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# Brian Ferneyhough's *Transit*, the London Sinfonietta, and the emergence of complexity in 1977

## Introduction

'Who is Brian Ferneyhough? You may well ask.' So begins the first significant piece of journalistic recognition Ferneyhough's music received in Britain, a feature article published in November 1976 by leading music critic and modernist cheerleader Peter Heyworth.<sup>1</sup> The article was published in Heyworth's regular column for *The Observer*, a few weeks after his return to London following the Venice Biennale in 1976, where Ferneyhough had two concerts dedicated to his music.<sup>2</sup> Heyworth, clearly, had not heard of Ferneyhough before his Venetian encounter; but he could feel confident asking this question of a British readership without facing the charge of ignorance since, as he rightly assumed, except for a small corner of the London classical-music world nobody knew about Ferneyhough. Before he left London in 1969 his music had been programmed in London college concerts, which received attention in the corners of some London-based national newspapers; but he was essentially anonymous for British critics until Heyworth wrote 'A Venice Discovery'.<sup>3</sup> Although Heyworth admitted to an experience of 'insularity' in the company of critics from the French, Italian and German periodicals, no doubt

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Heyworth, 'Venice Discovery', *The Observer*, 14 November 1976, 27.

<sup>2</sup> The concerts took place on 25 and 28 October 1976.

<sup>3</sup> The list of those who knew Ferneyhough and his music would certainly have included: the London Sinfonietta players and staff who toured France in 1975; Stephen Plaistow at the BBC; Jonson Dyer, James Erber and others at the publisher Edition Peters; and Brigitte Schiffer, London reporter for the German journal *Melos*; and going further back, those such as Finnissy and others related to the later iterations of the Wardour Castle gatherings. (See Michael Hooper, 'Wardour Castle Summer School', <<https://wardourcastlesummerschool.wordpress.com>> (accessed 16 January 2019). He was not therefore a complete unknown even though his music had remained basically unperformed in Britain. *Coloratura* (1966) for oboe and piano, and *Cassandra's dream song* (1970) were in fact both heard in 1976 at the Park Lane Group Young Artists Series, but they were largely unnoticed by critics: Andrew Clements wrote in July 1977 that 'the only performances London can claim were of *Coloratura* for oboe and piano, and *Cassandra's dream song* [sic] for solo flute, both at last year's Park Lane Group Young Artists Series. Until the forthcoming commission the BBC had neglected him most fearfully. Surely one of his works could have found a place in their winter Round House series before now?' (Andrew Clements, 'Brian Ferneyhough', *Music and Musicians* (July 1977) [n.p.]. Clipping held by: London, Edition Peters, Ferneyhough, Sonatas for String Quartet.)

compounded by his own status as a prominent and vocal supporter of Boulez in London,<sup>4</sup> he was quick to remind readers that ‘Continental, who tend to look for echoes of what is afoot on the mainland when they seek signs of creative life on our misty island, have not always been perceptive about English music.’<sup>5</sup> And yet on this occasion Heyworth found Ferneyhough’s reputation to be fully deserved, noting that his music was, crucially, ‘as remote from trends on the Continent as it is from anything that is going on in his homeland.’ Ferneyhough, in other words, lived up to the critical hype in Venice precisely because his music existed beyond the boundary that Heyworth had taken that hype to represent: Ferneyhough was indeed, in the words of one (unnamed) critic there, ‘one of the great visionaries of our time’.<sup>6</sup>

In the following year, 1977, Ferneyhough had two major works performed in London for the first time since he left to study with Klaus Huber in Basel, in 1969. At around 45- and 40-minutes duration respectively, the *Sonatas for String Quartet* (1967) was performed in April by the Swiss-based Berne Quartet at the ICA (Institute of Contemporary Arts),<sup>7</sup> followed in November by *Transit* (1972–74), a work for chamber orchestra and six solo voices, performed by the London Sinfonietta at the Queen Elizabeth Hall with Ferneyhough conducting.<sup>8</sup> (The Berne Quartet stayed on to record the *Sonatas* for RCA’s Red Label in April, while the Sinfonietta and soloists reconvened in January 1978 to record *Transit* for Decca’s Headline label,<sup>9</sup> this time under

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<sup>4</sup> Writing in 1990, and reflecting on the polarization between Brian Ferneyhough and John Adams in the 1980s, Bayan Northcott recounts Heyworth’s position as follows: ‘One critic who seemed in no doubt where he stood in all this was Peter Heyworth of *The Observer*, when he rose after the first movement of John Adams’s large-scale orchestral work *Harmonielehre* at the 1987 Huddersfield Festival of Contemporary Music and, crying “Forgery, absolute forgery!”, strode out of the hall. A work composed as recently as 1985 yet conflating post- Wagnerian harmonies and Sibelian processes under the pretext of the New Tonality was hardly likely to please this country’s most persistent advocate for both Boulez and Ferneyhough.’ (Bayan Northcott, ‘Standing innovation’, *The Independent*, Weekend Arts Page, 24 March 1990, 33.)

<sup>5</sup> Heyworth, ‘Venice Discovery’.

<sup>6</sup> As I show below, this visionary claim was attributed to the Biennale the following year in the London Sinfonietta’s promotional material. However, in ‘Venice Discovery’ Heyworth begins: ‘I arrived in Venice the other week for a couple of Biennale concerts devoted to works by ‘one of the great visionaries of our time,’ as a Venetian critic has hailed him, unable even to pronounce his name’.

<sup>7</sup> Hereafter, *Sonatas*. The concert took place on 17 April 1977.

<sup>8</sup> 16 November 1977.

<sup>9</sup> The Decca recording, underwritten by the composer’s publisher, later won the 1979 Koussevitzky International Record Award for the best new orchestral work to receive its premiere recording in 1978.

the baton of Elgar Howarth, of ‘Manchester School’ fame.<sup>10</sup>) Although the ‘hastily arranged’ London performance of the *Sonatas* at the ICA generated enthusiastic responses from those reporters who made it along,<sup>11</sup> it was the Sinfonietta’s performance of *Transit* that was viewed as the major coup—it certainly resulted in many more reports, many of them lengthy, from the London critics.<sup>12</sup> Thanks to both the technical standard of its players and the commitment to new music for which the Sinfonietta were renowned, London critics, in the words of one sub-editor, finally had the opportunity to ‘find out about’ a British composer who had lived ‘in self-imposed exile’ and for whom Heyworth’s review the previous year was one of only a handful of available reports.<sup>13</sup>

The coverage of *Transit* was boosted significantly by its position as the first event in the Sinfonietta’s much-celebrated tenth-anniversary season at London’s Southbank. During its first decade the Sinfonietta had developed a reputation across Europe as a specialist contemporary music ensemble-cum-orchestra explicitly committed to the promotion of twentieth-century classics, modern masterworks and new commissions.<sup>14</sup> In its birthday concert in January 1978 its status as a champion of postwar modernism could hardly have been more clearly signalled: the programme contained works by two of the orchestra’s favourites, Birtwistle and Berio, alongside

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<sup>10</sup> Howarth had been due to conduct the premiere in Royan, but withdrew due to illness. Ferneyhough was thus drafted in for his conducting debut out of necessity. Later correspondence with Jonathan Harvey held by the Paul Sacher Stiftung suggests he was far from comfortable in this role. More recently, he has reflected that: ‘the performances I conducted of *Transit* [...] were important to me because they marked the end of my public appearances as a conductor. As a chronic narcoleptic and cataplectic from the age of 20, I could no longer risk attacks on-stage. Even public acknowledgement of performances was a risky business until the late 80s, when medical control became a practical proposition. All my early public appearances took place under this shadow.’ (Brian Ferneyhough. Correspondence with the author, January 2010.) In 1976, for example, Ferneyhough was one of five conductors involved in the first performances of *Firecycle Beta* that took place in Venice and Donaueschingen.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Clements, ‘Brian Ferneyhough’, July 1977. Clements noted: ‘perhaps it was inevitable that Brian Ferneyhough would eventually have a major work performed in London at a hastily arranged concert in a woefully inadequate hall [...]’ For a history of the ICA prior to the 1970s see Anne Massey and Gregor Muir, *Institute of Contemporary Arts 1946–1968* (London, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> The recordings generated another layer of reception, including in the USA. The precise circumstances of their production remain to be researched, and for this reason they do not feature prominently in what follows.

<sup>13</sup> The quotation is from: Nicolas Soames, ‘A chance to find out about Ferney—who?’, *Evening Standard*, 15 November 1977, 10.

<sup>14</sup> See David Wright’s characterization of the Sinfonietta’s ‘repertory model’ in David C. H Wright, ‘The London Sinfonietta: 1968–2004’, *Twentieth-Century Music*, 2 (2005), 109–136.

pieces by Lutoslawski and Michael Tippett.<sup>15</sup> In part because of this approach the Sinfonietta enjoyed vital support from both the London critics and the wider arts establishment upon whose funding its British activities were almost wholly dependent.<sup>16</sup> It could also count on endorsements from starry international names associated with the modernist avant-garde, including Berio, Boulez, Carter, Henze, Maxwell-Davies, Ligeti, Stockhausen, Xenakis and many others.<sup>17</sup>

In many ways, Ferneyhough, *Transit* and the Sinfonietta were well matched. In *Transit* Ferneyhough presents performers with aspects of metrically and instrumentally ‘complex’ writing in the context of a conventional, linear form demarcated by clear subsections defined by specific combinations of voices, instruments or both. Within this overarching structure there are numerous instances of given material where instrumentalists, often as soloists, are required to extemporize or to choose freely within given limits. In both respects *Transit* presented the Sinfonietta with an opportunity to showcase the virtuosity of its players; furthermore, the call for additional singers lent support to its claims to be flexible enough in personnel to adapt to the larger challenges posed by contemporary repertoire,<sup>18</sup> and with Ferneyhough booked to conduct, the ensemble could again boast of its history of presenting the most authoritative and engaging

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<sup>15</sup> The programme consisted of the world premiere of Birtwistle’s *Carmen Arcadiae Mechanicae Perpetuum* (1978); Berio’s *Differenze* (1958–59) and ‘*points on the curve to find ...*’ (1974); Tippett’s *Songs for Dov* (1970) and Lutoslawski’s, *Preludes and Fugues* (1972). The concert also featured an early performance by the rising star of the conducting world, Simon Rattle, who led Tippett’s *Songs for Dov*.

<sup>16</sup> On 20 September 1982, at a special press conference, Vyner said: ‘A constant attempt is made to produce performances of the highest artistic standards and those of us connected with the London Sinfonietta have been enormously encouraged by the praise given us by the press.’ (London, Victoria & Albert Museum Archive, Arts Council of Great Britain, ACGB/50/228 (London Sinfonietta, 1974–85), Michael Vyner’s speech, ‘London Sinfonietta Press Conference, 20 September 1982’, 2.) After their tenth-anniversary birthday concert Paul Griffiths called them ‘our most essential orchestra’. (Paul Griffiths, ‘London Sinfonietta’, *The Times*, 25 January 1978, 13.)

<sup>17</sup> For example, an extensive list of congratulatory messages (and not only from self-avowed vanguardists) was included in the centrefold of the tenth anniversary brochure. As the correspondence between the ensemble and the Arts Council of Great Britain reveals the Sinfonietta were quick to draw upon such endorsements whenever its semi-permanent state of financial precarity demanded it.

<sup>18</sup> In 1982 Vyner also said: ‘The flexibility of the orchestra is one of its greatest assets, as it allows us to meet the needs of the composer. It allows us to perform works written for an enormous variety of instrumentations and, as you know, one of the great points of departure for the 20th century composer has been his use of different combinations of instruments – some for very small groups like ‘Pierrot Lunaire’ or ‘The Soldier’s Tale’; some large like Stravinsky’s *Agon* and Tippett’s *Concerto for Orchestra*.’ (ACGB/50/228 (London Sinfonietta, 1974–85), Michael Vyner’s speech, ‘London Sinfonietta Press Conference, 20 September 1982’, 1.)

interpretations of living music.<sup>19</sup> In fact the Sinfonietta had given the world-premiere performance of *Transit* in 1975 at the Twelfth International Festival of Contemporary Arts in Royan, France—the same festival date that saw Ferneyhough’s *Sonatas* given its first complete performance by the Berne Quartet.<sup>20</sup>

Although both the Royan and London performances of *Transit* are cited for this very reason as key moments in Ferneyhough’s breakthrough, the historical importance and contextualization of the piece’s performance and reception has yet to be examined in detail.<sup>21</sup> Where *Transit* has been discussed, scholars have focused primarily on creative process, analysis, and aesthetics, approaching the work usually as one stage in a wider overview of Ferneyhough’s music.<sup>22</sup> A prominent question in this scholarship concerns the position of *Transit* within the historiography of art music between the end of the 1960s and the end of the 1970s, in which it is typically framed as the beginning of a new stage marked by increased complexity.<sup>23</sup> In this article, however, I want to approach *Transit* and its boundaries in another way: not as a work, but as a key performance in the emergence of Ferneyhough’s reputation as a composer of ‘complex’ music. More precisely, my central aim is to document the impact that the reception of *Sonatas* and *Transit* had upon Ferneyhough’s reputation in 1977 as a means of isolating the cultural

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<sup>19</sup> For example: ‘The orchestra has been fortunate enough to attract some of today’s most fascinating composers to write for, and conduct, the ensemble. Concerts directed by major composers have usually had considerable public appeal and have proved to be rewarding and stimulating experiences for the players and the organisation as a whole.’ (ACGB/50/228 (London Sinfonietta, 1974–85), Michael Vyner, in London Sinfonietta, ‘1945→’ (1980) [Concert booklet].)

<sup>20</sup> The Sinfonietta were in discussions with Halbreich about performing *Transit* by May 1974. (ACGB/49/108 (Awards to Artists), Michael Vyner to Richard Lawrence [correspondence]. 24 May 1974.) The Royan concert took place on 23 March 1975.

<sup>21</sup> The Royan performance of *Transit* is mentioned alongside an overview of many early writings in Ian Pace, ‘Positions, Methodologies and Aesthetics in the Published Discourse about Brian Ferneyhough: A Critical Study’, *Search: Journal for New Music and Culture*, 11 (2015), 1–73. <http://www.searchnewmusic.org/index11.html> (accessed 31 January 2018).). Lois Fitch notes that earlier performances at Royan in 1974 ‘can be described as Ferneyhough’s ‘breakthrough’’. (Lois Fitch, *Brian Ferneyhough* (Bristol, 2013), 21.)

<sup>22</sup> A notable exception here is Malcolm Barry, ‘Transit’, *Contact* 20 (Autumn 1979), 12–14, as discussed by Pace, ‘Positions, Methodologies and Aesthetics’, 5–6. Nicholas Darbon, Francis Courtot and Fitch have in their own ways addressed the piece in terms of generative compositional processes, formal organization and philosophical influences. See Francis Courtot, *Brian Ferneyhough: Figures et Dialogues* (Paris, 2009); Nicolas Darbon, *Brian Ferneyhough et la Nouvelle Complexité* (Paris, 2008); Fitch, *Brian Ferneyhough*.

<sup>23</sup> For an overview of different approaches see Pace, ‘Positions, Methodologies and Aesthetics’.

politics and aesthetics of modernism surrounding that reception, specifically in relation to *Transit*.<sup>24</sup> Underpinning this aim is a simple two-part question: how was Ferneyhough's music understood by British critics in 1977, and what do the details of its performance reveal about the function and emergence of complexity in British critical discourse at the end of the 1970s?

### **Approaching the emergence of complexity in 1977**

On the face of it, the critical response to Ferneyhough in London in 1977 appears to play out as a dress rehearsal for his subsequent historical persona, which is to say his prominent and much-disputed position vis à vis New Complexity in the standard historical account of 'twentieth-century music' *after* Modernism. The initial British reception certainly exemplifies Philip Rupprecht's observation, apropos the postwar 'Manchester Group', that: 'a critical line soon emerges, comprising first reactions to a concert premiere; later writings typically repeat or elaborate (but only rarely refute) earlier impressions.'<sup>25</sup> And as in Rupprecht's study of polarized and polarizing responses to 'angry young men' in 1950s Britain,<sup>26</sup> here too the 'time-lag' motif (the notion that British musical life was reluctant and late to engage with the latest vanguard innovations) forms an important discursive trope, one used by the vast majority of critics in Britain to position Ferneyhough as a curiously un-British British composer.<sup>27</sup> This impression only hardened in 1979 with the notorious first performance in Glasgow of the BBC commission *La terre est un homme* (1979) for large orchestra: the performance was so unsatisfactory to

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<sup>24</sup> My approach differs to Pace in this respect. Despite his detailed account of emerging trends in the early writings produced throughout the 1970s, his is not the kind of microhistory that underpins the approach here. See Pace, 'Positions, Methodologies and Aesthetics', 1–7.

<sup>25</sup> Philip Rupprecht, *British Musical Modernism: The Manchester Group and their Contemporaries* (Cambridge, 2015), 443.

<sup>26</sup> Allusions or direct references to working-class backgrounds are no less relevant in understanding the biographies of Brian Ferneyhough and Michael Finnissy, just as they evidently are in the case of Rupprecht's careful treatment of this topic in his discussions of Harrison Birtwistle and Peter Maxwell-Davies. It remains for such work to be undertaken.

<sup>27</sup> Indeed, such is the repetition of this formulation — the 'time-lag' trope or motif — in the British journalistic and scholarly reception of Ferneyhough's music since 1977 that to truly document its occurrence would require a separate, long and banal compendium of journalistic and scholarly reception. The ontological or historical veracity of a time-lag is a moot point in an investigation of the politics of cultural production. Such questions are outlined in Annika Forkert, 'British Musical Modernism Defended Against its Devotees' (Ph.D. diss., Royal Holloway College, University of London, 2014).

Ferneyhough that he refused to allow the BBC to broadcast the recording.<sup>28</sup> By 1982, when the Sinfonietta performed *Carceri d'Invenzione I* (1982) for chamber orchestra, critics had developed the idea that Ferneyhough represented a figurehead for a new school of British complexity. Andrew Clements' comments are typical: 'ironically, even in London, there is a definite post-Ferneyhough school, writing beautifully laid-out scores that are extremely difficult to play.'<sup>29</sup> By the time of Richard Toop's important essay 'Four Facets of the New Complexity', published in 1988,<sup>30</sup> the antagonism between British music and complexity had long since solidified, with the Sinfonietta itself viewed as part of the problem.<sup>31</sup> More recently, Lois Fitch has cited Toop's account of British parochialism approvingly in order to account for a 'peculiarly deep-seated British suspicion of intellectualism'.<sup>32</sup>

In part because of the lasting impact of this antagonism, it is important to emphasize that the performance and reception history of the *Sonatas* and *Transit* in 1977 do not straightforwardly support a narrative of neglect—even as, with the benefit of hindsight, they are clearly bound up in its production.<sup>33</sup> For this reason alone, the early performances and recordings of the *Sonatas*

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<sup>28</sup> The script for the radio announcer reads: 'Despite the earnest endeavours of the members of the [Scottish National] orchestra and the untiring energies of its management to trace some of the exotic instruments that Ferneyhough requires [a contrabass clarinet], the composer feels that the performance does not truly represent his intentions. So he asked the BBC not to transmit the recording. With respect and not a little regret, the BBC has bowed to his wishes.' (Caversham, BBC Written Archives Centre, SC118/107/1, 'Musica Nova'.)

<sup>29</sup> Andrew Clements, 'Keeping a Distance', *The Observer*, 21 February 1982, 30. The byline reads: 'Andrew Clements on a leading British composer who has polarised critical opinion.'

<sup>30</sup> The article featured the composers Michael Finnissy, James Dillon, Chris Dench and Richard Barrett. In it, Toop claimed that 'alongside Birtwistle and Ferneyhough, they represent the few possible sources of light within a scene otherwise dominated by (to coin another phrase) "The New Capitulationism".' Richard Toop, 'Four Facets of the New Complexity', *Contact* 32 (1988), 4–51, at 4. (Toop's article is both influential and widely discussed in Darbon, *Brian Ferneyhough et la Nouvelle Complexité*.)

<sup>31</sup> The year after Toop's essay Steve Martland, hardly a composer aligned with complexity, chastized the Sinfonietta warning that it was 'in danger of becoming at least as much a mausoleum as the 19<sup>th</sup>-century symphony orchestra'. Martland took its lack of support for the music of John Tavener as 'some indication perhaps of how that orchestra under new management has changed its radical idealism to an institutional conservatism of utter blandness.' (Steve Martland, 'Extreme Conditions, Extreme Responses', in Michael Finnissy and Roger Wright (eds.), *New Music '89* (Oxford, 1989), 11–15, at 13.) Another important event in this respect is Michael Finnissy's experience with the Sinfonietta during the rehearsals and performance of his piece *Alongside* (1980) in 1980. (See 'Conversations with Michael Finnissy', in Henrietta Brougham, Christopher Fox and Ian Pace (eds.), *Uncommon Ground: The Music of Michael Finnissy* (Aldershot, 1998), 12–13.)

<sup>32</sup> Fitch, *Brian Ferneyhough*, 3.

<sup>33</sup> Pace complicates the notion that Ferneyhough was uniquely neglected in Britain by positing a more widespread neglect across Europe (Pace, 'Positions, Methodologies and Aesthetics', 1–7). I wish instead to complicate neglect as



and *Transit* are of interest. But they are also important historiographically: in a narrow sense, both works were more prominent in 1977 than the now-iconic and more frequently discussed solo pieces that he composed during the same period—namely *Unity Capsule* (1975) for solo flute and *Time and Motion Study II* (1975–76) for solo amplified cello and tape, works which more obviously exemplify (and in a more concentrated form) the famed complexity which Anders Førisdal has recently termed ‘radically idiomatic instrumental practice’.<sup>34</sup>

More broadly, however, the London performance of *Transit* exists at a point in British history that has traditionally been portrayed as a period of decline and transition, with echoes in the established historiography of ‘twentieth-century music’, too.<sup>35</sup> On the one hand, an awareness of splintering and fragmentation was clearly visible at the time: in 1977, for example—a year that began with the first British performance of Steve Reich’s *Music for Eighteen Musicians*<sup>36</sup>—a terminal diagnosis was put forth by no less a figure than Pierre Boulez. No stranger to the eulogistic mode of critique, he set the context for the launch of IRCAM by claiming that: ‘we are in the midst of a historical impasse [...]. [A] certain kind of cultural synthesis is dead, and with it the high art of our tradition is dead’.<sup>37</sup> Introducing Boulez’s remarks, the critic Robert Maycock

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such. As an indication of the nuance required see Rupprecht, *British Musical Modernism*; and Heather Weibe, ‘Confronting Opera in the 1960s: Birtwistle’s *Punch and Judy*’, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 142 (2017), 173–204. Also important here are Arnold Whittall’s many perceptive ‘pluralist’ interventions on the topic. For the most recent example see Arnold Whittall, ‘Foundations and Fixations: Continuities in British Musical Modernism’, in Björn Heile and Charles Wilson (eds.), *The Routledge Research Companion to Modernism in Music* (Abingdon, 2019), 353–378.

<sup>34</sup> Anders Førisdal, ‘Radically Idiomatic Instrument Practice in Works by Brian Ferneyhough’, in Erling E. Gulbrandsen and Julian Johnson (eds.), *Transformations of Musical Modernism* (Cambridge, 2015), 279–298.

<sup>35</sup> The 1970s has suffered notoriously from *post-hoc* declinism, perhaps more than any decade in the historiography of postwar Britain. On declinism and British nationalism in the 1970s specifically see David Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation: a Twentieth-Century History* (London, 2018), 379–402.

<sup>36</sup> The concert took place on 30 January 1977 at the Roundhouse in London. See Peter Heyworth, ‘Mr Reich’s Revolution’, *The Observer*, 6 February 1977, 30. Heyworth reported a ‘packed Roundhouse’ and appeared to base much of his article on the pre-concert talk between Reich and Michael Nyman.

<sup>37</sup> Pierre Boulez, cited in Robert Maycock, ‘New Music: Finding a Sense of Direction’, *Classical Music Weekly*, 30 July 1977, 2. (Until September 1978 when the move was made to fortnightly publication, the title was *Classical Music Weekly*. This became *Classical Music and Record Reviews* for a short time before a shift to the more widely known *Classical Music*. Hereafter I use the latter throughout.)

raised ‘the question [...] most often thought *and least often asked outright*: “who knows where it’s all going now?”’<sup>38</sup>

But on the other hand it is hard to escape the fact that British critics, safely shielded from the fringes of musical innovation in Britain, had only just started to notice the limitations of a linear narrative. The solution subsequently offered by often-naïve references to ‘postmodernism’ was still a decade away; it was only as the 1990s came into view that the term ‘postmodernism’ reach a critical mass in British newspaper reports, as a new generation of composers, performers, critics, and others educated in the 1960s and 1970s began to establish reputations.<sup>39</sup> Julian Johnson has remarked that ‘at a distance of several decades, we are more likely to talk about a continuing late-modernity than a post-modernity’, and indeed we are. But this does not diminish the particularly heightened ‘sense of an ending’ which, while not exclusive to it, particularly marks the anxieties around contemporary music in Britain, and elsewhere, from the mid-1970s through to the early 1990s.<sup>40</sup> In many respects British critics in this period were caught at the beginning of a transition between one way of understanding modernism and another, surely the very definition of being stuck between a rock and a hard place. From the perspective of the present the spectre of endings and beginnings is historically inescapable just as they both remain problematical historiographically—almost intractably so.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Maycock, ‘Finding a sense of direction’ [Emphasis added.]

<sup>39</sup> See for example Bayan Northcott, ‘Standing Innovation’, *The Independent*, 24 March 1990, Weekend Arts, 33; Andrew Clements, ‘Can’t tell Minimalism from Post-Minimalism? Here’s your guide to Post-war Music’, *Guardian*, 30 Sep. 1994, 15. Some years later, Bayan Northcott placed New Complexity, minimalism and neo-romanticism alongside one another and asked: ‘Whatever happened to modernism—that spirit of radical renewal which set the pre-First World War Viennese bourgeoisie whistling on their latchkeys at every dissonance of Schoenberg and the French beau monde rioting in the aisles to the beat of The Rite of Spring? Some would assert that, despite manifold backslidings—starting with the later Schoenberg and Stravinsky themselves—it continued to evolve in the post-Second World War avant-garde period of Boulez and Stockhausen and now, with the rise of Brian Ferneyhough as father-figure, manifests itself through the composers of the so-called ‘New Complexity’.’ (Bayan Northcott, ‘When Progress was Still the Order of the Day’, *The Independent*, 20 February 1998, 19.)

<sup>40</sup> Julian Johnson, *Out of Time: Music and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford, 2015), 3. The phrase ‘Sense of an Ending’ appears in Johnson, and is a reference to Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford, 1966).

<sup>41</sup> Chowrimootoo neatly encapsulates the problem when he writes that ‘[t]he historiographical problem with which scholars now struggle is also a historical problem’, which is to say that the effects of canonical modernism should not be marginalized from historical accounts — even if (or especially because), in the words of Ben Earle, ‘academic modernism of the cold-war period licensed unpleasant exclusionary attitudes’. (Christopher Chowrimootoo,

It is worth emphasizing, then, that the present study of *Transit* is framed by a wider project that investigates the relationship between the canonization of twentieth-century music and the emergence of the name and grouping ‘New Complexity’ during a period in which the ‘hegemonic’ or ‘major’ modernist historiography of postwar music took hold in Britain just as (or perhaps because) the compositional authority of serial and post-serial tendencies was ebbing away.<sup>42</sup> By focusing on the way in which *Transit* and Ferneyhough’s early British reception was bound up with the literal and imagined aging of the modernist avant-garde, I therefore undertake a series of close readings—on neglect, finance, confusion, tradition, and virtuosity—that together shed new light on the ways in which the London Sinfonietta, Ferneyhough, his publisher, key critics, and other commentators participated (intentionally or not) in the production, and thus emergence, of complexity during 1977. The emergence, though, is not only—nor even primarily—about complexity, still less the origins of ‘New Complexity’. In this respect, I follow Foucault’s dictum, albeit in a narrow way politically and musically, that ‘[w]hat is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity.’<sup>43</sup> Rather, the production of complexity is about the endgame of musical modernism and the historical, cultural, and practical circumstances that shaped how ‘twentieth-century music’, and thus complexity, was both produced and productive there.<sup>44</sup> That is to say, that with a focus on the late seventies in London, the question of

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‘Reviving the Middlebrow, or: Deconstructing Modernism from the Inside’, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 139 (2014), 187–193, at 190; Ben Earle, ‘Modernism and Reification in the Music of Frank Bridge’, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 141 (2016), 335–402, at 378.)

<sup>42</sup> In her recent critique of modernist hegemony and studies of ‘twentieth-century music’, Marina Frolova-Walker states a debt to Richard Taruskin’s critique of propaganda-musicology uninterested in the elitism of ‘elite modernism’. (Marina Frolova-Walker, ‘An Inclusive History for a Divided World?’, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 143 (2018), 1–20, at 2–5.) For a theorization of major and minor history see Christopher Chowrimootoo, ‘Britten Minor?: Constructing the Modernist Canon’, *Twentieth-Century Music* 13 (2016), 261–290. For a recent critique of late style relevant to my wider project, see for example Laura Tunbridge, ‘Saving Schubert: The Evasions of Late Style’ in Gordon McMullen and Sam Styles (eds.), *Late Style and its Discontents: Essays in Art, Literature and Music* (Oxford, 2016), 120–130.

<sup>43</sup> Michel Foucault, ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’, in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY, 1977), 142.

<sup>44</sup> A prominent, perhaps predictable feature in the interviews that begin Toop’s ‘Four Facets’ essay is the vehement rejection and disavowal which greets the term ‘New Complexity’ and its implied grouping. In the years that followed

complexity, for all the pages and heated exchange that it has generated,<sup>45</sup> is of far less concern in framing what follows than that other word which most often accompanies it, and to which it is inextricably bound: ‘new’.

The argument proceeds through five sections, which are arranged thematically rather than chronologically. The first, which serves in part as a means of establishing the historical terrain for those for whom it will be unfamiliar, investigates the ways in which a discourse of neglect and complexity framed the promotion and critical response to the *Sonatas* and *Transit* in 1977. The focus on neglect is then developed through an examination of the Sinfonietta and the context in which *Transit* was programmed in London. A third stage explores how a discourse of neglect informed and shaped the language that circulated around the performance of *Transit* to develop a focus on complexity. I then return to Heyworth’s ‘Venice Discovery’ from 1976 and consider the historiography of modernism and canonicity that served to support the claims made for Ferneyhough’s genius, an account in which the earlier *Sonatas* and the ghosts of experimental music are both important. In the fifth and final stage I consider the ways in which the virtuosity detected in the performance reinforced and elided questions of complexity, tradition, and innovation.

## Neglect

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this was accompanied by a suitably vague and conflicting set of explanations as to the term’s origin. For a comprehensive review of the ‘etymological question’ and the wider complexity debate see Pace, ‘Positions, Methodologies and Aesthetics’, 32–38.

<sup>45</sup> Here I would include that work which emphasizes ‘process’ and performer freedom against the dictatorial model of control — ‘terminal complexity’ — propagated by Richard Taruskin (where Taruskin’s account is totemic of a wider misrepresentations of complexity in scholarly and journalistic discourse). (Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music: The Late Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 2010), 475–476.) See especially Stuart Paul Duncan, ‘To Infinity and Beyond: A Reflection on Notation, 1980s Darmstadt, and Interpretational Approaches to the Music of New Complexity’, *Search: Journal for New Music and Culture*, 7 (2010), <http://www.searchnewmusic.org/index7.html> (accessed 31 January 2018); Stuart Paul Duncan, ‘Re-Complexifying the Function(s) of Notation in the Music of Brian Ferneyhough and the “New Complexity”’, *Perspectives of New Music* 48 (2010), 136–172; Lois Fitch *Brian Ferneyhough* (Bristol, 2013), 29–62; Robert Hasegawa, ‘Constraints Systems in Brian Ferneyhough’s Third String Quartet’, in Jonathan Goldman (ed.), *Texts and Beyond: The Process of Music Composition From the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Bologna, 2015), 271–288; Tanja Orning, ‘The Ethics of Performance Practice in Complex Music after 1945’, in Erling E. Gulbrandsen and Julian Johnson (eds.), *Transformations of Musical Modernism* (Cambridge, 2015), 299–318.

Given his reputation as the British critic who discovered Ferneyhough,<sup>46</sup> it is unsurprising that Heyworth devoted considerable attention to the Sinfonietta performance of *Transit* in London. In substance, his review, 'Vivid Voice', bore a striking similarity to his 'Venice Discovery' the year before; but in the space of a year, and with Ferneyhough's reputation as a neglected composer gathering momentum thanks to the Berne Quartet's performance and news of their forthcoming recording, Heyworth's tone had moved the small distance from enthusiastic discovery to evangelistic advocacy.<sup>47</sup> He began by hailing *Transit* as 'by far the most substantial and impressive piece of music to be written by an Englishman of the rising generation for some while', adding, for good measure, that, '[o]utside this country, that claim would be regarded as neither bold nor original.'<sup>48</sup> He went on:

Ferneyhough has for some time been widely regarded as a composer of quite exceptional powers. Only in his native land ... has he been shrugged off as too 'difficult' and expensive to perform. Once again, our musical life has revealed itself as timid and sluggish in the contemporary field. Something new is all right, as long as it doesn't upset established habits of thought or cost a lot.<sup>49</sup>

By positioning Ferneyhough's 'difficult' music against conservative British tastes, Heyworth rearticulated notions of neglect and insularity in which other British critics seem to have been only too happy to indulge. In *Classical Music Weekly*, for example, an earlier preview of the *Transit* performance introduced Ferneyhough as 'a name that is almost unknown in Britain,' adding that 'through a succession of startling premieres at Continental music festivals, [Ferneyhough] is now

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<sup>46</sup> Andrew Clements later recalled that: 'A report by Peter Heyworth in *The Observer* in 1976 was the first most of us had heard of a young English composer'. (Clements, 'Keeping a Distance'.)

<sup>47</sup> Peter Heyworth, 'Vivid Voice', 20 November 1977, 30.

<sup>48</sup> Heyworth, 'Vivid Voice'.

<sup>49</sup> Heyworth, 'Vivid Voice'.

recognized abroad as one of the most imaginative and technically awesome of the younger generation of composers.<sup>50</sup> A variation on the theme appeared in another preview article by Meirion Bowen, who stated that ‘at 34 [Ferneyhough] is still virtually unknown in his homeland, while much of his major work has been heard in Europe.’<sup>51</sup> Like Heyworth, Bowen interpreted this neglect as a matter of personality and culture-clash: ‘[w]hen he decided to go and live more or less permanently in Switzerland and Germany, in 1969, he was merely recognising the inevitable. Ferneyhough and England were turning their backs on each other. For reasons of temperament they were mutually incompatible[:] ... England rejected him and he rejected England.’<sup>52</sup> Adrian Jack, writing in the London edition of *Time Out*, noted that the composer was best known through the elaborate scores that decorated the window of his publisher’s shop front on Wardour Street in Soho,<sup>53</sup> while Nicholas Kenyon, in a review of the *Transit* performance, noted, with a touch of cynicism, that ‘Brian Ferneyhough, the most famous neglected composer of his generation, [had] finally (at the age of 34) achieved an important performance of one of his major works in this country.’<sup>54</sup>

Six months earlier, critics had already taken a very similar stance in their reviews of the *Sonatas* concert, using the fact of Ferneyhough’s neglect in Britain as the introductory, rhetorical foil against which to make sense of the music, and again repeating and thus reinforcing

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<sup>50</sup> Richard Morrison, ‘Balance with Flux: Ferneyhough’s *Transit*’, *Classical Music*, 12 November 1977, 6. (Until September 1978 when the move was made to fortnightly publication, the title was *Classical Music Weekly*. This became *Classical Music and Record Reviews* for a short time before a shift to the more widely known *Classical Music*.)

<sup>51</sup> Meirion Bowen, ‘British Premiere this Week’, *Guardian*, 14 November 1977, 10. (Since this is a preview article the title is, confusingly, indexed by Proquest Historical Newspapers as ‘Review 1 – no title’. I have instead used the editor’s heading as it appears on the original.)

By ‘major work’, Bowen could have referred to *Transit* (for chamber ensemble and six solo voices), *Sonatas for String Quartet*, *Epicycle* (for 20 solo strings), *Firecycle Beta* (for two pianos and orchestra), *Missa Brevis* (for voices) or *Time and Motion Study III* (for voices, percussion and electronics). Ferneyhough had not been a prolific composer; pieces and performances were still relatively few in number and relatively recent in occurrence. Indeed, the biographical note for the British premiere of *Sonatas for String Quartet* states as much: “His output for a composer is relatively small, as might be expected of a composer who takes immense trouble over each composition and the minutest details of it.” See, ‘Brain Ferneyhough’, *Berne String Quartet* [concert programme]. Held by: London, Edition Peters, Ferneyhough, *Sonatas for String Quartet*, Miscellaneous.

<sup>52</sup> Bowen, ‘British Premiere this Week’.

<sup>53</sup> Adrian Jack, ‘With Honour’, *Time Out*, 17 November 1977, 11. (It should be noted that Jack was also at the time director of the music events at the ICA.)

<sup>54</sup> Kenyon, ‘London Sinfonietta: *Transit*’.

Ferneyhough's 'Continental' reputation. Writing in the *Financial Times*, Ronald Crichton remarked: '[i]t is interesting to find a British composer taking his place in the Continental stream, without (judging admittedly from a single hearing of one work) the suspicion of parochialism that still dogs our music; something that only major talents like Tippett or Maxwell-Davies turn to advantage.'<sup>55</sup> Michael Finnissy, familiar with Ferneyhough's work in a way no critic could then rival, wrote '[p]erhaps the forthcoming RCA recording of the *Sonatas* will render Ferneyhough the recognition here which the leading music festivals and organisations in France, Germany and Italy have been awarding him for the last few years, and promote more widespread performance of his music.'<sup>56</sup> Revealingly, the ICA event was even promoted—on behalf of the Hinrichsen Foundation, an organization directly affiliated to Ferneyhough's publisher—as a concert of 'recent Swiss music', presumably on the basis of the Swiss connection between Ferneyhough, his teacher and colleague Klaus Huber, and the Berne Quartet.<sup>57</sup>

The hype led one critic, Kevin Stevens, to reflect later that: 'all the ballyhoo about Brian Ferneyhough's fleeting return to England in November of last year for a performance of his *Transits* [sic] made one instantly suspect a shrewd publisher's attempt to start a bandwagon.'<sup>58</sup> Since press releases are by definition sent to music critics (sent along with copies of scores in the case of *Sonatas* and *Transit*),<sup>59</sup> to feign suspicion was disingenuous to say the least. Ferneyhough

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<sup>55</sup> Ronald Crichton, 'Berne String Quartet', *Financial Times*, 18 April 1977 [n.p.]. Clipping held by: London, Edition Peters, Ferneyhough, *Sonatas* for String Quartet.

<sup>56</sup> Michael Finnissy, 'Ferneyhough's *Sonatas*', *Tempo*, 121 (June 1977), 34-36, at 36.

<sup>57</sup> Set up in 1976, the foundation was the newly formed charitable arm, and 'major beneficial shareholder', of Ferneyhough's publisher Edition Peters in London. According to the Foundation's website, it 'was founded in 1976 by Mrs Carla Eddy Hinrichsen to ensure the continuation of the tradition of supporting contemporary music established by the Hinrichsen family as the proprietors of Edition Peters the music publishers, established more than 200 years ago in the German city of Leipzig. Until 2010 the Hinrichsen Foundation was the beneficial shareholder of Peters Edition Limited, London.' <http://www.hinrichsenfoundation.org.uk/> (accessed 12 March 2018).

<sup>58</sup> Kevin Stevens, 'Ferneyhough', *Records and Recordings* (April 1978), [n.p.]. Clipping held by: London, Edition Peters, Ferneyhough, *Sonatas* for String Quartet: Miscellaneous.

<sup>59</sup> Andrew Clements, for example, complains that he could not read the score at the ICA in April 1977: 'Only the hall — the ICA Theatre — made the event less than totally enjoyable. If concerts have to be held there (and there is nothing remarkable about the acoustics), at least it should be possible to restrain the persistent noises-off of clattering crockery, which make the Round House sound like the British Museum Reading Room, and not to plunge

may have been unheard in Britain but he was not without a publisher there. So, of course, a press release was published on behalf of Edition Peters in London for the ICA concert in April. It read: '[w]idely recognized on the Continent, where he now lives, Ferneyhough has been awarded a string of prestigious prizes but has never previously had a major work performed in England.'<sup>60</sup> The press release also highlighted Ferneyhough's 'tremendously demanding scores', stating that '[h]is output as a composer is relatively small, as might be expected of a composer who takes immense trouble over each composition and the minutest details of it.' In the London concert listings that appeared prominently on the pages of *Time Out* magazine that month, the critic Andrew Clements (another emerging champion of Ferneyhough) reinvented the PR as follows: '[h]is tangled scores are calculated down to the minutest detail, attempting to extract the maximum expressive mileage—the problems he sets his performers are immense.'<sup>61</sup> In the days after the concert Clements noted in the *New Statesman* that, before this performance, 'the myths have grown. His scores look ferociously complex and meticulously notated; the difficulties of performing them and of apprehending them were apparently considerable. But at last we have a chance to assess him.'<sup>62</sup>

Within the short space of six months the roles of critic and promoter had been reversed. When the Sinfonietta reproduced the Biennale's 'visionary' claim on its large promotional leaflet,

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the audience into a stygian gloom that makes it impossible to read either programme or score during performance.' (Andrew Clements, 'Brian Ferneyhough' (July 1977) [n.p.] )

James Erber has recounted how in the days prior to the first London rehearsal of *Transit* he hired a black cab from the office at Edition Peters and frantically hand-delivered copies of the score and parts to numerous critics and performers across London. These included Heyworth and the London-based critic for *Melos* Brigitte Schiffer as well as the performers John Leach (cimbalom) and Barry Guy (double bass). (Email correspondence with the author, December 2018.)

<sup>60</sup> Helen Anderson, 'Sonatas for String Quartet' [press release], Helen Anderson Music Management. Held by: London, Edition Peters, Ferneyhough, Sonatas for String Quartet, Miscellaneous. The additional biography lists the prizes awarded at Gaudeamus festivals from 1968 to 1970 as well as the double prize awarded for *Time and Motion Study III* at the Italian Society for Contemporary Music in 1974; it also lists first performances at the Donaueschingen Festival in 1974, the Royan festivals since 1974 and the two concerts devoted to his music at the Venice Biennale in 1976.

<sup>61</sup> Andrew Clements, 'Music: Classical and Opera [Listings]', *Time Out* (n.d.), 47. (Clements refers to the concert taking place 'this Sunday' (i.e. 17 April 1977).) Clipping held by: London, Edition Peters, Ferneyhough, Sonatas for String Quartet.

<sup>62</sup> Andrew Clements, 'Expatriate', *New Statesman*, 22 April 1977 [n.p.]. Clipping held by: London, Edition Peters, Ferneyhough, Sonatas for String Quartet, Reviews.



poster, and concert brochure for *Transit*'s performance in London, it was accompanied by prominent quotations from both Heyworth and Clements, the latter having in the meantime interviewed Ferneyhough and written a lengthy summary of his music for *Music and Musicians* ahead of the London premiere.<sup>63</sup> Underneath the heading 'the man', the Sinfonietta printed Clements's claim from one of his earlier reviews of the *Sonatas* that Ferneyhough was 'at the very least ... the most accomplished British composer of his generation'.<sup>64</sup> Underneath the heading 'the music', the Sinfonietta cited Heyworth's own Venetian account of the *Sonatas*, reproduced so as to elide distinctions he had been careful to articulate the year before.<sup>65</sup> Originally written as praise for the *Sonatas*, when recontextualized as promotional literature for *Transit*, Heyworth's words became a general endorsement of Ferneyhough's music: '[p]assion and fury, melancholy and lyricism are interwoven into a huge argument to which no detail seems extraneous.'<sup>66</sup> In fact, interested elements of the London audience had had the opportunity to test Heyworth's claim about the *Sonatas* six months earlier at ICA, where the entire programme note for Ferneyhough's quartet was taken verbatim from the two relevant paragraphs of Heyworth's 'Venice Discovery'.<sup>67</sup>

It is not at all surprising that music criticism was turned explicitly into promotion: equivalent forms of endorsement and advocacy—promotional labour—exist across the culture

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<sup>63</sup> Andrew Clements, 'Brian Ferneyhough', *Music and Musicians*, 26, November 1977, 36–39.

<sup>64</sup> London Sinfonietta, London Sinfonietta/*Transit* [concert poster], 16 November 1977. [Emphasis added.] The article in fact ends slightly differently: 'I have no doubt he will prove himself the leading composer of his generation.' (Andrew Clements, 'Expatriate'.)

<sup>65</sup> The details of Heyworth's account in 1976 are documented below in the section on tradition.

<sup>66</sup> London Sinfonietta, London Sinfonietta/*Transit* [concert poster].

<sup>67</sup> Aside from *Transit*, the 45-minute-long *Sonatas* was at that time Ferneyhough's only other work of such extended duration; it was paired alongside *Moteti-Cantiones for String Quartet* by the Swiss composer Klaus Huber, Ferneyhough's former teacher from Basel (and by then, his colleague in Freiburg). The performance was given by the same Swiss-based Berne Quartet which Heyworth had heard in Venice and was promoted — as a concert of 'recent Swiss music' — on behalf of the Hinrichsen Foundation. Set up in 1976, the foundation was the newly formed charitable arm, and 'major beneficial shareholder', of Ferneyhough's publisher Peters Edition in London. Hinrichsen 'was founded in 1976 by Mrs Carla Eddy Hinrichsen to ensure the continuation of the tradition of supporting contemporary music established by the Hinrichsen family as the proprietors of Edition Peters the music publishers, established more than 200 years ago in the German city of Leipzig. Until 2010 the Hinrichsen Foundation was the beneficial shareholder of Peters Edition Limited, London.' <http://www.hinrichsenfoundation.org.uk/>

industry, as Lorraine York demonstrates in her recent study of invisible labour and literary celebrity.<sup>68</sup> Neither is it unusual to find critics regurgitating biographical and programmatic information provided to them by promoters, publishers, and artists, a point that is particularly important where Ferneyhough is concerned.<sup>69</sup> As demonstrated below, selected elements of Ferneyhough's own language (whether drawn from scores, programme notes, or interviews) were a central feature of the London reception of *Transit* in 1977. Nonetheless, by cultivating such impressions, the London Sinfonietta, Heyworth, and Clements were significant initial tastemakers in Britain: with the activity of Ferneyhough's publisher in the background, they set the agenda by amplifying and translating the 'visionary' claims made in Venice into a nationalist narrative that still resonated with the British classical-music world and its audiences at the end of the 1970s, even as the changes at the BBC and Arts Council in the 1960s provided a favourable, almost exclusive environment for the promotion and dissemination of musical modernism.<sup>70</sup> Mundane though some of these finer details may at first appear, they serve to emphasize an important point: that the image of Brian Ferneyhough that developed in Britain from 1977 was produced in such a way as to maximize publicity and cultural prestige, not only for the composer but, crucially, for those performers, ensembles, artists, and commentators associated with his music—ends for which the truisms of complexity and neglect were effective means.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Lorraine York, *Margaret Atwood and the Labour of Literary Creativity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013). Despite pretensions celebrity is of course integral to the production of modernism in earlier periods, too. As Aaron Jaffe notes, 'Prominent modernists' including figures such as Eliot and Pound 'were more canny about fashioning their careers than is often appreciated.' (See Aaron Jaffe, *Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity* (Cambridge, 2005), 3.)

<sup>69</sup> See Pace, 'Positions, Methodologies and Aesthetics'. Charles Wilson's formulation of the rhetoric of autonomy is an important, frequently cited landmark here, while Eric Drott has also shown the powerful ways in which biographical narratives shape and inform the language of music criticism and analysis in the reception of Scelsi's music. See Eric Drott, 'Class, Ideology, and il caso Scelsi', *The Musical Quarterly*, 89 (2006), 80–120; Charles Wilson, 'György Ligeti and the Rhetoric of Autonomy', *Twentieth-Century Music*, 1 (2004), 5–28. On the tendency specifically in British criticism to stereotype 'Continental' modernism see also Björn Heile, 'Darmstadt as Other: British and American Responses to Musical Modernism', *Twentieth-Century Music*, 1 (2004), 161–178; and Philip Rupprecht, "'Something Slightly Indecent': British Composers, the European Avant-garde, and National Stereotypes in the 1950s", *Musical Quarterly*, 91 (2009), 275–326.

<sup>70</sup> For the period after the 1960s see, for example, Rupprecht, *British Musical Modernism*, 33–66; Wiebe, 'Confronting Opera'; David C.H. Wright, 'Reinventing the Proms: the Glock and Ponsonby Eras, 1959–1985, in Jenny Doctor and David C. H. Wright (eds.), *The Proms: a New History* (London, 2007), 168–209.

<sup>71</sup> Importantly, as Pace observes, the emphasis on neglect is by no means confined to the British context. In response to Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf's conception of Ferneyhough as the pivotal figure in the emergence of a

## Finance

During the tenth-anniversary season a sense of neglect also underpinned the Sinfonietta's relationship to British musical life; in fact, Heyworth's complaints about the British aversion to difficult, expensive new works could easily have been fed to him directly by Michael Vyner, the Sinfonietta's Artistic Director at the time.<sup>72</sup> Reflecting upon the birthday concert in January 1978, the young critic Keith Potter bemoaned the extended periods that the Sinfonietta spent outside the UK, arguing that: 'British promoters seem in part to blame: Vyner says that very few in this country can afford the Sinfonietta and not many actually want it anyway.'<sup>73</sup> Moreover, Vyner was also reported to claim that it was for precisely these reasons that the Sinfonietta embarked upon its international adventures throughout the mid-seventies. Vyner's interview with Potter reflected a wider PR strategy whereby he was careful to remind patrons, critics, and audiences of the growing and increasingly important foreign engagements that the orchestra undertook abroad (some of which were in fact part-funded by the British government via the auspices of the British Council).<sup>74</sup> It is in this context that the first performances of *Transit* in Royan and London suggest a closer alignment of interests than the later antagonism between the Sinfonietta (i.e. British music) and New Complexity admitted.

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'second modernity' Pace writes: '[i]t may come as a surprise to English-speaking readers to hear Mahnkopf declaring [...] that "Brian Ferneyhough, probably the most important composer in the world, is unfailingly set aside in Germany, whilst the rest of the world has long recognized his outstanding genius".' (Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf, *Kritik der neuen Musik. Entwurf einer Musik des 21. Jahrhunderts. Eine Streitschrift* (Kassel, 1998), 25; cited in Ian Pace, 'Positions, Methodologies and Aesthetics', 11.) Beyond Ferneyhough, in 1988, Toop had already suggested that the British location of the composers Richard Barrett, Chris Dench, James Dillon and Michael Finnissy was sufficiently far-removed from the centre of German contemporary music so as to make any interventions all the more destabilizing to the latter's hegemony. (Toop, 'Four Facets of the "New Complexity"', 4.)

<sup>72</sup> See also Peter Heyworth, 'The Birthday Party', *The Observer*, 29 January 1978, 28. As cited above, in 1982 the Sinfonietta's management even developed a dossier-style press pack designed explicitly to sharpen the elbows of the London critics. (It contained favourable press reviews, lists of commissions and first performances, financial statements, and copies of a 9-page and a 6-page report read, respectively, by Vyner and Michael de Grey, the new Administrative Director.) (ACGB/50/228 (London Sinfonietta, 1974–85), 'London Sinfonietta Press Conference, 20 September 1982'.)

<sup>73</sup> Keith Potter, 'Keeping Adventure in Play for Sinfonietta', *Classical Music*, 21 January 1978, 6–7, at 7.

<sup>74</sup> As documented in the ensemble's official biography printed in concert booklets throughout this period.

While they were presented in promotional material primarily for their prestige value, the Sinfonietta's engagements abroad were in fact a crucial source of income for the ensemble, as costs in London spiralled: conductors, inflation, limited funding (relative to the French example), and Vyner's increasingly ambitious programme of festivals and commissions all played a part. At Royan in 1975 all the Sinfonietta's fees and expenses were covered by the French government;<sup>75</sup> in contrast, when they promoted *Transit* themselves in London—a work requiring extra players beyond their core personnel, including six soloists—they (i.e. the London Orchestral Concerts Board (LOCB)) bore the inevitable losses.<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, the projected loss of £3,020.00 was no doubt sweetened by a guarantee provided by the composer's publisher, Edition Peters, to underwrite the costs of the Decca recording that was to follow two months later—a recording in which the Sinfonietta were, of course, hired on a fee-based contract.<sup>77</sup> Before the publisher intervened that summer in order to secure the recording, the artist fees alone were estimated by

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<sup>75</sup> They presented *Transit* alongside three other works, one of which was an Arts Council-funded commission which they had instigated and, as it were, 'brought with them' — Michael Finnissy's orchestral piece *World* (1969–74). Arts Council-funded commissions were usually funded with the expectation that the first performance would take place in Britain. In a memo from Robert Ponsonby (Controller of BBC Radio 3 and Director of the Proms) to Stephen Plaistow (Producer for Contemporary Music), Ponsonby remarked: 'Pierre [Boulez] would have played *World* at the RH [Round House] had the Sinfonietta not premiered it at Royan and had I not assumed that if it was an Arts Council commission they would be obliged to play it in London. If they aren't – or won't – we'll do it, yes – but can the Arts Council spend its money abroad? (Caversham, BBC Written Archives Centre, R83/2,079/1 (Michael Finnissy, 1975-1984), 'Memo from RP to SP', 16 March 1976.) *World* was subsequently performed by the BBC Symphony Orchestra with Simon Bainbridge conducting as one of the BBC's College Concerts. By coincidence it took place in the month before the Sinfonietta's performance of *Transit* on 18 October 1977 but the event did not garner any press coverage.

<sup>76</sup> The Sinfonietta's annual grant for its London promotions was provided by the London Orchestral Concerts Board (LOCB), which allocated funding on behalf of the Arts Council of Great Britain and the Greater London Council. In addition it received funds from the LOCB's Contemporary Music Fund and was awarded an annual tour from the Contemporary Music Network, both funded by the Arts Council.

The Sinfonietta projected the costs of the *Transit* concert as £3,570.00 and earned income at £550.00. This compares with estimated total costs for the tenth-birthday concert as £5,497.00 and earned income as £880.00. (ACGB/50/228 (London Sinfonietta, 1974–85), Anthony Whitworth-Jones (Sinfonietta) to Eric Thompson (LOCB) [correspondence], 28 April 1977.)

<sup>77</sup> The minutes of the Recording Subcommittee of the Arts Council of Great Britain's Music Panel show that, though they had shortlisted *Transit*, a decision had already been made between the meetings held in September and December 1977 to fund the work privately. The minutes read: '*Transit* was to be recorded with assistance from [Ferneyhough's] publishers; Council money was therefore not required.' James Mallinson, who produced the recording for Decca and ran the label's Headline series, was also an influential member on the subcommittee. He had a close working relationship with Vyner and the Sinfonietta, too: the Headline series featured the ensemble for numerous orchestral projects throughout its lifespan in the 1970s, including recordings of works by Birtwistle, Hans Werner Henze, Ligeti and Schoenberg. For a full Sinfonietta discography see: <http://www.londonsinfonietta.org.uk/new-music/recordings> (accessed 17 January 2019); for the Headline series see <https://www.discogs.com/label/30321-Headline-2> (accessed 17 January 2019).

the Arts Council of Great Britain's Recording Subcommittee to cost approximately £12,000, costs that they were minded to fund.<sup>78</sup> The final fee may have been reduced depending on the efficiencies that could be found by 'sharing' rehearsals with the concert promotion.<sup>79</sup> Either way, viewed financially, the concert in November 1977 looks like a glorified dress rehearsal.<sup>80</sup> But for the sake of the Sinfonietta's relationship with its British patrons it was important that the concert appeared to be a promotion: otherwise its complaints about near-permanent financial ruin would have been undermined.<sup>81</sup>

The wider economic importance of such engagements came into public view in 1977. In the same review in which Vyner complained about stingy, uninterested British promoters, Potter (as Heyworth also did elsewhere) set out the new challenge faced by the Sinfonietta: competition from the newly formed Ensemble Intercontemporain, in Paris.<sup>82</sup> After the performance at Royan in 1975, the Sinfonietta had embarked upon a further three tours of France in 1976 alone. According to the critical outcry and internal papers, this series appears to have marked the end of a period, underpinned by 'a remarkable gesture by the French government'<sup>83</sup>, during which

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<sup>78</sup> Final estimates and costs are not known: thus far it has not been possible to access to the archives of the London Sinfonietta, Decca or Edition Peters. At the Arts Council's Recording Subcommittee, *Transit* was placed in the prestigious 'Category A' list: 'projects of international appeal that could be offered to the recording industry'. 'Category B' was envisaged as an in-house label designed to promote 'debutants' but it appears not to have materialized. The division was proposed by James Mallinson. (ACGB/51/31 (Arts Council Recording Scheme), 14 July 1977, Recording Subcommittee.).

<sup>79</sup> Had the recording been funded by the Arts Council this sum may have been reduced when tied to the first British performance which it also funded. For example, the subcommittee recorded that the approximate cost of £21,000 for recording Birtwistle's opera *Punch and Judy* with Decca 'could be reduced by about one third if a recording were tied to some performances.'

<sup>80</sup> On the 18 March 1977 there was still no programme decided for the November concert, in line with various holes elsewhere in the season plans. *Transit* was presented in the updated plans submitted on 28 April 1977. (Letters of the same dates in: ACGB/50/228 (London Sinfonietta: 1973–1985).) Future work could tease out these and similar details in order to ascertain the precise relationship between the performance in London and the recording contract.

<sup>81</sup> Letters in the Arts Council archive reveal that both Vyner and Anthony Whitworth-Jones, the Sinfonietta's Administrative Manager, were continually pleading for more financial support than the Arts Council or LOCB were willing or able to offer. Things came to a head in 1982, as they had done in 1973. Arts Council officers noted that 'When the LS talk about 'alternative methods of funding' they are of course not concerned about methodology. They just want more money.' The officer notes that in the five years between 1977 and 1982 the overall British subsidy received by the Sinfonietta had risen from £51,812 to £132,984. (ACGB/50/228 ('London Sinfonietta, 1974–85'), 'Notes for Meeting on Wednesday 29 September 1982'.) For a broader picture see Wright, 'London Sinfonietta'.

<sup>82</sup> See also Heyworth, 'The Birthday Party'.

<sup>83</sup> Keith Potter, 'Keeping Adventure in Play for Sinfonietta', *Classical Music*, 21 January 1978, 6–7, at 7.

Michel Guy, the French Minister for Culture, sought to establish the ensemble's French activities on a semi-permanent, residential basis. In effect, this would have meant relocating the Sinfonietta to Paris in preparation for Boulez's return with IRCAM in 1977, a process of centralization in French cultural politics that overturned a decade of regionalism from which festivals such as Royan were supported.<sup>84</sup> But the hoped-for agreement between the French government and the Sinfonietta failed to materialize. In 1978 Vyner sought to spin the breakdown of negotiations as a reluctant refusal on the Sinfonietta's part, so Potter presented it in his article as a commitment to 'Britain'.<sup>85</sup> Heyworth, writing after the birthday concert in January 1979, was more forthright: 'once again, Britain has pointed the way—and then failed to exploit the breakthrough it has made'.<sup>86</sup>

Perhaps the intervening year had led to a mellowing of the reaction inside the Sinfonietta. In 1976, when the plan fell through, refusal was not a word used by the Sinfonietta's Chairman, Glyndebourne Director George Christie. Instead he sent a severe, three-page letter to the then Labour Arts Minister Hugh Jenkins, copied to the Secretary-General of the Arts Council, the Council's Music Director, and the Chair of the London Orchestral Concerts Board. Christie framed the competition posed by the new and better-resourced Ensemble Intercontemporain in Paris as a threat to the Sinfonietta's existence:

I don't imagine that the artistic credentials of the London Sinfonietta and the preeminent place it has held in the performance of contemporary music needs any special advocacy here. I do, nevertheless, believe that one of the most important contributions to living

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<sup>84</sup> See Eric Drott, *Music and the Elusive Revolution: Cultural Politics and Political Culture, 1968–1981* (Berkeley, 2012).

<sup>85</sup> Potter, 'Keeping Adventure in Play', 7. 'Vyner could be said to have demonstrated a considerable commitment to Britain when he earlier turned down an apparently extremely casual and surprise offer from Michel Guy, then then French Minister of Culture, to base the Sinfonietta in France. This refusal seems to have resulted in the formation of IRCAM's Ensemble Intercontemporain, a fully-salaried Sinfonietta-sized body of players who currently get French government support of around half a million pounds a year (and are run, incidentally, by the Sinfonietta's co-founder Snowman).'

<sup>86</sup> Heyworth, 'The Birthday Party'.

music and the future of music has been made by the London Sinfonietta, consisting as it does, of players of extraordinary standard promoting the music of the most interesting composers of the twentieth century. Its survival, it is argued, *will depend increasingly on its operation in this country* and therefore on greater support from the Arts Council and L.O.C.B.<sup>87</sup>

Revealingly, the French government's programme of cultural exceptionalism and its specific support for Boulez in Paris was rationalized by British government officials as 'an important international cultural prestige weapon ... as they cannot compete easily with the British Council's and American work in spreading the English language'. They also suggested that the French 'may have been stimulated into a form of protectionism by the Sinfonietta's three 1976–77 French tours.'<sup>88</sup>

What impact this had on the Sinfonietta's promotions of new work, and new British work in particular, is beyond the scope of this article. But it does not seem far-fetched to suggest that the Sinfonietta's encounter with Ferneyhough and *Transit* was bound up with a nationalist rhetoric of exceptionalism (and decline) on both sides of the English Channel, motivated by financial concerns as much as aesthetic and social ones. That is to say, the emergence and promotion of Ferneyhough as a 'Continental' composer was linked not only to inherent British conservatism, but also in part to the financial impact of international competition, and growing musical specialization and professionalization. And given that, for the Sinfonietta's prestigious first performance in Royan, *Transit* was commissioned not by the ensemble but by the Royan

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<sup>87</sup> ACGB/50/228 (London Sinfonietta, 1974–85), George Christie, letter to Hugh Jenkins, 23 March 1976 (emphasis added).

<sup>88</sup> ACGB/50/228 (London Sinfonietta, 1974–85), [Internal memo], 1 April 1976.

Festival and the French government, the assumed expense incurred by the Sinfonietta was open to being exaggerated for diplomatic and cultural effect.<sup>89</sup>

### **Confusion (and the limits of language)**

The Sinfonietta's approach to programming *Transit* in London certainly reinforced both Heyworth's portrayal of Ferneyhough as a major composer and the reputation his music had gathered for its difficulty (and thus expense) in performance. In an echo of the strategy used at the Biennale to present Ferneyhough's 20-minute work for large orchestra *Firecycle Beta*, the Sinfonietta's *Transit* programme was just that: a concert with no other pieces.<sup>90</sup> In order to make a concert out of it, in the first half the Sinfonietta's players, led from the podium by Ferneyhough, gave an open rehearsal in which they performed excerpts from the work in order to demonstrate salient features in the context of Ferneyhough's own explanations.<sup>91</sup> With these excerpts as illustration, the composer explained material that could also be found in the programme and biographical notes.<sup>92</sup> His preoccupations in devising *Transit* were summarized as follows: first, a longstanding interest in the creative impetus and 'use' of extra-musical images and ideas as a structuring device; second, and related to this, a particular fascination with flux, alchemy, and pre-Enlightenment mysticism, and—crucially—a consideration of their creative

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<sup>89</sup> *Transit* was only commissioned by the French government at the last moment, after most of it had been completed, when financial support from the French Ministry of Culture was suddenly available following the failure of Isang Yun to complete his commission to time. According to correspondence from the administrator of the festival in Royan, Marianne Lyon, the Ministry's award was made specifically for the first performance of a work by an international composer; with his successes at Royan in 1974 Ferneyhough was the beneficiary. (Basel, Paul Sacher Stiftung, Brian Ferneyhough Collection, 'Correspondence'.) Halbreich must have committed to the work around the Royan festival in 1974, since, as detailed above, the Sinfonietta had already been earmarked to perform *Transit* by May 1974. (ACGB/49/108 (Awards to Artists), Michael Vyner to Richard Lawrence [correspondence]. 24 May 1974.)

<sup>90</sup> In Venice *Firecycle Beta* was performed twice either side of an interval that staged a conversation between Harry Halbreich and Ferneyhough

<sup>91</sup> See Jonathan Harvey's reference to the transcript in his article in 1979: Jonathan Harvey, 'Brian Ferneyhough', *The Musical Times*, 120 (September 1979), 723.

<sup>92</sup> The programme note was written by Ferneyhough, the biography by Clements. But as Pace and my own documentary suggest, the latter was clearly informed by the former. (The London Sinfonietta, 'The London Sinfonietta/*Transit*' [programme booklet], 16 November 1977.) See Brian Ferneyhough, 'Interview with Andrew Clements' (1977), in Brian Ferneyhough, *Collected Writings*, ed. James Boros and Richard Toop (Amsterdam, 1995), 204–16.



translation and realization in both the substructures and sounding surfaces of composed music;<sup>93</sup> third, recent interests in the use of text as a method for generating sonic and structural material emptied of its semantic content; and, fourth, ongoing investigations into the expressive potential to be found at the borders of performability. Despite his absence from Britain before 1977, Ferneyhough—his music, his ideas, and his mode of verbal expression—was therefore visibly as well as audibly prominent at exactly the point at which the London critics sat up and took notice of his existence.<sup>94</sup>

According to Richard Morrison, in a preview of the *Transit* concert published in *Classical Music Weekly*, the programming strategy and open rehearsal were designed to ‘help the audience’s understanding’, although this is not the way that subsequent reviewers saw it.<sup>95</sup> In particular, the critics’ emphasis on mysticism and metaphysics—flux—failed to hide a level of uncertainty or suspicion on their part that bordered on mystification. Clements, for example, stated that with *Transit* Ferneyhough had overcome a period of relative silence and emerged with music that displayed ‘an all-embracing artistic position that incorporates a diversity of extra-musical and metaphysical concepts’. At the end of the essay Clements noted that the music that emerged in this second phase ‘carries with it an intricate web of allusion—to modern philosophical systems and to mediaeval alchemy and hermeticism’.<sup>96</sup> But what this meant for the critics, let alone audiences, seemed to be anyone’s guess.<sup>97</sup> Certainly the insistence that the music ‘carried with it’ such ‘allusions’ upped the programmatic ante considerably, an important point given the quasi-formalist function of the work’s extra-musical ‘programme’ and the borderline drawn by Heyworth between intention and intuition.

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<sup>93</sup> Ferneyhough’s interest in flux and pre-enlightenment thought is also important in other larger works in the 1970s, including *Missa Brevis*, *Firecycle Beta*, and *La terre est un homme*.

<sup>94</sup> The lengthy programme notes were also a feature in Royan and Venice.

<sup>95</sup> Richard Morrison, ‘Balance within Flux: Ferneyhough’s *Transit*’, *Classical Music Weekly*, 12 November 1977, 6.

<sup>96</sup> Andrew Clements, ‘*Transit*’, in *The London Sinfonietta*, ‘The London Sinfonietta/*Transit*’.

<sup>97</sup> See Darbon, *Brian Ferneyhough et la Nouvelle Complexité*, 125–66.

Ferneyhough's own reflections and explanations from the podium, in the programme note, and in interviews, leaned heavily towards Adornian conceptions of the contingency of musical meaning and, to say the same thing differently, the ontological instability of musical material. The most direct 'way in' to the music, if the reviews are anything to judge by, was what critics took to be a programmatic one: specifically, the metaphysics on which Ferneyhough drew as inspiration for the work's title, for the arrangement of instrumental groups to represent the transition from earthly to metaphysical realms, and for the overall organization into eleven sections defined by differing combinations of instruments. Kenyon's review can be taken as representative in this respect. He wrote:

The most immediately understandable aspect of *Transit*, visually and aurally, was curiously the one least satisfactorily realized in the Sinfonietta's performance. Inspired by a Renaissance woodcut, Ferneyhough has taken as his fundamental metaphor the transit or journey from earth through the spheres; the reaching of natural human man towards the rarefied metaphysical heights of existences. The players are set out on the stage in an amphitheatre-like succession of receding interlocking semi-circles.<sup>98</sup>

With the six solo vocalists and three solo woodwind (all amplified) placed in an inner semi-circle nearest the conductor—'the humanistic element in the design'—a series of increasingly concentric semi-circles moved from the 'stellar' realm of keyboard instruments through the intermediate position of percussion and trumpets, the 'darkness' of sixteen strings, and a final outer, 'cosmic' layer of heavy brass, 'the music of the spheres itself.'<sup>99</sup> Clearly a crucial point of departure in organizing the layout of instrumentalists as well as the instrumentation of each

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<sup>98</sup> Kenyon, 'London Sinfonietta: Transit'.

<sup>99</sup> The practice of couching works in the context of the extra-musical ideas which informed the specifics of compositional practice (and especially formal design) has been a significant one for Ferneyhough throughout his career, frequently informing choice of titles as well as the accompanying (and consistent) denial of programmatic interpretation, explored below.

section, this spatialization could only be dimly experienced on the flat platform of the Queen Elizabeth Hall, but this fact did not reduce the impression amongst critics that *Transit* was a work *about* metaphysics.

Ferneyhough's own programme note attempted to pre-empt any literal interpretations of the work's title, its 'subject matter' or the Renaissance woodcut that instigated it, demonstrating a wariness of the critics' eagerness to report his own allusions to programmatic meaning. He wrote that with *Transit* he had tried to 'redefine the common ground linking the arts with other fields in a manner rising above the tastefully descriptive'.<sup>100</sup> Moreover, the first two paragraphs are devoted entirely to the (in his view) erroneous 'function(s)' of the concert programme note:

The fundamental difficulty seems to be that of avoiding imprisoning the composition within the limits of a verbal description itself not subject to the expressive disciplines which the work itself strives to articulate. In an important sense a text of this sort [the programme note] ought not to describe, but rather to exemplify the possibility of an individual speculative transcendence 'filtered' through the language of the piece, embodying a transference of creativity from one sphere to another. A demonstration of this sort would thus eliminate from the outset the necessity of a statement of its underlying principle. Whether or not this task is the responsibility of the composer is naturally another question.<sup>101</sup>

With this disclaimer in place, he duly set about explaining how tensions and differences between musical and non-musical 'texts' or planes of meaning not only provided a problem for the

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<sup>100</sup> The comment is also reproduced by James Erber for the extensive sleeve note that accompanied the Decca recording. (As noted above, Erber was then the contemporary music specialist at the composer's publisher, Edition Peters in London; he subsequently left the publisher in 1979 to study with Ferneyhough in Freiburg.)

<sup>101</sup> Brian Ferneyhough, 'Transit', in *The London Sinfonietta*, 'The London Sinfonietta/Transit'; see also the same argument as expressed later to Paul Griffiths in 1983. See Brian Ferneyhough, 'Interview with Paul Griffiths', in Brian Ferneyhough, *Collected Writings*, 234–249, at 244–5.

composer's own explanatory note but formed the very subject of the compositional activity: 'the texts are not "set" to music in the usual sense of this term; rather, they *generate* it, afterwards merging back into the background, their function having been fulfilled.'<sup>102</sup> In this respect, Richard Morrison got close to Ferneyhough's stated aims on the influence of extra-musical factors when he noted that 'as in most of Ferneyhough's works the *generating* force is a metaphysical concept'.<sup>103</sup> Writing in *Time Out*, Adrian Jack appeared to offer one of the clearer ventriloquisms when he relayed that: 'Ferneyhough has said he's not interested in metaphysics for the ideas themselves. He abstracts from philosophical writings those systems which he can apply to the organisation of sound.' Exactly what kind of context this provided for interpretation was evaded with the vague observation that: '[i]n *Transit* philosophical and pre-scientific reflections provide a context for the music.' He then added, with more than a hint of mischief: '[i]f it helps, Ferneyhough describes *Transit* as an attempt to make palpable the positive structure of doubt'<sup>104</sup>—an overblown remark on Ferneyhough's part compared to the more immediate and direct formulation (at least to this listener) that preceded it: 'the work is a search for momentary balance within flux'.<sup>105</sup>

Since, then, Ferneyhough was apt to claim that 'programmatic' details were doomed to fail as an adequate response to the musical result—given his insistence that the listener's 'true

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<sup>102</sup> In a later, draft programme note for *Transit* dated 1978, Ferneyhough wrote that the role of texts was: 'to act as generators of the music – their internal construction, their specific content, not least their relationship one with another were transformed at the outset into quite abstract informational quanta. Neither they or the resultant composition are in any special sense paramount – the very question of precedence is a sign of incipient misunderstanding. Rather one might speak of functional parallelism, in which common traces, spurs are tracked down to some common lair of signification.' (Ferneyhough Collection, "Transit'.) [Underlined text in the original.]

<sup>103</sup> Morrison, 'Balance within Flux'. [Emphasis added.]

<sup>104</sup> Adrian Jack, 'With Honour'. In the programme note Ferneyhough wrote: 'the work is a search for momentary balance within flux, an attempt to make palpable the positive structure of doubt.' (Brian Ferneyhough, "Transit'.)

<sup>105</sup> Writing over two years later in a review of the Decca recording, a rare dissenting voice on this point (a reviewer in the US-based *Fanfare*) complained that 'Ferneyhough's obsession with "model"-making itself results, inevitably, in the erection of a surrogate-metaphysics, a substitute universe of the artist's own making, and reflecting primarily his own arbitrary flights of ego-whim.' (J.D' [author not known], 'Ferneyhough: Transit', *Fanfare*, March/April 1980, 85–86, at 85.) The author ended the review by acknowledging the hype around Ferneyhough and positioning him explicitly as an English composer: 'space does not permit wrestling further with the complexities of a score I suspect might give greater visual pleasure than aural, and which for me—masterpiece to others though it may seem—is close to being an immense bore. Forgive me, Brian Ferneyhough, and all those who struggle to rescue English music from the clutches of Tippett and suchlike.'

task begins at that very point at which attachment to this level ends’—critics were left somewhat befuddled by the result of the introductory half of the concert: Ferneyhough, as it were, failed to discharge the programmatic duties of the tradition that Heyworth had claimed for him.<sup>106</sup> One remarked that Ferneyhough was a ‘peculiarly mystifying verbalizer’ and another, William Mann, advised Ferneyhough to stick to the music.<sup>107</sup> As demonstrated below, six months earlier the context of the string-quartet tradition had provided an obvious context for the reception of the *Sonatas*. By contrast, in the reception of *Transit* the piece’s organization—the form and instrumental layout—and the tentative ‘programme’ it implied proved crucial as an explanatory device—a ‘context’—for critics uninterested in or unconvinced by the philosophical reflection that informed Ferneyhough’s creative practice. Ferneyhough’s protestations to the contrary merely heightened the impression of complexity.

That this interpretation should have proved to be such a prominent feature of the work’s reception probably speaks to an essay style typical of Ferneyhough’s writings, one that relates to other contemporary composers’ writings on their music, but which is sharply disconnected from the mode of discourse employed by the critics in London.<sup>108</sup> As Julian Johnson has recently shown, for example, metaphor has been similarly used by Birtwistle as a means to describe the process of composition rather than a programme linked to it.<sup>109</sup> Yet, whereas Birtwistle renders the modernist fascination with the (hermetically sealed) labyrinth in an immediately graspable

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<sup>106</sup> In the same draft note from 1978, Ferneyhough writes: ‘At no point was the actual truth or falsity of the theories propounded in these texts – in any case presented out of presumed historical sequence – my primary concern: [...] whilst therefore on one level naturally reflecting (one person’s) reactions to the cognitive models selected “Transit” would be totally misunderstood if the listener were content to limit his reception of the piece to this programmatic/naturalistic frame. His true task begins at that very point at which attachment to this level ends.’ (Ferneyhough Collection, ‘Transit’.)

<sup>107</sup> Bowen, ‘British Premiere this Week’; William Mann. ‘Composer who Rewards Concentration’, *The Times*, 17 November 1977, 8.

<sup>108</sup> Future work might undertake a comparison with the reception following performances in Royan and Paris.

<sup>109</sup> Johnson, *Out of Time*, 134–5. In respect of Berio, Birtwistle and Ferneyhough, Johnson concludes that their work reveals ‘the conundrum that the linguistic order of multiple lines plays at the borders of its own collapse into disorder’ (140). In respect of the influence of Piranesi’s eighteenth-century drawings (‘dungeons of invention’) on Ferneyhough’s *Carceri d’Invenzione I* (1982) Johnson remarks that: ‘Ferneyhough’s *carceri* may not literally be the torture chambers and prisons of Piranesi’s drawings, but they certainly relate to the ‘prison-house of language (to borrow a phrase from Fredric Jameson) and the ‘cries’ of the a-linguistic body forced into the discipline of its instruments’ (137).

image (a walled city), the reference points that frame *Transit* (coupled with the manner in which their ontological function was explicitly elaborated) were an esotericism too far for many of the British critics.<sup>110</sup> Viewed in terms of a Foucauldian approach to discourse, the resulting ‘confusion’ played a part in producing complexity: set against the narrative of neglect that framed *Transit* in 1977, it helped to secure the impression in Britain that Ferneyhough’s music was not straightforwardly, or even remotely, British. To use another metaphor, *Transit* was not a part of ‘that’ world.

## Tradition

Back in 1976, with Ferneyhough presented as an iconoclast in the making—which is to say a composer unbound by trends, groupings, or schools—Heyworth had claimed that the works performed at the Venice Biennale possessed ‘an indefinable aura that is the hallmark of a real creative personality.’<sup>111</sup> The first of the two performances that Heyworth heard in Venice comprised the Berne String Quartet’s rendition of the *Sonatas*, and two pieces for solo flute, *Cassandra’s Dream Song* (1970) and *Unity Capsule* (1975), performed by French virtuoso Pierre-Yves Artaud.<sup>112</sup> Three days later Heyworth heard the large-scale *Firecycle Beta* (1971) for orchestra, given its world-premiere performance at by the NDR Symphony Orchestra from Hamburg.<sup>113</sup> Heyworth’s praise for Ferneyhough’s newer works was grounded in the straight line he traced from the late seventies back to the late sixties, and the serially rooted expressionism of the *Sonatas* in particular, a work which left him ‘enthralled’.<sup>114</sup> In it, Heyworth found a ‘return to

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<sup>110</sup> Critics in France were similarly inclined to explore the apparent programme. See, for example, Jacques Lonchamp, ‘*Transit* de Brian Ferneyhough’, *Le Monde*, 24 January 1976, 19.

<sup>111</sup> Heyworth, ‘A Venice Discovery’.

<sup>112</sup> ‘Manifesto della B 76. Musiche da camera di Brian Ferreyhough [sic]’, 25 October 1976. Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee, la Biennale di Venezia. Image: <http://asac.labiennale.org/it/documenti/fototeca/avancericerca.php?scheda=220258&p=3> (accessed 31 January 2018).

<sup>113</sup> ‘Manifesto della B 76. Ferney houg [sic]. Brown. Feldman. Sciarrino. Ligeti’, 28 October 1976. Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee, la Biennale di Venezia. Image: <http://asac.labiennale.org/it/documenti/fototeca/avancericerca.php?scheda=220250&p=1> (accessed 31 January 2018).

<sup>114</sup> Heyworth, ‘A Venice Discovery’.

structure and argument’, and to ‘the complexities of Boulez’s early work and beyond that to Webern.’<sup>115</sup> No detail of the *Sonatas* was superfluous: its complexity formed ‘the undercarriage of an expressive range ... amazing in so young a composer’. Heyworth admitted that in the more recent, hyper-virtuosic pieces for solo flute he was unconvinced by the composer’s strategy of exploring the limits of performability, and expressed a tired caution towards the use of extended instrumental techniques and the resultant ‘sounds’, integral features of each piece’s material. Nonetheless, in both pieces he could detect a ‘sequence of musical events’ and ‘an unfolding sense of shape and development’ beneath the virtuosity and surface ‘noise’. (In a comforting pre-emptive rejoinder he placed a metaphorical arm around the reader noting that: ‘complexity, as you may have gathered, is a primary characteristic of Ferneyhough’s music’.) Similarly, in the case of the large orchestral work *Firecycle Beta*, Heyworth could be less sure he understood ‘the piece’ in the same way as he grasped the *Sonatas*, since here the construction and listening experience was of an altogether more Dionysian dimension, as it continued to be in *Transit* and the orchestral piece of 1979, *La terre est un homme*. Whereas the structure and rigour of musical argument in the *Sonatas* was matched by its ‘expressive range’ the heightened virtuosity of the later solo pieces was underpinned by perceptible shape, development, and order, and the orchestral work by something more nebulous: ‘exceptional imaginative power’.<sup>116</sup> At one level, the comparison betrays an equivocation on Heyworth’s part. But any misgivings about the direction of Ferneyhough’s recent works pale in comparison to the broader historical narrative that underpinned Heyworth’s account.

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<sup>115</sup> Heyworth, ‘A Venice Discovery’.

<sup>116</sup> It is interesting to ponder whether Heyworth’s view of Ferneyhough’s music might have altered had he been at the Biennale two months earlier when *Time and Motion Study III* (1974) for 16 singers and electronics was performed by Schola Cantorum Stuttgart under the direction of Clytus Gottwald (4 September 1976, on the island of San Giorgio). Though composed during the same year as the latter stages of *Transit* it features a more concentrated and extrovert use of extended techniques. Samuel Wilson analyses the work in order to theorize a collapse of the boundary between human and non-human such that the word ‘extended’ becomes ontologically problematical. (See Samuel Wilson, ‘The Composition of Posthuman Bodies’, *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, 13 (2017) 137–152.)

Seemingly innocuous, the phrase ‘a sequence of musical events’ is an odd yardstick for critical commentary; but, placed in the context of Heyworth’s disdain for ‘the Cageian [*sic*] “revolution” of the sixties’, the euphemistic meaning of the words ‘sequence’, ‘musical’, and ‘event’—and their combination—becomes much clearer. In Heyworth’s view, not only were extramusical sound and noise on the increase, the experimental impulses of the preceding decade had created an unfortunate situation whereby ‘a handful of performing instructions came to be widely regarded as sufficient basis for a piece of concert music’.<sup>117</sup> Heyworth—repeating Ferneyhough’s own written accounts—thus located the origins of Ferneyhough’s early work as a late-sixties rejection of indeterminacy and ‘freedom’ while simultaneously positioning the development, or maturity, of more recent pieces as a convincing integration and resolution—even sublimation—of the ontological questions and sonic experiments explored in ‘works’ and performances employing indeterminate methods.<sup>118</sup> That is to say, Heyworth’s emphasis on musical argument, expressive maturity, and imaginative power—as opposed to some sort of mystical programme—introduced Ferneyhough to British audiences as an exceptional and individual *composer*, one who pushed the boundaries and the complexity of modern composition by building on its great traditions and by overcoming challenges to its authority. Regardless of the way in which Heyworth understood these different degrees of complexity, the ‘indefinable aura’ that he attributed to Ferneyhough’s works was rooted in a logic of surface and depth familiar to the norms of classical-music criticism, a logic in which the sounding surface of the earlier, less strikingly ‘avant-garde’ *Sonatas* proved crucial to Heyworth’s favourable response and his positioning of complexity as the servant to genius.

In promoting Ferneyhough as the saviour of the avant-garde, Heyworth had much in common with another prominent supporter of Ferneyhough’s music, the Belgian musicologist

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<sup>117</sup> Heyworth, ‘A Venice Discovery’.

<sup>118</sup> If Heyworth was guilty of emphasizing the European, serial roots (i.e. ‘argument’) of Ferneyhough’s creative practice, it was hardly a misrepresentation of Ferneyhough’s own dialectical orientation towards the problems posed by composers experimenting with different strands of indeterminacy.



and Royan festival director, Harry Halbreich, who supplied the liner note to the 1978 recording of *Sonatas* made by RCA. There Halbreich claimed that, because of its combination of structural rigour, large-scale form, and ‘blazing intensity of expression’, the *Sonatas* compared favourably with the late quartets of Beethoven and Bartok; he also placed Ferneyhough alongside Tippett as one of the few shining lights in the British field.<sup>119</sup> (In a sign of Halbreich’s taste for hyperbole he had already claimed in 1975 that Ferneyhough and the Italian composer-conductor Giuseppe Sinopoli, who also featured in the Sinfonietta’s Royan concert, represented the Stockhausen and Boulez of the future.<sup>120</sup>) In terms of the production of canonicity it is thus important to emphasize that, although the critical noise surrounding the performance of *Transit* reflects the prestige that it enjoyed in the Sinfonietta’s promotions, the *Sonatas* also occupied an important if less-visible role in the early reception of Ferneyhough’s reputation in Britain. Indeed, in Royan in 1975, Venice in 1976, London in 1977, and then for the recordings in 1978, the first critical impressions of Ferneyhough are indelibly shaped by the presentation of the *Sonatas* and newer works together.<sup>121</sup> In effect, the compression of compositional development experienced by early audiences reinforced the argument that Ferneyhough’s music was no mere exercise in academicism, and secured the impression, at least among sympathetic critics, that the composer

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<sup>119</sup> ‘Since 1965, Ferneyhough has completed a series of works of cardinal importance, of which the density and complexity of thought and structure, the intensity of expression, the sheer beauty and novelty of tonal realisation and, last but not least, a sense of large form almost unique nowadays, show him to be the greatest English composer since Michael Tippett, and most probably the greatest anywhere with his generation. [...]’

What no words can possibly convey are the blazing intensity of expression, the acute tonal and harmonic beauty, the wealth of invention and the overwhelming grandeur which, for the present writer at least, make this work one of the greatest experiences of this century’s music, a worthy successor to the late quartets of Beethoven.’ (Harry Halbreich [sleeve note], Brian Ferneyhough, *Sonatas for String Quartet*, Berne String Quartet (RCA Red Seal, RL25141, 1978).

<sup>120</sup> Rudolph Hohlweg, [Title not known], *Melos* (September/October 1975), 396. ‘Halbreich läßt zwar solche Komponisten spielen, seine Sympathien gehört jedoch zwei unstreitig seriösen Musikerfindern: Brian Ferneyhough und Giuseppe Sinopoli, von Halbreich schon mit Vorschußlorbeeren bedacht. “Stockhausen und Boulez von morgen” sagte er in einem Interview zur Lage der zeitgenössischen Musik’. [Although Halbreich has programmed such composers [Radulescu and Levinas are mentioned], his sympathy belongs to two indisputably serious musical innovators: Brian Ferneyhough and Giuseppe Sinopoli, who had already received advanced praise from Halbreich. In an interview on the current situation of contemporary music, he called them tomorrow’s “Stockhausen and Boulez”.] Ferneyhough and Sinopoli were also featured together in concert and in conversation later that year at the Donaueschingen festival (19 October 1975).

<sup>121</sup> In 1976 Heyworth and those in Venice heard the first Italian performance of the *Sonatas*, again by the Berne Quartet, while *Transit* was given a second outing in Paris (19 January 1976), this time by the ensemble 2e2m, conducted by Paul Méfano.

had arrived in Britain fully formed, so to speak, and that the complexity that had developed in the meantime was the logical extension not only of his own preoccupations but of an avant-garde that, in the view of British critics as diverse as Hugo Cole and Michael Nyman, had not aged well.<sup>122</sup>

Just such an account was made explicit in Heyworth's review of the Sinfonietta's *Transit* performance in 1977. At its core was the idea that in Ferneyhough's approach, both to the organization of material and to sound 'beyond the boundaries of music', *Transit* reflected a 'torn relationship with the music of his time';<sup>123</sup> the passage bears lengthy citation as a result:

Over the half century that stretches from Schoenberg to Boulez, music was driven in a direction of ever-increasing complexity that reached a climax in the serialism of the fifties.

In reaction a great wave of relaxation then set in. Chance elements have over the past two decades been increasingly introduced into the process of composition to a point where a few years ago there was a wave of scores that consisted of little more than verbal accounts of the composer's intuitions. Accompanying this movement, there has been a growing preoccupation with a vast range of sound that had hitherto been considered as beyond the boundaries of music.

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<sup>122</sup> Hugo Cole, *The Changing Face of Music* (London, 1978), 104–7. The title of Nyman's article speaks for itself: Michael Nyman, 'Against Intellectual Complexity in Music', *October* 13 (Summer 1980), 81–89, reprinted in Pwyll Ap Siôn (ed.), *Michael Nyman's Collected Writings* (Farnham, 2013). Cole, who was a critic at the *Guardian*, wrote: 'Kagel, Cage and Stockhausen, and first generation avant-garde performers such as Siegfried Palm and Vinko Globokar, were skilful publicists and entertainers; something that was very necessary in the 1960s. Their presence on the platform was often an essential part of the performance; some of the most dismal concerts have been those at which anonymous groups of players have tried to reproduce the works of these masters from the pretty scores which in fact tell so little about the magic generated by inspired prophets and clowns. Watching a respectable Scandinavian radio station conscientiously attempting an ambitious avant-garde programme, in the early 1970s, I remember feeling that avant-gardism had come of middle-age, none too gracefully, and that it was past the hour for the next revolution' (107).

<sup>123</sup> Heyworth, 'Vivid Voice'.

Ferneyhough has a foot in both camps, and in *Transit*, which was composed between 1972 and 1975 [*sic*], he sets out to square two apparently irreconcilable approaches to composition.<sup>124</sup>

Preferring intention to intuition, it seems likely that Heyworth had Stockhausen uppermost in mind with his reference to a ‘great wave of relaxation’.<sup>125</sup> His view that the exploration of ‘a vast range of *sound*’ was primarily the product of indeterminate compositional practices seems more myopic, at least with the benefit of hindsight—that is, until one understands the importance of the relationship between compositional intention and performer virtuosity that was shared, in very different ways, by Ferneyhough and the Sinfonietta (and evidently by Heyworth, too). In terms of our understanding of the Sinfonietta, an ensemble that did not make a habit of performing works outside the canon of modernist masterpieces (at least in its first twenty-five years),<sup>126</sup> the boundary drawn by Heyworth provides a useful insight into the repertory model that framed their performance of *Transit* in London, and helps to explain their commissioning of new work from both Finnissey and Ferneyhough in the period spanning 1974 to 1980. More prosaically, of course, the narrative that Heyworth developed made for a good (and familiar) story; and the boundary around ‘music’ which he (re)drew—explicitly in this case—reveals

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<sup>124</sup> Heyworth, ‘Vivid Voice’. The work was revised in 1975; its published dates of composition are 1972–74.

<sup>125</sup> For more on the reception of Stockhausen and Cage in London, see Benjamin Piekut, ‘Indeterminacy, Free Improvisation, and the Mixed Avant-Garde’, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 67 (2014), 769–824, at 803–6.

<sup>126</sup> A full list of Sinfonietta commissions is reproduced in their 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary booklet published in 2018. The point is made by both Paul Griffiths and Alistair Williams, amongst others, in their essay contributions to the same volume. Anthony Whitworth-Jones, who was administrator between 1973 and 1982 recalls that: ‘Throughout the 1970s there seemed to be a certainty, a confidence as to the direction that serious new music should take. It stemmed from the Second Viennese School and Igor Stravinsky, through Luciano Berio, Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen to name but three figures central to the London Sinfonietta’s early years, then to, amongst others, the Manchester School; Harrison Birtwistle, Alexander Goehr and Peter Maxwell-Davies. This certainty was shattered by the arrival of Minimalism and neo Romanticism, leading to the extraordinary, not unhealthy, pluralism that exists today [...]’. (London Sinfonietta, ‘50’ [Special anniversary programme book] (2018), 79.)

precisely what Bourdieu termed ‘the institutionalisation of permanent revolution’ and what Halbreich would call a ‘radicalized tradition’.<sup>127</sup>

Heyworth’s positioning of *Transit*, then, is crucial for a more nuanced understanding of how complexity emerged in the critical discourse around Ferneyhough’s music, not least because the emphasis on the restoration of compositional authority and intention was largely overshadowed by the attacks on British parochialism that it was also used to support. This last point is important: while Heyworth’s writing offers a corrective to the dominant impression, even in recent scholarship, that an interest in complexity on the part of British critics was the result of innate hostility, it also alerts us to the ways in which Ferneyhough’s approach to indeterminacy receded from view as a result of both the *Transit* performance and the wider reception of Ferneyhough in which the *Sonatas* figured.<sup>128</sup> Thus, despite the different reference points in Heyworth’s and Halbreich’s accounts, and their shared emphasis on a *return* to an essentially nineteenth-century vision of the composer, their interpretation was displaced in the writings of other British critics by something more recognizably alien, in which an emphasis on complexity or difficulty figured prominently as a synonym for ‘Continental’ new music (and vice versa).<sup>129</sup>

This is not to say, however, that all British critics presented a simplistic account of the function of notational complexity in Ferneyhough’s music, as might be expected from more

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<sup>127</sup> Quoted in Christopher Fox, ‘Darmstadt 1982’, at 51. Fox reports how Halbreich claimed Ferneyhough’s music as an example of ‘radicalized tradition’, which, in Fox’s summary, amounted to ‘the logical extension (*and perhaps conclusion*) of the western school of structural dynamism, which Halbreich sees as running from post-Renaissance polyphonists to Schoenberg. As an opposite tendency, devoted to a dissolution of the time sense of this school and a return to the timeless world of Eastern musics, he traced a line of development through Schubert, Liszt, Bruckner, Debussy, Messiaen, Xenakis, Ligeti, and Sclesi to l’Itineraire and, especially, to the Paris-based Rumanian Horatio Radulescu.’ (Christopher Fox, ‘Darmstadt 1982’, *Contact*, 25 (Autumn 1982), 49–52, at 51.) The talk presented by Halbreich was called ‘A Plea for a New Complexity’, and positioned both of the above tendencies as a reaction against the wave of neo-romanticism then particularly prominent in West Germany, including at Darmstadt that year.

<sup>128</sup> The question of Ferneyhough’s creative practice and the role of indeterminacy requires discussion elsewhere, since it cuts to the core of recent scholarly debates about notation and performance practice.

<sup>129</sup> Andrew Clements, ‘Transit’.

recent responses to Richard Taruskin's 'terminal' polemic.<sup>130</sup> Bowen, for example, explained that the complexity of Ferneyhough's music served a higher 'almost-Platonic' purpose and reported Ferneyhough's remark that 'the audible (and visual) degree of difficulty is to be drawn as an integral structural element into the fabric of the composition.'<sup>131</sup> On this basis, Bowen noted that, in contrast to Boulez, Ferneyhough built 'towards complexity, not towards a mandarin rationalism.'<sup>132</sup> The same emphasis occurred in the biographical essay that Clements produced for the Sinfonietta's *Transit* programme booklet, as relayed to him by the composer in interview that year.<sup>133</sup> Although its contents were similar in effect to the claims made by Heyworth—*Transit* was positioned as a pivotal work in the composer's continuation of and development beyond the 'formal and linguistic implications of European post-war serialism'—the narrower focus on the serial (for which read Continental European) tradition reflected a wider pattern in which the sublimation of experimentalism went largely unnoticed by British reporters, even though Heyworth (and elsewhere Clements and Bowen) had almost certainly sourced the argument directly from the composer's verbal and written pronouncements.

## Virtuosity

These patterns of reception occur in concentrated form in the critical reaction to the 'Vocal Model', the opening section of *Transit*. Given the confusion generated by the language that circulated around the work's presentation—coupled with its reputation for notational complexity—the critics must have been relieved to find that the notation for the Vocal Model contained clearly type-set performance instructions, in addition to six lines of staff notation (see

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<sup>130</sup> See fn. 45.

<sup>131</sup> Bowen, 'British Premiere this Week'. Bowen also writes: 'He goes in for complexity but behind it all is a powerful charge of passion. [...] This great passion itself stems from a profound sense of what he terms the "morality" of music — that is, its connection with the world at large. [...] To attain this almost Platonic notion of his art Ferneyhough insists on stretching his performers and listeners to the utmost. He stuffs his compositions with more material than can be absorbed at a single hearing, wanting what he calls "a kind of creative neurosis".'

<sup>132</sup> Bowen, 'British Premiere this Week'.

<sup>133</sup> The interview underpins his preview of *Transit* in *Music and Musicians* as well as a published interview of 1984 that is reproduced in Brian Ferneyhough, *Collected Writings*, 204–16.

Ex. 1).<sup>134</sup> In the Vocal Model, Ferneyhough presents six solo, amplified voices in isolation prior to the introduction of three timpani. The voices begin with a sustained chord, comprising six notes in close proximity, with the tenor, baritone, and bass soloists singing in the head voice. In line with Ferneyhough's generative approach to text (which is manipulated purely for its sonic properties), all six singers, conceived as a single body,<sup>135</sup> proceed through each line of the given material, contorting the face and voice in response to the setting of various phonetics. In addition, each singer performs with an auxiliary maraca or clave, graded high, medium, or low in pitch. In the notes for performance, Ferneyhough advises that different voices (and thus pitches) will, as it were, move in and out of focus as a result of quasi-improvised variations in dynamic, glissandi, vibrato, and pitch. The deviations in pitch begin micro-tonally and become progressively wider as the singers negotiate the six lines of material so that an ever-greater sense of flux or volatility occurs against the fixed or primary pitch.

[Insert Example 1 near here. The two images should ideally be spread across one opening.]

On the face of it, this combination of performer freedom, extended techniques, and precisely notated passages resonated with Heyworth's claim that in *Transit* Ferneyhough had 'a foot in both camps'. And, on this basis, Ferneyhough's instructions also give a clear impression of where the foot should be placed next, pointing out to the singers the importance of 'the feeling of intensity and discipline, totally opposed to any vague sense of "improvisation"'.<sup>136</sup> In

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<sup>134</sup> In these instructions Ferneyhough explains, amongst other things, the manner in which the singers should navigate the six lines, the function of the indeterminacy specific to their own parts, the production of 'extended' techniques, and the importance of maintaining a sense of 'homogeneity and continuity' divorced from the accompanying and precisely-notated timpani parts (Ex. 1).

<sup>135</sup> Ferneyhough advises the singers to rehearse the Vocal Model in isolation before bringing it together with (though explicitly *not* integrating it with) the timpani and full ensemble (see Ex., 1). (Ferneyhough, *Transit* [Score], 1.)

<sup>136</sup> Ferneyhough, *Transit* [score], 1. The singers, only some of whom had performed the work in Royan and Paris, were Rosemary Hardy (soprano), Elizabeth Harrison (mezzo soprano), Linda Hirst (mezzo soprano), Peter Hall (tenor), Brian Etheridge (baritone) and Roderick Earle (bass). In the first performance at Royan the singers were: Judith Nelson (soprano), Mary Thomas (mezzo soprano), Janet Strickland (mezzo soprano), Peter Hall (tenor), Peter Knapp (baritone) and William Mason (bass). In the Paris performance with Ensemble 2e2m (19 January 1976) Della

his review of the performance Kenyon in particular picked up on this characterization of improvisation practices, noting that ‘the highly accomplished precision of the singers was impressive in itself: the *lack* of improvisation, and the strictness with which they pursued their material in their own time made for a powerful feeling of *direction*.’<sup>137</sup> His praise for the singers is suggestive of the perfectionism that permeated the classical-music world in which the Sinfonietta was located, a point reinforced elsewhere by Vyner’s emphasis on composer intention<sup>138</sup> and the virtuosity possessed by the Sinfonietta’s players.<sup>139</sup> What is conspicuous by its absence, however, is the critique of virtuosity that Ferneyhough began to develop in *Transit*, a critique that he had taken further in the two years since he completed the score at the beginning of 1975. Bowen had already conveyed Ferneyhough’s approach to precision and perfection before the concert, reporting in his preview Ferneyhough’s explanation that: ‘no attempt should be made to conceal the difficulty of the music by resorting to compromises and inexactitudes (of rhythm) designed to achieve a more polished result.’<sup>140</sup>

Of course, the extent to which the Sinfonietta’s players were prepared to avoid compromise or polish is hard to ascertain.<sup>141</sup> They worked with Ferneyhough in both Royan and

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Jones (mezzo soprano) replaced Judith Nelson, and Mary Thomas sang the soprano part. ([Artist Biographies], The London Sinfonietta, ‘The London Sinfonietta/Transit’ [programme booklet].

<sup>137</sup> Kenyon, ‘London Sinfonietta: Transit’. [Emphasis added.]

<sup>138</sup> For example: ‘Modern music is very complex and difficult and requires specialists with the necessary techniques and qualities to perform it and bring it truly alive. Nothing is so distressing as the dismissal of a work, not because it is a bad piece, but because the bad performance obscures the composer’s intentions.’ (ACGB/50/228 (London Sinfonietta, 1974–85), Michael Vyner’s speech, ‘London Sinfonietta Press Conference, 20 September 1982’, 2.)

<sup>139</sup> An insight into the prestige generated by the reputation for virtuosity can be gleaned from Michael Finnissy’s reflections on his interaction with the Sinfonietta’s Artistic Director, Michael Vyner. Prior to the first performance of his work *Alongside* (1979) in February 1980, a work which was commissioned in order to replace Ferneyhough’s delayed *Carceri d’Invenzione I* (1982), Finnissy reports how: ‘Vyner kept on saying: “Oh it is going to be virtuosic and it is going to show-off the players isn’t it?” I said: “Oh, I think it probably is.”’ On Finnissy’s account, the rehearsals and first performance were an unmitigated disaster because the music did not lend itself to the model of virtuosity which the Sinfonietta’s players were accustomed to. (Michael Finnissy and the author. Unpublished interview, Steyning, West Sussex, July 2008.)

<sup>140</sup> Bowen, ‘British Premiere this Week’.

<sup>141</sup> Where a similar approach to internal and ensemble indeterminacy occurs much later on in ‘Verses II’, roughly midway through the work, the clarinetist is instructed to play solo material in his own tempo and to do so while navigating each of the nine bars in a freely chosen order. On the Decca recording of 1978, the Sinfonietta’s clarinetist, Anthony Pay, performed the nine entries, quite legitimately, in the order given. In the score Ferneyhough writes: ‘Play 2<sup>nd</sup> time only, in free tempo. Begin slightly later than Cel.[Celeste], with one of the three fragments Ia, b or c. Proceed to one of the frag[ments] IIa, b or c, and so on. Pauses between entries generally not

London, and the composer was present again in 1978 to supervise the Decca recording, so one may assume that the performance and recording bear some trace of his creative input. The point, though, is not to judge the Sinfonietta's fidelity to Ferneyhough's approach; rather it is to emphasize the synergy between the language used by Kenyon—the 'feeling of direction' rather than flux or failure—and the ideology of performer autonomy familiar to the Sinfonietta and the wider world of classical music. This is important because in the decades that followed a stark division developed among specialist performers: on one side of the debate were those who embraced and therefore revealed 'failure' when confronted with highly complex notational demands; on the other side were those who dismissed the possibility of a precise or accurate rendition.<sup>142</sup> What is striking about the bonhomie following the performance of *Transit* is the extent to which the discrepancy suggested by Kenyon's remarks was not yet a cause for division. On the contrary, it was the means by which Ferneyhough could be presented as a 'visionary voice'.

## Conclusion

The encounter between the London Sinfonietta and *Transit* in London reveals the emergence of what became an influential discourse, specific to Britain but with variants elsewhere, in which the emphasis on neglect and nationality framed the perception of difficulty and complexity. If British promoters and performers were caught three years behind the pace set by the festivals in France, Italy and West Germany, they and the British critics certainly wasted no time in establishing a discourse that, especially within the Anglosphere, has endured for over four decades. However, in acknowledging the roots of complexity within the discourse of contemporary music, it is important to emphasize that the reception in 1977 hardly exemplifies the hostility that marked

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longer than two beats. Whilst every effort should be made to fit the material in the available length, performance of all material is not absolutely necessary. If finished too early, repeat ad lib.' Brian Ferneyhough, *Transit* [Score] (London, 1977), 27.

<sup>142</sup> For a detailed discussion of this literature see especially Stuart Paul Duncan, *The Concept of New Complexity: Notation, Interpretation and Analysis (Part I)* (Doctoral Dissertation, Cornell University, 2010).



the premiere of *La terre est un homme* in Glasgow—Ferneyhough’s large BBC commission that took place less than two years later—let alone the idea, secure by the Sinfonietta’s performance of *Carceri d’Invenzione I* in 1982, that Ferneyhough represented a figure-head *in absentia* for younger British composers similarly interested in complexity. In 1977 Ferneyhough was, in the words of Bowen, simply ‘a loner. You can’t relate his work easily to any school or musical figure-head’.<sup>143</sup>

Behind the hype, and with the benefit of hindsight, Ferneyhough was not straightforwardly a loner. His music and his reputation emerged in Britain with the support of a specialist ensemble with orchestral ambitions, a major publisher, and a classical-music culture that was, if not consistently sympathetic, at least heavily invested in the canonical place that Ferneyhough and his music might occupy in an increasingly murky and uncertain future.<sup>144</sup> Beyond complexity, then, the performance of *Transit* in 1977 suggests a departure point—a transition even—of wider historiographical importance, one in which the impact of Boulez’s conducting in London and the emergence of Ensemble Intercontemporain in Paris captured more firmly Boulez’s importance as a cultural ‘mandarin’. In addition to new forms of competition, the broader professionalization and specialization of contemporary music ensembles and performance also suggests how the imaginary museum of ‘twentieth-century music’ was coupled with the patronage of new work to provide fertile ground in which labels such as ‘New Complexity’ could develop. Indeed, it is because the first performance of *Transit* is bound up with the Sinfonietta’s efforts to consolidate its position in London as the guardians (and arbiters) of ‘twentieth-century music’ that the work’s performance in the ensemble’s tenth-

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<sup>143</sup> Bowen, ‘British Premiere this Week’.

<sup>144</sup> Decca’s Headline label, for example, was closed down in 1980 as the recording industry experienced its pre-CD contraction; in 1982, the Sinfonietta’s new managing director, Michael De Grey, warned that the Sinfonietta would need to develop its audience to avoid collapse; and two years later, the Sinfonietta gained sponsorship from IBM, at the same time that it successfully convinced the Arts Council of the need for a 25% rise in income—as all funded arts organizations were forced to attempt following the appointment of Luke Rittner, co-founder of the Association for Business Sponsorship of the Arts, as Secretary-General at the Arts Council. Many organizations were cut adrift or had their funding dramatically reduced as part of this concentration of funds and the overall reduction in government expenditure on the arts.

anniversary season offers one particularly rich example for thinking about the cultural history of musical modernism, complexity, and avant-garde practice in late-seventies Britain. Thus, by examining the lofty and mundane motivations underpinning the Sinfonietta's approach to programming *Transit*, we can continue the move away from simplistic narratives in which, for example, two works first performed in London in 1977, *Transit* and *Music for Eighteen Musicians*, can be interpreted as capturing the splintering of tendencies that supposedly define 'the seventies'.<sup>145</sup>

As a result, I echo those who have long argued for a move beyond 'New Complexity'—but only to the extent that we acknowledge how complexity emerges as historically *new* in two ways in this period. On the one hand it marked a clear, if simplistic development of the modernist canon, in which the Sinfonietta and many of the London critics were heavily invested; on the other, complexity emerged because its status or function was left unresolved at the level of critical reception, and potentially also performance practice. That is to say, the practical and aesthetic demands imposed by Ferneyhough and his music were caught between competing ideas about virtuosity: one—a nascent critique—propagated by Ferneyhough in the score and bound up with an aversion to 'improvisation'; another—widespread and assumed—cultivated by the London Sinfonietta's promotion and canonization of 'twentieth-century music' as captured in the programme for the tenth-anniversary birthday concert and the lavish praise that followed it.<sup>146</sup> In recent studies of Ferneyhough's music, this tension at the heart of performance practice and aesthetics is clearly elaborated, but the *history* of performance has been largely muted in comparison with its theorization. Samuel Wilson, for example, examines how in works such as *Time and Motion Study I* (1974) autonomy 'is thrown into stark relief by what compositionally

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<sup>145</sup> For this example, we need look no further than the Sinfonietta's performance in 1997 for the (decade-long) concert series 'Towards the Millennium' led by Simon Rattle and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. Tasked with the job of capturing the historical significance of the 1970s for the benefit of a self-consciously postmodern audience, the Sinfonietta programmed two diametrically opposed 'masterworks' that received a first British performance in 1977: *Transit* and *Music for Eighteen Musicians*.

<sup>146</sup> In addition to the articles by Heyworth and Potter cited above, see also: David Cairns, 'Now the Party is Over', *The Sunday Times*, 29 January 1977, 36; Hugo Cole, 'Problem Solvers', *The Guardian*, 23 January 1978, 8.

stands before it, such that the performance events come to foreground the very conditions that themselves made their staging possible.<sup>147</sup> But the performance event, at least in the case of *Transit*, could only have been more conventional in its format; in all other respects, the conception, staging, and reception of the work—and thus the positioning of Ferneyhough and complexity that followed—served to reinforce rather than foreground or critique the tradition that mediated it. Ultimately, the initial emphasis on complexity was not only productive in a promotional capacity, but was also heard and perceived as a reassuring sign of *old* certainties for an arts establishment grown accustomed to the largesse and stability of the previous fifteen years. For a very brief moment, the new complexity was the old complexity.

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<sup>147</sup> Wilson, 'The Composition of Posthuman Bodies', 140.

## **Abstract**

In November 1977 the London Sinfonietta began its tenth-anniversary season with a performance in London of *Transit* by Brian Ferneyhough. The concert marks a significant moment in the formation of Ferneyhough's public persona, just as the tenth-anniversary season marked a turning point for the London Sinfonietta. In this article I undertake a microhistory of this performance in order to ascertain how Ferneyhough's reputation for complexity was forged in Britain. Rooted in performance and reception history, and based around close readings of key tropes, I show that early critical opinion ranged from sympathetic to ambivalent or curious; yet it never developed into the type of hostility commonly referenced in critiques of New Complexity. The historical detail of this pivotal performance, I argue, suggests the need for a broader cultural history attuned to the transitional state that characterizes both the history and the historiography of new music in the late-seventies.