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Brian Ferneyhough in Interview

The following text is the edited and greatly abbreviated transcript of two conversations with Brian Ferneyhough. The first took place at his Freiburg home on 13 October 1983, to the accompaniment of a hungry cat (which attempted at one stage to eat the microphone lead), and a highly vocal (but perfectly safe) budgerigar. The second took place almost two months later in Brussels, on the occasion of a revival of *Firecycle Beta*. The Freiburg interview was concerned mainly with general aesthetic questions, and forms the bulk of the material below; in Brussels most of our conversation revolved around discussion of sketches for *Lemma-Icon-Epigram* and *Superscriptio*, which the composer had kindly placed at my disposal and which form the basis of forthcoming analytical articles. Even here, though, there were various comments of more general interest, which have been interpolated into the Freiburg transcript; moreover, my original questions have often been modified in the interests of clarity and continuity. Parts of this material, along with many other excerpts from our two conversations, were subsequently used in a 'Composer's Portrait' programme for the ABC, Sydney, Australia, broadcast in June 1984.

As the interview progressed, we became enmeshed in a discussion of the German neoromantics, and the relationship between art (for art's sake?) and the 'authenticity of self-revelation' espoused by the neoromantics. This led me to ask:

Authenticity and self-discovery

RICHARD TOOP: Is there an element of self-revelation in *your* work?

BRIAN FERNEYHOUGH: No. I would say that one particular aspect of my work is that I construct myself *through* the work. I am what I am through having gone through the experience of writing the work, and in the same process, the 'glasses' which construct it for me enable me to see that person created (in so far as I produce another work after it).

RT: Does that mean that your works inflect you, rather than you inflecting them?

BF: On the immediately accessible level—the level accessible to me—I would say that was true, yes.

RT: So that the works are not just a voyage of self-discovery, but almost self-definition as well, or self-redefinition?

BF: I would say yes; it's the process of writing which is the vehicle of the self. It's not a matter of going through the journey in order to arrive at a self-revelation of the kind many alchemists or mystics tend to point to, in which the revelation is then an essentially static totality. My view of 'self-consciousness' (or 'self-observatory capacity', in that sense) is an essentially dynamic one—it is always in movement.

RT: Does that mean that when you actually begin to write a work you have certain areas of yourself which you wish to explore through the work, or which you wish to shed light on, and you expect the work to do that?

BF: Yes, that's right. Always. Let's put it this way: there are three things. One: there is this area of myself which I wish to explore. Two: there are areas of the world which have an as yet unexpressed correlate which I sense in myself. Three: it is possible to commence a work without having either of these immediately accessible to me, or not consciously so. But then it is much more difficult to take the first step, because I can't write 'just music'; and besides, in the course of any work of that type, once commenced, the piece inevitably takes on such dimensions at some stage, if it is going to get finished at all. Sometimes I don't finish works for precisely that reason—because they don't find access to whatever it is that needs to be said.

RT: How do you cope with the situation in which the means of your 'self-discovery' are governed by the external circumstances of a commission? For example, can you say to yourself, 'Well, I think it is now legitimate for me to discover myself in terms of a piccolo'?

BF: No. With the exception of one or two pieces in the last year or so, where I have to say that the discovery has had to come as a matter of 'necessity', after having had to do something, I would say that generally I've been in the fairly lucky position of being able to choose my ensembles and players.

RT: If the number of players in an ensemble offers certain 'possibilities of richness', is that more important than the specific nature of the ensemble?

BF: Well, I don't even think of an ensemble in that way. I find it exceptionally difficult to write for 'ensembles' in the normal sense. I never wrote for one before *Carceri d'invenzione I*, and even that has got some weird instruments in it. I couldn't write for what I'd call the 'standard Webern/modern music ensemble'—I just couldn't, not in the normal sense of 'ensemble sound'. My idea of an ensemble is of a totally homogeneous sound-world in which the internal differentiation and articulation of the sounds takes on extra, existential energy and suggestiveness, simply by deviating from the standard grey norm.

RT: But isn't it true that in *Carceri*, especially at the beginning of the piece, you assign very specific tasks to each kind of instrumental grouping?

BF: Oh, this is maintained all the way through! It's deliberately somewhat 'wiped over' (in the Baconian sense) in the middle, so as to produce different trajectories of energy, shall we say. But at the end they do return; and that's because it is part of this cycle, which is again the journey of self-discovery, as it were, or self-investigation, the idea of seeing what for me are the fruitful extremes of the organisation of the external world in order to reveal the inchoate nature of the subjective sensation. Or at the other extreme, what is the value of projecting the inchoate *onto* the material in order that I may be able to see it more clearly in a 'gelled' form, like a bee in amber? How can you preserve this 'organic' in a state of organicity?

RT: Given this general approach to composition, how

can you really go so far, at this moment in time, as to project a cycle of seven works?

BF: Because it's the only way to compose. I'm a slow composer, and I can't conceive of just one work (or then it has to be a big work). Because I have to reflect. It's what I call the 'auto-history' of a work; it's part of the stylistic formative process. A style can only be defined not in terms of the synchronistic elements it contains (at least, not primarily), but far more by the diachronic shadows which those elements in that particular work throw upon the past and future of one's own being. And therefore, for me, if I don't define my activities in terms of, say, a two- or three-year space at least, then there isn't sufficient time for these elements to be auto-revelatory; there isn't time for the history of generative potential to be realised.

Compositional strategies

RT: Are the complex compositional strategies in your music things that you work out well in advance? How much is pre-composition, and how much is spontaneously evolved?

BF: A great deal is spontaneous generation. I think the use of any structure is dual. Firstly, it is to enable one to have a framework within which one can meaningfully work at any given moment, so that one isn't faced with the totality of all possible worlds, under which circumstance one does nothing, probably. Secondly, it presents one with an object to which to react—it is a state of affairs at any given moment, and if you have worked the systems properly then you have left yourself enough freedom to be able to react in a totally individual, and spontaneously significant fashion. Structures for me are not there to produce material; they're there to restrict the situation in which I have to compose, such that material can be spontaneously generated, but still have relationships to the elements around it, so as to produce a totally significant object.

RT: I seem to remember reading an account of your work, at first or second hand, in which you seemed to say that the pre-existent grid of possibilities was almost like a wall you had to bang your head against, a sort of blockage that had to be broken through in order to create. Do you still feel that way, or is that already a partial falsification of your view at an earlier time?

BF: It's a slight falsification of the view in the sense that one doesn't have to break through the wall, because that would imply the wall's being an undifferentiated object. Rather more, I would see two forces at work—and perhaps this is a psychological over-simplification, but nevertheless it enables me to present a convenient counter-case to the Boulezian multiplication idea, which seems to me to be unfortunate. I believe very much that one has an unformed mass of creative volition. On the other hand, in order to realise the creative potential of this volition one needs to have something for it to react against. And therefore I try to set up one or more (usually many more) grids, or sieves, a system of continually moving sieves. This fundamental, undifferentiated mass of volition, of creativity, is necessarily forced to subdivide itself in order to pass. This, when it manifests itself in a composition, gives us as listeners an impression of multiplicity which wasn't, perhaps, present in the original conceptual drive. But, of course, it isn't 'multiplicity': there's no more material than there was before. It's simply that in order to pass these grids of various types and sizes, the material has been forced to diversify itself,

to break itself up into more differentiated units which are more immediately apperceptible. This seems to me to be a much more sensible way of producing complexity in a work than simply taking a basic unit and, like the Hall of Mad Mirrors, multiplying it into infinity: one doesn't get any new information that way (or very little); whereas this way one sees what was inside the original block, just like Michelangelo saying that he could see his David in a particular piece of stone.

RT: What was the origin of this whole 'grid' notion?

BF: I think it was basically something that developed slowly. Of course, the key moment is always the one at which you can formalise it verbally, and very many of the musical notations I utilise in preparing sketches for a work are often verbal descriptions of possible processes or states. If you were to look at my basic sketch-books, you would find that they consist almost entirely of writing, rather than musical notation. It's largely verbal conceptualising on the one hand, or pictorial imagery sometimes (less often), philosophical speculation (always relating to the work in hand!), or the simple description—I've a very nice shorthand for it now, which I have developed over the years—of possible musical processes—the way things, whatever they may be, whatever things I choose, might be applied to certain sorts of grids.

RT: You retain your sketches?

BF: I never used to . . .

RT: For any particular purpose?

BF: I earn a certain amount of my livelihood from teaching courses externally—summer courses, but also other courses—and I find sketches are a part of one's livelihood, one needs them! And one of the nice things about reanalysing one's own works in public (not in looking at the analysis in advance—I don't like doing that, I like to be spontaneous—but in standing up and actually starting talking about it) is that one sometimes invents new things, quite spontaneously, by making an imaginary example on the blackboard; I sometimes think, 'By God, this is interesting!' Because I never use examples from the pieces to describe the processes; I always say, 'This is what I might have done, but didn't', mainly because I don't want to simply reproduce what I have done already.

RT: Again, this is the same thing as your forgetting what you had done, and therefore simply recomposing another way of getting to the same thing.

BF: That's right. One of my basic psychological problems in life, I suppose, is that I have a very short-term memory, so that if I now presented to you some very long, tortuous, and complicated argument in response to some question of yours, and you were to interrupt me and say, 'Oh look, I didn't understand that, could you repeat that?', I guarantee I could not.

RT: One would just have to start again?

BF: I am forced to reinvent, let's say, a new formulation for the same argument every time, simply because I'm not capable of retaining a train of thought for long enough. And that probably also has something to do with my musical creativity, why it takes me so long to create a work, why I write very slowly, but also the particular sort of expression and jumpiness, quirkiness that the works themselves consist of.

RT: What is your working method? Do you have a regular routine, or is it very much as dictated by circumstance?

BF: Well, generally I try to keep office hours: it's something I'd recommend to all students. I start at 9 in the morning (sometimes earlier, at 7 or 8) and I go on, all other things being equal, until about 12 or 12.30; I stop (if possible I have a sleep), and then I restart around 3 or 3.30, and then I go on to 6.30 or 7. And on ideal days I get seven or eight hours' work done in this fashion.

RT: And do you find yourself at the beginning of each day really having to reinvent where you'd got to, or do you find that you remember where you were at the end of the previous day?

BF: Well, because my sketches are sometimes incomprehensible, even to me, the day after, because of the short-term memory we were talking about, and because I haven't adequately taken that into account at the end of the previous day's work, it's sometimes very difficult to get back into it. Particularly if, for instance, in a work I've had to leave one layer in order to get on with another layer at a certain moment. Coming back two weeks later to that first layer, it sometimes takes me two or three days to get back into it. However, if I'm in the middle of something, and proceeding with a certain degree of creative dynamism, then usually at the end of a day's work I leave a certain amount of material in a state such that the next morning I can pick it up and go on with a minimum of rethinking, and then I get back into the swing of things fairly quickly.

RT: Is it possible for you to work on more than one piece at once?

BF: Yes, I've always done that.

RT: From preference? Kagel claims that it is essential for him to be working on four or five pieces at once, just to create the necessary level of tension.

BF: Yes, absolutely, because what one work fails to illuminate, another work may well do, and therefore, even though these works may not use the same material, they are very often interrelated in many more subtle ways, which simply working on one piece would have prevented one from achieving.

RT: Does this mean that at any one point there is not so much a specific set of works that you are dealing with, but rather some kind of theoretical central kernel, some kind of conceptual central work, which never actually gets written, but on which all these various pieces you're working on are, in a way, peripheral commentaries?

BF: Certainly not peripheral commentaries! However, there is a certain central kernel, and in one of our previous discussions I tried to define it with the simple word 'style'. I said that many people today make the very simple mistake of equating style with the repertoire of surface elements which a particular work or group of works contains, whereas I would define style far more in terms of continuity in the employment of certain types of material from one work to another. Since today we have a plurivalent society in which very many styles are present simultaneously, it follows, if we don't want to undertake the mad task of trying to recreate *per fiat* one new unified style, each one of us has the task of recreating within the continuity of his own work the semantic richness which a unified style in previous generations allowed to those composers living in them.

Therefore, for me, the essential defining character of style is: how can, through a series of works—also, on a different level, in the development of one work itself—how can these various elements, these means

of working, these strategies, be seen to exhibit themselves in different lights, with different potentials for interaction with future works? How can they learn to speak to one another, and to us, in an optimal fashion? There are people who say (and many of them are young composers), 'Today we have the duty to react to the totality of experienced world music; we live in a global society in which Balinese gamelan music, John Cage, and Noh drama are coextant, and the responsible composer, the socially aware composer today, needs to be a virtuoso in playing an organ whose stops consist of all these styles.' I would hesitate to say that this is nonsense, but I think it's a very dangerous ideology, because it means that though the composer is a master of many styles (or not, as the case may be), he is still subservient to them. He treats those styles as 'things', as found objects, whereas I believe that these styles, these types of working, are inextricably bound up with the cultures in which they originated. We can try and appreciate them, and one can, if one wants, adopt some sort of musical attitude towards them; but to employ them as colours, as intellectual colours, as manipulation, to force us into a certain way of feeling, I find this both intellectually and artistically and morally exceedingly suspect.

Therefore a composer today needs, more than ever, to work in one continuously developing style—style as defined in the perhaps circular way I attempted to do so—in order that these elements have a chance to breathe, to expand, to redefine the ambitus within which this style is itself redefining its past and future simultaneously. Because it's the only way, in this situation of a plurality of styles, in which any given work can achieve the semantic richness necessary to make it live up to the demands which the past has quite rightly imposed on us.

The ethical dimension of music

RT: Is there any way of ensuring, at least partially, the aesthetic significance of a work? Is it just a matter of doing the right thing at the right time?

BF: You've got to be musically lucky, I think, but you've also got to be *verbissen*: you've got to be obstinate in the sense that you keep the same high technical quality, make the same aesthetic demands on yourself, even in dry times. You know, Eliot's old man at the fiery gates, waiting for the rain. You've got to be sitting there, waiting for the rain to come. Because if you don't keep the standard up during those dry times (which you can't control) the rain will never come.

RT: You feel you've had dry times yourself?

BF: Oh yes. I've often felt times to be totally meaningless in terms of what I do, living where I do, and looking at the world through the eyes and telescope that I do. I've often thought that I'm sitting on a desert island, in terms of what I think is quality in music. It's something that has disappeared from the scene altogether; the moral responsibility has disappeared from everything. The rats have left the sinking ship, and even the ship has probably sunk. And one of the reasons I say that I'm on a desert island is because most people don't accept the—let's not call it 'moral'—the ethical dimension of a musical work, or any work of art.

RT: How would you distinguish between the two?

BF: For me, 'moral' is a somewhat heavier, more nail-downable term, in the sense that 'moral' has far more of the Adornoesque implication that the work of art can be good or bad, right or wrong. I wouldn't think of

it in those terms, as a contribution to the state of the world at a given time. I'm not one of those composers who is engaged in the banally social[ist] or even fascist notion of a work of art's 'doing good' in the world in general, in the service of this or that social precept.

RT: Rather than 'right or wrong', wouldn't the Adornoists say 'truthful or untruthful'?

BF: Certainly. However, this is a function of the place, the locatable situation of the work in respect of a certain self-regarding quality, or self-perception, that society has at a given time.

RT: They would say that, or you would?

BF: I would too, but it's banal: it doesn't say anything about actual quality. Now let's talk about ethics. I would say that the ethical quality is something that emanates from the composer into the work. That doesn't mean that he is a good or bad guy, something which a 'moral' work, or the production of 'moral' music, tends to imply—moralising! The ethical quality is something which I would describe as remaining work-immanent, something that remains embedded in the quality of the work, without needing to relate to anything else whatsoever. This doesn't put me in the famous *l'art pour l'art* ghetto, or the good old ivory tower. Quite the opposite: the only people who talk about *l'art pour l'art* are those so-called democratic composers who say, 'Yes, let's all individualise our expression, let's all be individuals. But you can't do that.'

RT: Is your general aesthetic, and your conviction in the path you are following, generated internally by the work itself, or do you also draw strength from other areas, from the rest of the musical world, from literature, or whatever?

BF: Well, I have to confess that, except from a sense of duty, I don't pay a great deal of attention to what is going on in the world of music at the present time. Over the years I've become intensely depressed by the present development and state of the art, so that apart from odd works by odd composers, which might be quite bad in themselves but contain an interesting point here or there, I really don't get a great deal of stimulation from that. But then that shouldn't be logically necessary if there is any validity in my standpoint that style is a function of development rather than of surface configuration; then, of course, I have to draw future developments from the corpus of evidence already extant in my own work.

I would say that one needs to differentiate this question quite a lot. For instance, you ask: do I draw sustenance from external things, or do I draw it purely from the music, or what? I would say I draw it from the sense of energetic stimulus which I feel in myself concerning the state a work has arrived at relative to my total interests at any given time. The work is one thing, and it may be interesting or not; what I am doing otherwise in the world may equally be interesting or not interesting, but it is the way in which these things and the work are both transcended in terms of the excitement, the urge of producing, that for me is the ultimate creative situation.

Expression

RT: Were there any particular influences on your early work?

BF: I would say certainly that my early music was in some way texturally related to the exuberance of the early Boulezian works, but I lost touch with Boulez

very, very early, and anything he wrote since 1951 or 1952 has been, to me, of little personal relevance. I say now 'little personal relevance' as a composer; of course, artistically I can have a different estimation of the works in an abstract sense, or a critical sense. But as far as my own creative activity has been concerned, all his theorising has been of zero interest.

RT: So it's really the 'Artaud' period of Boulez that interests you?

BF: Oh yes; it's really what interests me in any composer's work. Unless you've got this absolutely intense identification of expression with the *possibility* of expression (the possibility only exists in realisation, and the intensity of the explosive moment of realisation), then it's a lost cause right from the beginning. I realise that this may be a very limiting and delimited view of art, and I'm quite willing to admit (and I have to, when I'm teaching my pupils and I have to try and enter into their world too) that there may be more 'laid-back' versions of expressive aesthetic effect. I hope I can come to terms with them on their own terms. Nevertheless, as far as I'm concerned, the 'too-muchness' of expression which my work deliberately aims at *is* the basic pre-supposition of creative activity, and one has to live with one's own innate sensations, one's own convictions, without necessarily negating those of others.

RT: Among other things, it's a matter of deliberately setting out to create a labyrinth, rather than a one-way street . . .

BF: Well, I've been called a mannerist composer. I know it was meant as a form of insult at the time, no doubt a learned insult in the eyes of the critics concerned; but in fact if one examines the meaning of the word 'mannerist', I would have to say that most modern art, including people like James Joyce, is mannerist. That is, it works with a 'manner', a conscious stylistic ambitus: style becomes conscious, and not only is the style one uses conscious (in some parodistic work the choice of style is also very conscious), but the actual development of a style within itself, its future possibilities, are also realisable only by conscious reflection on what has already been achieved. And to that extent the labyrinthine is, for me, a very important concept. For instance, I'm very interested in the idea of *ingenio*, the idea of intellectual, playful constructivity—*homo ludens*—confronting head-on, with a massive crash, a great intensity of creative drive: that the creative drive can only find expression as fragment, as (if you like) fragmentary ciphers of this basic, initial explosion. So that's why, in some ways, many processes in my work might be perceived as being fragmentary and inconsequential, precisely because they only find expression after the fact, after the initial unity of expression and structure (which permits the expression) has been dissolved in a flare of energies.

Working methods

RT: In an interview with Joel Bons¹ you say something to the effect that, looking at your scores, you have the impression that you're very good at covering your own traces.

BF: Certainly. And I make no bones about this. The surface can remain the same while the techniques used to generate that surface change. In fact, that is one of the tenets on which my work is based; if it were not so, I would not have that possibility of creating polyvalent or multivalent levels of perception of one and the same image.

RT: Doesn't that put you in something like the situation of Borges' Pierre Menard,² rewriting *Don Quixote*? Admittedly the time-span is small, and let's say that you're Cervantes in both cases, but . . .

BF: Well, absolutely. If I take a triplet set of semi-quavers, it is very significant and very important whether this triplet has been generated by some now completed process, so that it has the status of a 'trace of evidence', as it were, of this process (in which case the process itself is the primary interest, and the trace is merely that which leads us to an examination of the processual), or whether this triplet is something pre-defined, something given as *material*. On the one hand it's transparent, on the other it is concretely available to us as evidence in a more direct sense; and by playing between these two extremes, always manipulating the directness of liaison between material presence and processual background (or the sensation of processual background), one is, as you say, working on both levels—one has the original achievement of the book as a cultural artefact, and one has its dematerialisation into the conceptual activity of rewriting it.

RT: In relation to your recent work in particular, how do you work, basically? What comes first as the idea for a piece?

BF: I have to say it depends entirely on the piece. Usually I would say that the first sensation, the experience which begins to persuade me that I am actually going to write a piece, is very often a cross between a tactile, a visual, and an aural one. That is, I tend to perceive a mass, almost a tangible sculptural or sculpted mass, in some sort of imagined space, which is made up of these various elements—it might be a certain mass of undifferentiated instrumental colours, it might be a certain register, it might be a certain kind of transformation from one type or state to another, in some way congealed into one momentary experience. That can quite often be allowed to revolve in my mind for some considerable time—it might be a year or 18 months—before it clicks together with whatever else is buzzing around in my mind at the time. Sometimes the title of a work, for instance, comes very early, and many things are hung around that. Nevertheless, I would always say that I would find it difficult to distinguish between the sensibility of intellectual excitement, the feeling of the infinite radiatory potential of a certain idea, be it musical or otherwise, and the immediate sensibility offered by experiencing in my head (already formed, as it were) some sonorous image. I can't distinguish between these two. I think that those composers (or anyone else, for that matter) who attempt to place a limit in principle between the 'bodiliness' of intellectual activity and the 'abstractness' of bodily sensation are themselves guilty of the very sort of intellectual categorisation of which they are accusing other people.

RT: Does that mean that for you composition often involves an element not just of creation but almost of recapturing? And that, just as you were saying earlier that if you forget your way, technically, through a piece, you have to reinvent the means of composing it, so even the first version might also be an attempt to 'reinvent' something which was conceptually 'buzzing around' in this plastic sort of way?

BF: Well, I'm not normally conscious of this: I don't believe music to be that passive. A piece creates itself; it isn't something that you 'draw from life' inside your head, so to speak. On the other hand, I can give you a counter-example, which may or may not be

revealing about my work. During various periods of infertility, I have had tremendously vivid dreams. Now these dreams have taken two forms. One has been the imagination of sounds, more or less clearly defined; when I've woken up I've tried to notate them, and they've inevitably been rather banal and obvious, so we'll forget that. Nevertheless, I've also had a kind of dream which has tremendously encouraged me on many occasions. That is, I have found in front of me in this dream a score. Now this score is not by me—not by the 'me' looking at it, anyway (although there are several 'me's, of course, always). Now I open up these scores, and I can see notes, I can see constellations, I can see which instruments or voices are active at any given moment.

And I remember two particular occasions: there was one fantastic piece—it must, I suppose, have been a sort of perverse piano concerto—which reminded me of nothing so much as some sort of crazy Brazilian rain-forest: fruitfulness gone mad in all possible directions—straining towards the sun, or pushing down into the earth in all possible directions to fill out the universe in whatever way possible. And I could really see rhythms, I could see pitches, I could see where instruments related to the piano in particular, and I was tremendously impressed . . . so I wasn't just seeing a vague impression, I was actually seeing fully written notes. The second example was of a piece I still have the project of writing one day—it already has a title—which was about a twelve-page score (perhaps less, perhaps eight or nine only), a very long, tall score, with narrow pages. And it was for large orchestra and large, multiple-voiced choir. All instruments and all voices were performing without a break of more than half a beat's length from beginning to end. Now what was fascinating about this piece was (a) the layering of different types of texture, and (b) the way that the predominantly *pianissimo* means of writing, in spite of everyone playing all the time, allowed for very clear structural distinctions between sections, contrasts between layers, and so on. So that I didn't need to resort to the crude device of stopping people performing in order to make these structural or textural distinctions between sections, but they came through the skilled use of the transformation, distension, compression, and the making clear or more diffuse, of the texture. That, in some ways, was even more impressive than the piano concerto, because it was so much more disciplined, but at the same time, so much more radical.

And I remember waking and being very frustrated on both these occasions at not being able to notate some of the things, because the act of taking a pen or pencil in your hand and trying to notate things already distances you from the experience, and the act of writing already dictates to you in a very strong and physical way what *it* wants to do, and not what the thing you are trying to recreate seems to be. So on the one hand I was rather distressed at not being able to do this; but on the other hand I was tremendously encouraged by the feeling that even at moments of intense . . . almost desperation, shall we say, at not being able to compose, one was creating these complete pieces inside oneself, which had a coherence and unity that was quite staggering. So that even if they were works that would never see the light of day, that were inaccessible to anyone else, it gave me a whole new perspective about what creativity is, about where creativity is located in the human spirit.

RT: Did these dreams ever recur, or were they unique phenomena?

BF: No, they never recurred. No.

RT: And so you would rush to recapture what you could, or would you just sit there and think about them?

BF: After the first experience of trying to write them down, and naturally destroying them even quicker, I decided merely to think about them. And looking at some of my later works, particularly things like *La terre est un homme*, there are passages in that—especially the dense tutti where everyone is playing madly for several bars—where there is a great deal of very shadowy and distant reflection of those scores.

RT: Can you give me a specific example of how a piece came about? Let's say the piano piece *Lemma-Icon-Epigram*: what was your work process, and what phases did the piece go through in terms of planning, and so forth?

BF: First of all, one has to say that the title of the piece is taken from the concept of the *emblema*—or *Denkbilder*, as Walter Benjamin terms them—of the 16th and 17th centuries. They consisted rather of the equivalent of our present-day crosswords for highly learned and literate gentlemen. They consisted of three parts: one was a title, of a rather obscure, surrealist type, often in Latin, and often with arcane connotations. The second part was the verbal description of a possible picture—*icon*—with various symbolic parts, like the *conjunctio oppositorum*, the male and female, like the dragon emerging from the alchemical egg, like the sun, the moon, and so on, put into various permutative constellations. The third element was always a piece of verse called the *epigram*, in which—again for the learned consciousness—an attempt was made to relate the obscurity of the title to the intense symbolism of the image. So that you have three different dimensions of the same basic area of concern.

In this particular work, my interest revolved around two things, one of which was to make the process of treatment thematic or motivic, therefore replacing material repetition, or the quasi-motivic repetition of given elements. The piece has to start with *some* material, but it could have started with others; I simply wrote down a set of notes without thinking about them at all, and said, I will work with these. That's how the piece begins. And then there is a very strict system of inter-reference, where I can relate back to the initial material, or I can relate back to one of the derivations of the initial material, or to one of the derivations of the derivations. Each of these derivations has between one and 13 different types of transformation attached to it, so that there is a very intense, almost cyclonic whirl of transmutation, of re-perspectivisation, taking place—it's what you might call a 'mobile cubism'.

RT: Can I back-track a moment? Was your knowledge of the whole business of the *emblemata* considerably previous to your writing of the piano piece, or did the knowledge of one suddenly lead almost automatically to the other?

BF: Well, let me start to answer this question by carrying on answering the previous one. The second thing I wanted to say in respect of my immediate concerns in writing that piece was something I mentioned when we were talking earlier: the question of possible explanation of musical materials via musical means. How can one have, as it were, a 'meta-musical' explanation of an extant musical material in that material itself? How can one allow material to distance itself, such that one can see that material in two different ways simultaneously? This concern is

something I've lived with for many years. Let us take, for instance, the example of Schoenberg's op.23, the Five Piano Pieces. The first of those piano pieces begins with several bars of intense and, I think, stunningly beautiful three-part writing, which are almost complete in themselves. The moment he then starts moving off into variations of this, moving into more conventional accompanimental piano figurations, and so on, I feel it becomes repetition, irrelevant: in a way, I would have liked him to stop the piece there, at the end of that first tiny exposition.

It seems to me fundamentally wrong to reveal the basic essence of a work, and then multiply it. This is Boulez's idea, and not mine. My idea is to start with the multiplied mass, and gradually through various processes focus down to the given; it seems much more sensible to me, and much more conclusive, much more in keeping with the way the human mind works things out. So this was the basic motivation of this work.

I had first come across the idea of the *emblema* in 1976: it was much later that I realise how obsessed Walter Benjamin was with this entire business,³ and how his Klee picture, *Angelus novus*, was of such great symbolic importance to him, both to his theories and to his person. So a lot of this had resonances later which were quite accidental, and external to the original idea. It was in Venice, I recall, while I was there for the Biennale. The Biennale still had money in those days, and I was invited for three weeks, as one of several young visiting composers, to live in almost the best hotels, three meals a day, and so forth. I didn't have a great deal to do except advise on the performance of my works, and be there, in the standard Italian fashion. I enjoyed this very much—it was one of the formative influences of my compositional career—and I spent this time consciously trying to compose a piano piece based on this idea, and couldn't. I tried very many approaches to it, many textures, and none of them worked. I then abandoned them—I still have these sketches somewhere, and maybe one day I'll use them, but perhaps I won't—and I left it to accumulate.

Over the years, the detritus of images and partial images associated with my alchemical and metaphysical studies, or Renaissance studies, began to accumulate round a core, and this core was, as I said, the idea of *Denkbilder*: pictures to help you think, or 'thinking pictures'—it's very ambiguous, of course. And I wanted to find a way, both of solving the problem I outlined a moment ago, and of treating time in an immediately palpable, pictorial fashion. So the first part of the piece is this whirlwind of the not-yet-become, the idea of processes, not material, forming the thematic content of the work. So apart from the quite banal initial material, which we don't even know is 'initial material', the whole thing is in a whirlwind of dissolution even before it has been created—very linear.

So this is the *Lemma*, the superscription. The linearity of the material—it's mainly two-part writing—is in some way a sort of half-amused reference to this concept. The second part, the *Icon*, is the description of the possible picture put into actual pictorial form. I'm dealing here with the expansion and contraction of rhythmic and chordal cycles. There are only seven chordal identities, and this middle part is, as it were, the same thing seen from many perspectival standpoints. I have what I call a 'time-sun'. That is, I imagine a framework, a conceptual spatio-temporal framework within which these chords are then disposed on several levels, like objects. Then there is a sun passing over them; the shadows thrown by the sun (the speed at which the

sun moves playing a great role here, of course) are of different lengths, different intensities, impinging in different ways on different objects, themselves also moving upon the space defined by this frame. And the durations of these chords, the way the chords are vertically expanded or compressed at certain points, the type of inversion used, and so on, how many of these different types of treatment are superimposed, what the type of textural treatment of each of these chordal units is, all this is very strictly controlled by this unifying visual concept. So I'm very much relating—if only tangentially, and rather anecdotally—to the concept of visuality, of pictoriality, to the mysterious suggestive pictoriality of this mannerist *concerto*.

The third part is the *Epigram*. This is the attempt to unite these two elements that have appeared previously. It's a failure: I have to say this. But as we were saying earlier, before we started recording, Schoenberg's Second String Quartet is also a failure in this sense, and needs to be a failure, in my eyes, in order to be the historical success which it actually is, and which makes it, for me, a very important composition.

RT: But a failure in what sense? A failure as a piece of music when you hear it, or as the realisation of a concept, or what?

BF: A failure to be a classical string quartet. And by failing to do this, it becomes something else. Now *Lemma-Icon-Epigram* is a failure in the sense that it does not find this *via media* of exegesis in the *Epigram* part. But that for me was also a very important learning experience, which put me onto quite different tracks of speculation that I think are bearing fruit now in this large-scale cycle, where I have, right at the beginning, with a great deal of care, laid out the space within which it is meaningful to look for musical problems.

RT: What 'went wrong' in the *Epigram*?

BF: Well, the idea of what was to happen in *Epigram*, the idea of the entire piece, was to move in exactly the opposite direction to Schoenberg in the first of the op.23 pieces—we were talking about this. One should start out with a diverse phenomenon, and move back towards the kernel of the substance, and this is what *Epigram* was trying to do. It was trying to move away from the seeming discursive polyphony, the motivic polyphony of the work's opening (which in fact is nothing of the sort, but is a total dissolution and disembodiment of material-creating devices, raising technique to the level of thematization, while the material falls to a demonstrative substratum). Instead, the exact opposite is true; through the course of the piece, I have gradually concentrated material and structure on converging paths. So the idea was that in *Epigram* these two would come together in a much more motivically cogent fashion, such that the listener would feel, 'Aha, the great linear freedom of the first part and the tremendous verticalised icy rigour of the second part, both expressing in their own ways different approaches to time, but equally powerful, have in this final section found some sort of synthesis, moved down towards the essence of the matter.' And in fact at the end of the piece, we find that the very last three bars of the piece bring together the two complementary hexachords of what would have been basic twelve-tone material in a quite absurd manner: it reduces the whole thematic thing down to a basis.

One of the things that make *Epigram* both a failure and a strangely unexpected success for me is that I found that in trying to work it motivically, my

compositional desires simply didn't interlock with what I was theoretically setting out to do. After all this research I had carried out over the space of about eight months in producing the piece, I felt that this sort of motivic writing was really not a desirable thing. And one reason why the *Epigram* turned out so short was that at a certain point the material itself *demand*ed to be redispersed in schematically block-like entities. There is a convulsive 7/16 bar at the end of page 22, where so many lines of material are crossing that I decided I simply wasn't going to carry out the scheme I had set for myself, that it was pointless to take this sort of material any further. Because in a way it was a personal confirmation for me of my distrust of the motivic-cellular diversification principle. So from that point on, I start bringing back my chords as a sort of prison-bar structure, and between the manifestations of the chords themselves I bring in little fantasies which present the chords in more linear fashion. Then at a certain point I begin breaking up the chords into two hands, so that the two parts of the chord move asynchronously, right in the middle of the keyboard. And this, I think, builds up a tremendous power, because the hands are trying to disengage themselves from one another, and never quite make it, because they are pulled back in again. And for me, this last part of the piece demonstrates quite well both the ultimate creative absurdity of the thematic-motivic foundations I was trying to investigate, and also the power generated by the conflict between that desire and the things that the actual material itself wanted.

RT: Wouldn't it almost have distressed you, in fact, if your original intentions *had* worked at the end? Wouldn't it have given the piece a sort of 'happy end' which might have been much more problematic than failing?

BF: It might have become very smug, I suspect. 'Here I am, and this is what it was all about.' And I would dislike that. Of course my music must, in a certain way, always remain open-ended. What fascinates me—and why I never really wrote aleatoric music or indeterminate music of any sort, even at the times when this was a rampant plague—was that I believe that you can only have meaningful open-endedness through an absolutely closed formal concept. A piece radiates out beyond its double bar; in a certain sense, a shadow piece starts in the mind immediately after the last double bar of the composition. This is something which we sacrifice if the piece itself has an open-ended formal conception. I believe very much that fragmentation, for instance, which is something I've thought a great deal about over the years, can only have a musical expressive significance to the extent that we can postulate at least possible alternative ideal completions that never were.

Scores and their performances

RT: Could I move now to the question of performance? Given that it is almost innate in your compositions that the correlation between what is written and what is played will not be perfect, what, for you, are the essential criteria for a good performance of your work?

BF: I would say the establishment of audible criteria of meaningful inexactitude. That is, from work to work, from one section of a work to another section, from one performer to another, from one performance situation to another, the level of meaningful inexactitude is one indication, one hint of the way in which a work 'means'.

RT: So interpretation consists, to some extent, of different intelligent failures to reproduce a central text?

BF: I would say this was true, yes. Unfortunately the situation today is that the central text has no long-term tradition supporting it, in which it is embedded, and which tells us how to play it. Therefore it is our duty as composers to make the text, the visual aspect of the text and its musical structure, so self-referential in an enriching sense that the performer can find some way of plugging it into his own sensibilities—so that he is not trying simply to give a generally tasteful rendering of some set of noises, or whatever, but that these noises are, in a semantically specific sense, inter-related among themselves in such a way that the performer himself can attempt to take an attitude towards that interrelationship.

RT: Obviously, in the sheer technical difficulty of the pieces there is a certain in-built defence mechanism against uncommitted performers. Is even the notation itself, and its *mis-en-page*, a sort of 'protective commentary' (in Debussy's sense) against the dilettantish approach?

BF: Oh, certainly, because I've waited six years now to find a second performer for my bass clarinet solo piece, *Time and Motion Study I*, and it has been a tremendously enriching experience for me after such a long time listening to only one person playing it, however well, to work with a second person on this piece, to hear his attitudes both to it and to the previous performer's interpretation, and to feel a quite different creative illumination of the piece, which is very much in keeping with my ideas about the possibility of interpretational diversity.

RT: Do you find that individual performers of your works are relatively uniform in their interpretations from one night to the next, or are there big discrepancies? There seems to be plenty of scope for the latter: given that one is always struggling for this unreachable object, the direction in which one is going to fall down might easily vary.

BF: Well, this is true, of course. But it isn't the falling down in itself which is significant, it's the attitude one adopts to the necessity of falling down, or the inevitability of it. I would say first of all that there are many performers of my works who differ astoundingly from one another, that certain of my works, like *Unity Capsule* for instance, have types of performance which one might say are almost diametrically opposed, but which reveal nevertheless different aspects of the piece. I of course have my preferences regarding the more valid form, but that's just my preference—the pieces have divorced themselves from me now, except in a biographical sense. On the other hand it's certainly true that any given performer can, under different circumstances, produce a quite different performance, and there is always the danger that a performance will fail almost completely, no matter how many notes are achieved, if it lacks that intensity of awareness of the almost erotic relationship between manual movement, density of notation, and constant awareness of the knife-edge quality of the possibility of not achieving something, and so needing to compensate for it momentarily on another level—for instance, of looking momentarily at a quite different aspect of the piece in order to balance the failure out, one which one hadn't looked at before, or hadn't looked at for some time, or not in that way. This, under favourable circumstances, can produce performances of quite different quality, which nevertheless have very clear identity traits: it's very clearly

the same piece, despite all the diversity of other aspects.

RT: Do you ever regret not having the performer's 'erotic-tactile' relationship to your own works? Because you presumably don't play . . .

BF: Not any more, but I *have* played. I've had many and various experiences in the performance of instruments. The instrument I've always played best, perhaps, until I didn't have time to play any more, was the flute, and I suppose that's reflected in my own music.

RT: So for example, were you ever able to play *Cassandra's Dream Song*?

BF: Yes (but not *Unity Capsule* because I never played a ring-keyed flute—so that's my get-out on that subject), certainly, because the techniques involved in *Cassandra's Dream Song* were created through experimentation with the flute. The first form of the piece, which was somewhat shorter than the final version, was created in that way, and it was then subjected to a more intensive compositional analysis *post priori*, and a recomposition, of course.

RT: What happens to your relationship to, for instance, *Cassandra's Dream Song*, when you actually try to play it?

BF: Well, I've never tried to *perform* the piece in a literal sense, although I could; at that time I could play all the individual sections—for some reason, I simply never bothered to put them all together. So I can't really answer that question directly. But even if I did answer it, perhaps it would be irrelevant from the point of view of any other performer, because I never really had a performer's mentality, although I quite enjoyed conducting at one stage, and did quite a lot of it in London: I gave the first performances of a number of my works that way. I was never really interested in that particular tactile relationship to the work; as I said before, tactility can be both emotional and bodily, and intellectual, and spiritual. I don't think that the activity of intellectual creativity is any less erotic than the direct, literal bodily contact with the material.

RT: What relation *do* you have to your work once it is finished? What 'happens' to you when you hear your older pieces?

BF: Oh, I don't like listening to my music, not even new pieces. Generally they sound pretty much like I expected them to sound, so it's what I wanted, and that's it. There have been some performances which have excited me tremendously, the odd few which I've always remembered. But on the whole, at the moment I've established that a piece has the effect that I expected it to have, then in a sense it's living its own life, I'm not connected to it any more. On the other hand, one of the implications of the progressive definition I gave earlier on of style, as something always in progress within the corpus of one's own works, implies also that past works also belong to that same body, and must always be taken account of when moving on. The degree of semanticity inherent in any of the materials included in those works, the way of looking at the world which those works imply, must also be taken into account, either literally or in the back of one's mind, when one carries on. Otherwise one would be doing an injustice to the lived history of the elements one was working with at that moment.

RT: Does a work ever surprise you positively in performance, in the sense that you find more in a

piece than you thought you had put into it?

BF: No. Perhaps that just means that I'm not capable of perceiving more than I thought I'd put into it. Sometimes I've been surprised that certain sounds have worked better than I thought they would. On infrequent occasions I've been quite surprised and disappointed that certain sounds haven't worked at all as I expected they would, even though they were recognisably the same sounds. Maybe it's that I've miscalculated at that moment—not the banal hand-work thing of wrong balance, or anything like that (though that has occasionally happened), but far more that I haven't developed, or have over-estimated, for instance, the degree of semantic richness which a particular element has arrived at, so that the element is too transparently fragile at that moment to carry the weight of meaning which I have assigned to it.

RT: Coming back to the score as such: It seems to me that when your scores are published, made available for anyone to buy, they have a significance which is different from that of the average, more obviously realisable score, in that what they mean to the listener is quite different from what they mean to the performer. They are something that the performer is going to attempt to realise; but for the listener they may almost be a confusing factor, representing all too clearly the gulf between what appears to have been conceived, and what appears to have been realised in a particular performance. Is it a problem for you, in that sense, that listeners also buy and read through your scores?

BF: Not at all; quite the opposite! I would say that it simply underlines my general point of view that a work of music is not simply sound, but the sound itself is a cipher for something else which some people call expression, but which I, of course, would prefer to differentiate a lot further, and in a lot of directions. A score as, let's say, a visual representation of a possible sound—that's just one aspect of what a score is. A score is also an entire cultural artefact with an aura of spiritual resonance which is completely its own, in spite of its being related to the sonorous experience of the work in one of its other manifestations. A work takes on these kaleidoscopic manifestations at different times, depending on what aspect of it one is examining, but the totality is far more than most people assume it to be. And therefore I think that the score being one thing and the piece being another is a complete absurdity.

RT: Your scores are also, perhaps, a certain protection against oversimplified hearing. For example, when I was sitting here the other evening listening to *Carceri I*, I was surprised by how transparent the piece sounded. Then, going back and listening with the score, and in stereo instead of mono, I had quite the reverse experience, and I suddenly became aware of how much I *hadn't* heard, not so much because maybe it wasn't audible, but perhaps because I had actually eliminated so much in order to arrive at that, for me, satisfying notion of transparency.

BF: Don't you find that interesting, though? The score can, as you say, be a certain defence reaction against oversimplified listening. It can, however, also be a sort of validation of the immediate quality of the sounds, strangely enough. I've often thought that one of the main tasks a piece has to accomplish, over and beyond its large-scale ambitions, is to persuade a listener to suspend disbelief for the duration of the work; not to sit there passively, like some present-day ideologists would pretend, but to enter into the

world of that piece by dissolving his own cultural barriers against it. Now unless a work can achieve this, then no matter what its complexities or its virtues, of course it doesn't succeed with that particular listener. Therefore it is important that the initial sounds of a piece always be sounds that will give the listener that sense of aura, that sense of magnetism, that sense of presence, indefinable in another way, which only a particular sort of aural sensation can achieve. And therefore the beginnings of most of my works have that . . . or I try to make them have a very clear image. This clarity of image is not always maintained subsequently, because one doesn't need to keep hitting the listener on the head with this sort of demand. But I do think that a work, no matter what its qualities may otherwise be, will fail unless this is accomplished. Therefore, the score can act as an antidote to this, and, in a sense, what you were seeing as a problem a moment ago is from my point of view a decided advantage—one sort of listening, or the one sort of perception of a work can then be balanced out by the other, and a much more rounded picture emerges.

A miscellany of works

RT: The title *Funérailles*, apart from its obvious funereal connotations, also invokes Liszt.

BF: Well, yes, I've had a certain 'thing' with Liszt. I don't know why—I'm not particularly fond of his music. But I once considered calling a piece *Les préludes*, and at the moment I'm working on a series of songs called *Études transcendentales* (as a main title, but with a different subtitle).

Why *Funérailles*? I was using the word less in its funereal significance than in terms of any form of protracted and rather alienating ritual. One of the things I was dealing with in this piece was myself looking at myself, looking at myself composing—a sort of objectivisation of a subjective reaction. And I often find, when taking part in any ritual (but especially large-scale public ones), that one stands there, basically not taking part in the ritual, but looking at oneself, at one's bodily presence; and that seems to me to be an exact parallel. In the score I produce this story of a Martian landing on top of a large hill and looking down at a parade ground, watching these creatures wandering backwards and forwards in various patterns, and wondering precisely what he would feel about it all. And having felt equally alienated on occasions, having been 'reconstructed' as a partaker in some of these rituals, on whatever level, and being in some sense not oneself, and yet more oneself because of being more aware of oneself not being oneself: this was exactly analogous to the situation of both mystery and immense subjective intensity of investigation which this piece was meant to invoke.

RT: Does that mean that in some ways it's an (uncharacteristically) autobiographical work?

BF: Oh no, the piece isn't at all autobiographical, because it's not the autobiographical, extant, flesh-and-blood me, with his experiences, that is being investigated. It is simply the artist making artistic decisions, or judging already-made artistic decisions from a new artistic standpoint, at the moment of recomposition. I'm involved with the *raison d'être* of the creative act, rather than the person doing the creating. It just happened to be me doing it, but the same process could have been carried out by somebody else, with quite different but equally exemplary results.

RT: On the whole, your titles have very precise

connotations. Yet occasionally you come up with something relatively abstract like the Second Quartet. Did you ever think of calling it something else, or is there a particular intention here in using a purely formal, non-allusive title?

BF: I never thought of calling it anything else, and I'm going to write a third quartet in a couple of years—it has already been booked by the Arditti—which will also be called just, quite banally, 'Third String Quartet'. I've always been fascinated by the string quartet medium, as being one of the few genres in music history whose content is related to a specific instrumental combination. What is appropriate to a string quartet in terms of development of types of argument, intensity, and so on, is traditionally quite different from that in, for instance, a string trio or a piano trio, whose content has always been much more problematic. If we examine the genre of string trio we find the approaches to it range from the divertimento-like, insubstantial, right through to the totally autobiographical, cutting quality of the Schoenberg, for example. So there is a certain logic in invoking certain types of intensity by restricting oneself to the rather abstract nomenclature of 'String Quartet', which wouldn't apply in calling a piece 'String Trio'.

RT: Would you now retrospectively prefer your Sonatas to be called your First Quartet?

BF: Well, to be truthful, they are already my second quartet; there's a string quartet which dates from 1963 which has never seen the public light of day, and probably never will. No, the title 'Sonatas' refers of course to the Purcell connection, which many people see as being much stronger than it actually is. In fact, I like the Fantasias . . .

RT: 'Fantasias' might have been the more appropriate title . . .

BF: Yes . . . without being intensely attracted to anything else he wrote. And they were very much in the 'old style', so that his more modern, advanced style is not one that had any particularly great relevance for me. But nevertheless, to call my pieces 'Sonatas' did at least distance them from the argumentative tradition of the classical string quartet, because my idea in those pieces was to make the *intensity* of the single moment, à la Webern, which can be the justification of that moment, in terms of our awareness, expand itself over an extremely long duration, whilst deconstructing itself back into formal cogency. Therefore to call it a string quartet in the normal sense would have been to falsify the issue, because a string quartet normally presupposes a concept of argumentation, in which the validity or not of the types of strategies used in the arguments are not being placed in question: they're already given.

RT: I remember seeing somewhere that you now criticise the Sonatas for String Quartet on the grounds that they consist too much of a structure without content.

BF: I don't think I used those words; I would probably have used the word 'carapace'. Let's put it this way: I think I said that all works contain immediate expression (or message presentation), and skeleton. And in the works I have been writing recently, starting perhaps with the Second String Quartet, the main object of the music has no longer been to incorporate or redefine experiences gained from extra-musical sources, for example (which still interest me, but I don't try to contain them specifically, since I feel that in that respect I've already done, more or less successfully, what I wanted to do), but far more, to get into the

real interstices of linguistic formulability. What is the space in which the work really exists? There is a vacuum that exists between the surface presentation—that's what I call the carapace of the Second String Quartet—and the subsurface generative structures. Now the extent to which these two things are separated allows the surface material to take on different degrees of auratic⁴ presence. In the Sonatas, the surface *is* the skeleton. That is, it's evident that the processes which are present in the Sonatas are presented to us as expressive means, whereas in the Second String Quartet the surface is very much the sediment of those already disappeared processes which have leadenly disappeared below the surface, like anchors, or like half-deflated balloons beneath the stratosphere: they're swimming at different levels, at different distances from this surface, so that the degree of sonorous causality is different for each type of activity. It allows us, as it were, to mentally distance ourselves, and forces us to refocus; it gives a sort of analogy (though not in a direct sense) to innate, in-built tonal prejudices, so to speak, that allow us to relativise single events in terms of a larger frame. Every work produces a different relationship here, of course, so one can't talk about a generalised process. But from work to work, over a long period of time, with the constant redevelopment and redefinition of the means under the frame, I have great hopes that—at least within the scope of my work—some sort of redefinition of this kind can come about.

RT: I suppose the Sonatas, and maybe the Sonata for Two Pianos, were the first works of yours to attract considerable attention. Is this where the 'real Ferneyhough' starts? Listening retrospectively, is there a specific piece which you regard as having been *the* step forward?

BF: No, because there have always been steps back, or at least recuperative steps, in place of the 'great advance'. I've always moved in a pendulum-like way, from the most adventurous and investigatorial approach back to a middle-of-the-road stance, in order to recontextualise the elements I have been working with.

RT: Were the big steps forward always the works for large forces?

BF: No, not always. The Sonatas, of course, were very important. If you look at the other works which I wrote at that time, you will see the tremendous gap that exists between even the Sonata for Two Pianos and the Sonatas for String Quartet. The Sonatas for String Quartet were written at an incredibly crisis-ridden period of my life, and I think that both this emotional crisis and, of course, my relative youth at the time are very evident in the facture of the work. So it's a work that remains very embedded in my consciousness in some ways, and that's why I didn't write a second quartet for many years: it was necessary for me to overcome that piece.

Otherwise, it's easier for me to tell you which are the significant ends of things, rather than the beginnings. The ends of cycles are always important, like *Firecycle Beta*, for example, which has never been performed in Britain, or *Epicycle*, which also hasn't. One can see the continuity of these works from the Sonatas; they were always magnified versions of those, moving in slightly different directions, and with slightly different concerns. So I would say I could define *Firecycle* as being the end of a period, and I could define *La terre est un homme* as being the end of a period, rather than saying what were the decisive steps forward. I suppose you could say that the works

that come after that were steps forward, but of course forward only in a linear sense, and because of course one always tries to work on the highest level available to one at any given moment.

RT: If you've arrived at the end of a cycle, do you find yourself saying, in effect, 'God, what do I do next?'

BF: No, except that in one case, where I didn't write anything for a long time, this was really true. After writing *Firecycle Beta*, not only was I unable, and also, ultimately, unwilling to write *Firecycle Alpha* and *Gamma* (so that the work remained a torso) but I also felt that this type of Utopian vision of what a musical language was or ought to be was essentially played out. It had been very useful for the production of a certain number of works, which even today I still think have their points and which I wouldn't reject by any means, but it didn't provide me with any fruitful humus to carry on. Thus there was this period where I had to find some new motivation for composing, and finally this motivation (in the *Time and Motion Study* series) was the total integration of all those things which had always interested me as an intellectual human being, shall we say—the various philosophies, the ideas of poetics, the basic ways of looking at the world, the various disciplines of self-development, and so on, through which one approaches certain states of being in the Western tradition.

RT: Can you say something about the forthcoming cycle, and the title: *Carceri d'invenzione*?

BF: Well, the most obvious reference is, of course, to the etchings-cycle of architectural fantasies by the Roman architect-artist Piranesi. What interested me most about these pictures is that they are multi-perspectival. Although, on the surface, they look to be rather fantastically realistic, they actually generate lines of force, or energies, which are not commensurate with one another on a realistic level. And these grating, scraping contradictions force us to reconstruct not just the fictional space of the picture but actually to regard the edge of the page, not as a limit to the invention but as the point at which these unfinished perspectival energies really emanate out into the world, and force us to reperspectivise the world of everyday existence which confronts us beyond the limits of the work.

This is exactly what I try to do in music. The work itself is meant to create the scraping, raw edges, the frictions and lines of force which project themselves, labyrinth-like, out beyond the limits of the actual duration of the work, to infect or colour our perspectives of the way in which the world is perceived. So this was one straightforward analogy. The other aspect of the title—*Carceri*, of course, means 'dungeons' or 'prisons'—is that I believe that constriction lies at the basis of all artistic creativity: if the artist isn't faced with a certain limited situation, he usually doesn't create.

I was working with one particular constriction, which was the concept of repetition. The beginning of *Carceri d'invenzione I* makes it very clear that I start the same material or similar material several times, and continue it differently, for different lengths each time. There are things like the repetition in each instrument of phases of different length: literal or partially literal repetition, in which the beginnings and ends, or certain segments from the middle of these repetitions are chopped out each time round. So the cycle for each instrument is getting shorter and shorter, but different parts of it are missing each time; for each instrument, there is a different strategy of elimination. So the kaleidoscopic totality is continually changing, and the repetition is not immediately

apparent as such: it has already been sinking a little bit below the surface. For instance, I can have literal repetitions of technique, allied to totally different materials; or I can use the same material, differentiated in a variety of ways, and varying combinations of these in different layers.

Secondly, the 'dungeon-like' nature of the piece exists both in the horizontal and in the vertical dimension. Horizontally because differing layers, while taking note of one another, and utilising similar materials on occasions, often follow different types of logic, shall we say, to arrive at different points; they define themselves in different ways, having differing types of hierarchical ordering, the one with another, at different points in the piece. Vertically, I have adopted various techniques, which it would take too long to describe here, in which the length of space defined by a bar allows a certain density of material to be constricted or expanded, so that the same material may occur in bars of different lengths, correspondingly faster or slower. Alternatively, only a certain proportion of the material may occur in a bar of different length, or the material of three previous bars may be contracted into one new bar of perhaps even shorter length than the original bars, so that the material may be much slower or much faster; it's a kind of proportional canonic technique, relating to the material contained within one bar, rather than entire strings of material. That's one aspect of the verticalisation. The second aspect is the new type of metric system I have developed, which includes beats of irrational lengths in relation to the basic tempo of the piece. So you find strange things like the whole ensemble jerking immediately into a perceptibly different rapidity: there's a click, a trigger at the beginning of each bar that coincides with this change of tempo. One hears this best of all in the first piece of the series, *Superscriptio* for solo piccolo, where it's very schematically employed.

So both at the level of analogy—the relationship to the fantastical imagination and the associated perspectival energies related to Baroque imaginative architectural notions, as exemplified by Piranesi, but also by other people—and also in the literal way that materials are disposed in the vertical and horizontal dimensions, the way I delimit the choices I have of the types of technique I use, or the types of material to which the techniques are applied at different times: both these aspects are implied in the title. That is, '*Dungeons of Invention*': without these limitations, the invention would be of a quite different sort, or might not be at all.

Working with microtones

RT: Microtones seem to be playing an increasingly important role in your recent work.

BF: Well, *all* works involve microtones in some sense, for me. But the question of microtones, it is true, is very important to me at the present time. I am using microtones very much in a systematic fashion; that is, the simultaneity of pitch materials which I am employing in most of the works of this seven-work cycle *Carceri d'invenzione* allows for the gradual introduction or elimination of microtonal materials. This is very important harmonically. In previous works, certainly in the first version of *Funérailles* for instance, many of the microtonal inflections are indeed just that: inflections. They were like a sort of glissando or exaggerated vibrato—they might be something which points up the limits of one particular functional entity.

RT: They're almost articulation types, in a sense.

BF: They're articulation types, yes, that's true.

RT: So where does the situation begin to swing around? And did it swing round decisively, or is it that in the course of time your attitude to microtonal elements has gradually become more systematic, more integrated?

BF: I would say it has become more integrated, though even in *Epicycle*, in 1968, if you look at the one page which is without metre, which is full of pauses to be held for a certain length of time, the harmony on that page (which I think is quite successful, well balanced) is built entirely of pre-calculated, microtonal chords. So I would say it's a question of degree rather than absolutes.

RT: If you use microtones in an integrated way, does this mean that you think that their perceptual qualities are just as great as those of tempered intervals? Do you expect the interval of one-and-a-quarter tones to be registered by the listener just as precisely as a semitone or a tritone?

BF: Well, using the term 'registered precisely' already implies a certain grammaticality of all intervals and their perceptibility—that one assigns functions to them in some way. I would say that there is a certain quality to a whole-tone plus quarter-tone which is perceptible even with a certain degree of flexibility as to exactitude. I don't regard these things as functional, perceptible units, I regard them as areas of sensation, the same as I would with a major 3rd; if a major 3rd is slightly out of tune, it still has the quality of a major 3rd.

RT: Do you think the ear has the same capacity under current circumstances to 'correct' a slightly false microtone in the way that it obviously 'corrects' the slightly deviant major 3rd?

BF: It depends on the context, I would say. I mean, you say one corrects a major 3rd automatically, but the question is, to what purpose the major 3rd is there, in what context it finds itself, with what other intervals. I'm thinking now of the strange beginning of one of the movements of *Le marteau sans maître*,⁵ where the guitar plays a minor 3rd that seems totally alien under those circumstances, which seems either a great stroke of genius, or a grave error on the part of the composer. I've never been quite sure which.

RT: I know the opening you mean: it sounds very odd . . .

BF: Does one there, or would one, assuming the note was slightly out of tune, correct it in the sense which you imply? I beg leave to doubt it; at least, it's an arguable point. And I suppose that everyone's perception is different—it depends on what you've heard immediately before, it depends on what your expectations are, and so on. Therefore I would say again with microtones, and the perception of the individual quality of certain types of microtonal interval, that it depends on the consistency with which you use them: how closely the last example of the same interval occurs to the one you're now listening to, on the type of texture, the type of motivic or non-motivic texture within which the interval is embedded. How isolated is it, for instance: was the last example of the same interval or a similar interval identifiably in the same instrumental colour? All these things play a tremendous role, and one plays with all these things when composing. I don't believe any composer works just with intervals. If he does, there's something gravely lacking in his sensibility. One works with total contexts, one places intervals as one component into an organic unit, and the same

with microtonal intervals.

RT: Is there a certain element, then, of Lewis Carroll's 'Take care of the sense, and the sounds will take care of themselves.'?

BF: Well, you know there is, but we mustn't take it to ridiculous extremes. I would say that sound is never just sound. Sound is always the reflection of context, of contour. If we abstract any one of our sensations from a context, then that sensation takes on a very strange quality. Like if you wake up in the middle of the night: we don't know where we are, we see a strange, pale square in front of us. Is that square one inch in front of our eyes, or is it five feet away? Is it an opening, or an illuminated surface? And until we've worked this out—that it is actually an open door leading out into a moonlit area—we have gone through all sorts of permutations in our minds. The perception of a work of music, for me, is very much allied to this contextualisation of sensation, because the sensation as such is almost never abstract, so that even this strange experience of seeing this seemingly abstract space has already been conditioned by our previous expectations; in making this perception, the mind has already very rapidly scanned previous possible experiences of this type.

Style, gesture, and figure

RT: Can we come back to the question of style, and particularly your views on the relationship of gesture and figure?

BF: I would say that there are two things wrong with much contemporary style. Those who fulminate most readily against serial techniques are exactly those who fall into the same dilemma. Their argument against parametric thinking, if I may put it in that general way, is that serial techniques generate isolated, contextless monads via the accidental coming-together of streams of innately independently generated parametric specifications; and that these single monads, perceptually, could not enter into meaningful relationships with their surroundings other than in a banal and superficial, quasi-expressionistic fashion. But on the other hand, it seems to me that those composers who now adopt what I call the ideology of the 'transparency to expression of the single gesture' fall into exactly the same monadic trap.

RT: So Rihm, for example . . .

BF: As we heard yesterday evening.⁶ Now I'm putting words into these people's mouths, and perhaps they could indeed confute me by saying, 'That's not what we meant at all.' But listening to their music and reading their writings, it seems to be the case that for them a gesture, belonging to whatever preconceived repertoire, has a semantic significance, a certain constant semantic significance, relating to the sort of emotion we are meant to recognise it as representing.

RT: It's an *Affektenlehre*.

BF: Yes. Now it seems to me that a composer sitting and looking inside himself, and writing down a gesture, is attempting as it were to draw that gesture, that emotion which he observes in himself, in terms of musical notation. Therefore, logically, the more this gesture is in itself an iconic representation of the emotion, and is therefore self-sufficient—either it represents this thing or it doesn't—the more it represents it, the more it in itself is its own justification, via this representational connection, the less contact it needs, structurally speaking, with any other



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CARCERI D'INVENZIONE II (1985)

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gestures placed in the same context. Because either a gesture is iconic or it's not. And the more it aims towards representing something other than itself (by being, as I said, transparent to emotive significance) the less it needs any kind of relativising contextuality, in terms of a general language, other than just the basic vocables, shall we say.

RT: So we're back at what Boulez once said about Messiaen: that he doesn't compose, he juxtaposes.

BF: Yes, and we're back at the stage where the only form-building means available seem to be either the banal contrast principle, or some kind of chain principle, putting things together in some sort of more-or-less interesting order whereby very often the events could be changed round without a great deal of interference to the general emotive patterning. Now it seems to me that the only consequence of that for young composers today is that one sees everywhere a sort of new conservatism, in which they are reading in the textbooks about examples of rondo form and passacaglia form, they're writing symphonies again. This sort of neoconservatism seems a logical consequence of this monadic contextlessness of the single affective gesture. They are forced to impose an arbitrary, extraneous, and very academic formal structure upon these isolated instances of what may or may not be authentic expression.

RT: In these pieces, it seems to me, the gesture and the form appear meaningful to an audience only in so far as they're known in advance. And to that extent, it's a little like throwing out known and appreciated lumps of cheese to groups of Pavlovian rats.

BF: Yes. And the effective gestures are just as isolated as the single sonic units of a serial work would be, except of course they have the slight advantage of relating already to vocabularies of previous periods, which, however, have themselves become anaemic, simply by creating general categories of expression. We say, 'Aha, that's meant to be a dramatic, despairing gesture', or whatever. We typify this particular, no doubt deeply felt, structure as being simply a token of that generalised type. And that being so, we could replace it with almost any other example of the same type, and still retain approximately the same amount of information.

RT: It's almost like a *Young Werther* situation; the succession and intensity of the emotions are far more important than there being any good cause for any of them, or than any particular emotion.

BF: Yes, this is true. And one of the things that disturbs me most, as I understand it, particularly in Germany, is the recent *rapprochement* between the new Romantics and the sociocritical school, the *musica negativa* of Lachenmann and others—the fact that each school seems to recognise its own negative image in the other.

RT: That really surprises me.

BF: Well, it doesn't surprise me, because they both have similar views of what we might call 'History' with a capital 'H'. Each of them refers—Rihm positively, Lachenmann negatively—to a posited totality of history. One draws his musical nourishment from it; the other generates semantic significance by constantly negating it in every moment of a work. But of course, this 'totality of history' is itself a fiction, and I would have thought that it's impossible, in any given work, to sit facing this gigantic, monolithic totality, and produce anything individually viable as a particular work. It's like wanting to write, totally immersed in history but sitting outside it. If it were

true that they were regarding the totality of music history in each work, and realising it in one way or another, then of course each work would just become some sort of *Schmarotzer* ['parasite'].

RT: Perhaps the point at issue is really that, whether positively or negatively, the definition of music history that they both accept is simply that of the average concert-goer.

BF: Well, that of the average German concert-goer, in fact. Well, this is what I was saying, that just because you put a capital 'H' on the false totality of musical history, this doesn't make it some sort of overall, viewable, and consumable, or appreciable, usable object. And I think that if these people—as I believe Lachenmann is beginning to do—are prepared to concentrate on particular manifestations of historical subjectivity, then no doubt one can do something with it. But to call late-17th-century to early-20th-century music—German music—'music history' seems to me to be rather . . . questionable.

One of the things I'm trying to do is to distinguish between the gesture as such, which in itself is an objective, material-bound presence—we can examine its delineations, we can appreciate it as a total 'vocal' on whatever level (which is why overall style is of no great importance to me—one can write in perfect 5ths or do what one wants—that's not the question), and the figural aspect of a gesture ('figural' being itself a subcategory of gesture). The thing which distinguishes the figural way of constructing or observing a gesture from the 'gestural' part of the gesture is that one is attempting to realise the totality of the gesture in terms of its possible deconstruction into parametric tendencies. That is, no longer does one attempt to create a gesture via the automatic coming together of abstract parametric units or quantities, nor does one try to build a gesture as an affective quantity, and place these totalities against one another. One attempts to so construct gestures that the parametric qualities of which they are composed are released into the world of the music, as it were, into the future, the future potential of the music, at the moment in which the gesture presents itself. So at the moment in which the gesture actually dissolves into the future, certain parametric elements, which owe their original *raison d'être* to having been embedded in this gesture (and therefore are no longer isolated quanta, floating, free-ranging nothings, 'quarks' or whatever), are released in order to be able to conflate in different ways, or coincide to produce new gestural units. So for me, the ideal situation is one in which neither the abstract gesture in itself, nor the use of parametric thinking to generate gestures, but the gesturally justified, free-ranging employment of parametric information is the centre of all compositional concern.

RT: So the figural content of a gesture is precisely the thing that will allow that gesture to turn into something else.

BF: Well, it's the thing which is justified, first of all, by its particular contextualisation, its particular anchoring in a gestural context. But at the same time the context, the whole tenor of the argument of the work, must be such that some of these particular favoured parametric elements at any moment, however produced, must already be attempting to subvert and dissolve the gesture to which they belong. They must be at least as powerful as the gesture, and this seems to me to be the only way to jump the gestural barrier from one monadic unit, one experiential unit to another: by certain elements of that gesture dissolving themselves out of the general context, and having

enough individual energy to flow either immediately or at a somewhat later time into connection with other parametric layers to form new gestural units.

RT: To what extent do you think the notion of gesture is ineradicably linked with certain inherited emotional responses?

BF: Absolutely, which is why I think it's rather unfruitful for us to argue about the relevance of this or that gestural type. On the whole I espouse, with certain reservations, the idea of pluralism, and the *ideal*, also, of pluralism in contemporary stylistic thinking. I would not try to impose what some people seem to be desiring most ardently: some sort of generalised, so-called 'common musical language'. I think this would be an appalling and arbitrary concept. I have seen in the case of some so-called 'schools' which have been built in the past few years that this does indeed lead to a certain communality of style, but only on the most primitive of levels. The communality of style serves to eliminate many of those differential aspects which might have produced richness and a possible individual creative urge for each particular composer. And it seems to me that plurality of style, or the concept of pluralism in style, is in no way contradictory to the sort of principle to which I hold firm. And it seems to me that it is only by accepting surface gestural differentiation—pluralism—can one hope to eliminate most of these rather unfruitful arguments about common language and comprehensibility.

RT: Coming back to gesture in your own work, it seems to me that it is obviously necessary for you, in a work like *Carceri d'invenzione I*, to begin with something that has enormous developmental potential . . .

BF: Absolutely . . .

RT: . . . but is also very much 'a gesture' as such—that is to say, a gesture in the sense of being an extremely clearly focused musical idea, which draws attention to the piece. To lay out a set of propositions, one must be concerned with gestures.

BF: This is true: I think there's no point in presenting something you intend to use in a tentative way. If it's going to be used as a basis for enhanced figural deployment of parametric information, you can't present something which itself is too weak to provide the parameters with some conflict. If they're going to escape, they've got to generate enough energy to escape the confining gravitational walls of the gesture itself, and break out in differing directions. If the gesture itself is too weak to contain them to a significant degree, then their escape of the gesture, their expansion in conceptual space, will not itself seem significant.

RT: When you mark the opening section of *Carceri I* 'brilliant and vulgar', that in a sense must also relate back to an *Affektenlehre*: there must be in your mind the notion that this kind of gesture is innately both 'brilliant' and 'vulgar', and will be received by other people as such—not because they'll say, 'Ah, that's brilliant and vulgar', but in the more sublimated way that one normally hears music.

BF: In fact it was described in one review, I recall, as 'crass'.

RT: Well, actually I don't even find it particularly vulgar (or maybe I just like that kind of vulgarity): it's very strident, very hard-edged, and it's also very much a 'listen-to-me!' gesture, I think.

BF: Well, also of course for subcutaneous reasons. It

being the piece that follows *Superscriptio* in the same cycle, I had to use the piccolo as the connecting element. At the same time I had to show, again emblematically, the idea of extremes, by taking the relatively low extreme of the trombone, and the high extreme of the piccolo, playing the basic interval, which runs through all the pieces in varying ways—the tritone (and the diminished 7th chord). Using the same playing technique, the fluttertongue at the dynamic extreme (very loud) was an attempt, as it were, to hold the piece together, while creating the feeling that the middle, the empty middle, was a tremendously powerful force wanting to push these two extremes right out of the piece altogether. So already I was trying to develop a tremendous amount of energy, which immediately, via the parametric levels, attempting to escape from both the rigid constriction and the tremendous force simultaneously, allowed the piece to explode into its own future.

So this opening gesture was not just a dramatic gesture to get people's attention, although of course the hortatory function cannot be entirely discounted! it is a bit like banging a bass drum. Nevertheless it did have a very important figural function for me. To be even more banally concrete, the fluttertongue is one of the basic figural devices which is employed a great deal in that particular material; the piccolo, trombone, and piano are important constants in defining that material at times when it has been superimposed with other materials. And the emptiness of that middle space itself, via its proper negative, also becomes parametrically important in two ways. That is, when the other wind instruments enter, they come in exactly that area which the piccolo and trombone did not fill, with suave and flowing material. On the other hand, whereas the piccolo and trombone remain largely at the extremes, the piano, which is first of all at the extremes with the trombone and piccolo, gradually becomes denser and denser in its writing. Instead of just basic two-part writing it becomes very dense: five- or six-part chords moving towards the centre of the keyboard, so that it too comes to fill that empty space. And this has a reflection much further forward in the piece, at the end of the first major part, the piano solo and the brass 'bangs' with the drums, where the piano does exactly the same thing again; moving from a very wide distribution of pitches, it comes—exactly like at the end of *Lemma-Icon-Epigram*—to this interlocked-hands cluster. So the whole thing is being 'imprisoned' more and more by these forces. If I were just doing it as a dramatic gesture, I believe that these forces would seem very implausible as entities, whereas by simultaneously *figurally* interpreting certain gestural units on several levels, through temporal and perceptual space, into the future, I believe I authenticate and validate these particular dramatic gestural devices as—what shall we say?—coherent definitions of lines of force.

RT: Again, let's take the opening of *Lemma-Icon-Epigram*. From your point of view it may be a sort of 'anti-material', but it's still very much a gesture, in the sense that one hears this rapid sequence of notes, rather high up, and one's immediate response is, 'What is this?' And before one has had time to work out exactly what it is—it's a sort of 'tangled' material, in a way—just as you're trying to disentangle it, it retangles itself. It may be 'neutral', in a certain way, but nevertheless there is a certain gestural content in that, I would say, as there needs to be to draw one's attention.

BF: Sure! Yes, obviously the gestural content of the beginning was conscious for me, although I started

off with a very abstract series of pitches. The moment I had decided on octave registers for the pitches, and decided that I would keep the repeated pitches that turned up, there was a great deal of gesturality involved. Nevertheless, the figurational aspect of that initial material was less significant in the very first gestural appearance than in the second that immediately follows, because there we are already showing possible parametric expansional techniques, but at the same time, we are demonstrating the actual constriction of the original. So at the same time as freeing itself from this space, it is reminding us what the original space was.

RT: Precisely by omitting it.

BF: And that's what I mean by parametric lines of force: tendential lines of force, which are flowing in various directions all the time, and which validate individual gestures in respect of their predecessors or successors.

What I insist on is this: that whatever stylistic exterior one employs for one's music, the interior concept needs to be defined diachronically: that is, not in terms of your relationship to a large-scale history (although that has to be thought through too), but through the way the paths, particular elements, and vocables in one's personal musical environment develop, either within one piece (in which case you have to organise it very demonstratively by deconstructing the piece within itself, and by presenting its elements to us as part of the development process), or by allowing these things to expand from piece to piece in one's own *oeuvre*, to enrich one another, and to take up new combinations. And this can only be

done by parametric expansion, as opposed to gestural relationship; and the gesture then is, in a sense, subsumed to the lines of force which are demonstrated by the new combinatorial potentials of the parametric subcomponents themselves. And it seems to me, therefore, that whatever style one writes in, one needs to have this continuity of diachronic consciousness, which one attributes to, and from which grow, all the auto-history of generation of each of the vocables we employ. We have to validate them in personal historical terms, our own personal historical terms, and those of the vocables themselves. And I think this is impossible in styles which in themselves employ large percentages of linguistic discrepancy.

¹ Joel Bons, 'Intervista a Brian Ferneyhough', *Quaderni della Civica Scuola di Musica, Milano*, anno iii, no.8 (1983), pp. 7-25.

² Jorge Luis Borges, 'Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*', *Labyrinths*, trans. D. Yates and J. Irby (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), pp. 62-71.

³ Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana, 1973), p. 259.

⁴ Compare Walter Benjamin's use of the term 'aura' in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', *Illuminations*, pp. 219-53. For example, 'We define the aura [of natural objects] as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be.' (p. 224).

⁵ The reference is to the opening of the fourth movement of Boulez's work, 'Commentaire II de "Bourreaux de solitude" '.

⁶ Wolfgang Rihm's *Ohne Titel: '5. Streichquartett'* was given its première in Brussels on 9 December 1983.



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