal material from an earlier era, more comforting than Finnissey's mediations or that which is so far removed from the original as to practically seem wholly new (such as the right hand, which in some distant sense is itself derived from the Verdi melody). To try and get away from encouraging this conception, I attempted various strategies. One was to accentuate the most dissonant notes in the right hand so as to attempt to destabilise the bass.

[Play in this manner]

But this approach seemed over-didactic. I realised better results could be achieved by thinking not so much primarily in terms of pitch as in terms of rhythm and meter. So what I did was to slightly stress the beginnings of beamed groups in the right hand, play them with a high degree of rhythmic exactitude, and especially mark when the pulse shifts through tuplet groupings, rather than aiming for a more mellifluous approach, thus creating a sense of stronger rhythmic presence, marked by discontinuities or at least shifts in pulse. This, I have found, enables a greater sense of the treble as a pair of *lines*, rather than simply a constellation of pitches forming an essentially decorative function around the central melody.

[Play this way]

As with most of the other examples I have played in this lecture, the aesthetic ideals I am aiming for resist the 'organic'; rather stressing discontinuity, tension between co-existing parts that are not necessarily made to blend seamlessly, and above all defamiliarisation. These ideals and their concomitant strategies can easily turn into a fetish of their own, becoming thus manneristic and indeed 'familiar', thus negating their original function, and I have certainly fallen into this trap myself on some occasions. With this in mind, they need to be continually re-examined when learning a new piece or re-learning an old one. But at heart they represent a strategy of *resistance* in performance; resistance towards certain ideological assumptions that to my mind entail absorption of musical works in the manner required by the culture industry. This absorption itself entails a harmonisation of the antinomic elements within such works, the smoothing out of such discontinuities as can produce psychological estrangement or simply cause fragmentations and incompleteness within the musical experience such as demands some active input from the listener. If these are not papered over, then the works refuse passive listening in the manner that is easier when a work is presented as a organic and hermetically-sealed whole, complete in itself; rather they force consideration as being part of a wider context. This type of musical aesthetic, whereby musical works exist in a critical and dialectical relationship to wider experiences and consciousness (and by implication to the world), is to my mind one of the most important ways in which music can become something more than passive entertainment. Looking hard at the relationship between notation, meter and time, is one of the most powerful ways of enacting them in practice.

