

## ASSURED AND PERMANENT CATASTROPHE : NOTES ON COMPOSING, 2003-2011

I moved from Toronto to Paris in September 2003, when I was 22. I had intended to study with Allain Gaussin at the Conservatoire de Sevran (a suburb of Paris), but he had unexpectedly been called to teach at the Conservatoire de Paris (CNSMDP) for a year to replace Marco Stroppa, and I ended up studying with Franck Bedrossian for that first year. Franck was a recent CNSMDP graduate himself, and had striking attitudes toward contemporary music which clashed, productively, with my own.

The first new composition I undertook upon arriving in Franck's class was a solo oboe work, *Locus Solus*<sup>1</sup> (now withdrawn). The basic gestural vocabulary of this piece owed a lot to my largely failed attempts at understanding Boulez' piano sonatas, but transposed into the domain of wind music. Franck kept encouraging me to look beyond Boulez and Stockhausen at somewhat more recent music such as that of Grisey or Lachenmann, but I was determined to come to terms with the music of the postwar avant-garde. As a piece, *Locus Solus* represents one of my earliest attempts at piecing together a functioning technique. Nevertheless, it manages to express something personal, and the work is characterized by an intense, disorienting expression, propelled more by rapid intercutting than linear development. Wanting to go farther, I then embarked on a truly utopian project which, at the time, had little hope of seeing performance: *PHP* (2004) for heckelphone and two pianos (subsequently revised and premiered in 2012 as *PLP*, a version for lupophone). Although I had to wait 8 years to hear a performance, this was an important piece for me, exploring spatialisation, attack/ resonance figures, and large-scale formal strategies.

On a trip to London in March 2004, I saw an exhibition of paintings by Phillip Guston at the Royal Academy. This extremely impressive show inspired the title and certain formal qualities of my next piece, *Music with no Edges* (2004) for five instruments. This piece consists of four very different movements, each based on a distinct formal concept. The whole was unified, however, by my search for maximal independence of the instrumental lines, both harmonically and rhythmically, throughout the work. Transparency and flexibility became priorities. Despite an increasing complexity of rhythm, my instrumental writing remained relatively traditional. Franck urged me to consider more radical instrumental techniques, but I could see no necessity for them within the language I was attempting to formulate at the time.

Nevertheless, since arriving in France, I gradually began to familiarize myself with more recent developments in contemporary music and my instrumental writing began to evolve as a result, becoming more mutable, plastic, and focused on sonority. The genre of solo wind piece seemed an ideal vehicle for such investigations, so I then wrote *Nombres imaginaires* (2004, withdrawn) for flute, and *Passages* (2005) for clarinet. Both these pieces were written while a student in Allain Gaussin's class, after his return to the Conservatoire de Sevran in September 2004. Gaussin encouraged me to think more precisely about the importance of perception in my work, which forced me to look beyond my often exclusively structuralist concerns and consider the connection between the generative technique and the sounding result. My subsequent reflections on this question slowed my output somewhat, but resulted in a more acute sensitivity to formal articulation. *Nombres imaginaires* took static harmonic fields and subjected them to prismatic timbral and figural variations, while *Passages*, composed roughly at the same time as the septet *Signaux* (2005, withdrawn), was the result of my personal investigations into ways in which musical time could be considered and notated.

In *Signaux*, which took nearly a year to write, I attempted to make an entire piece out of a single generating idea, that of a regular pulsation given by various percussion instruments triggering events in the rest of the ensemble. The title came from my productive misunderstanding of Steve McCaffery's *Signalist Poem*<sup>2</sup>. It was in this work that my lack of experience with orchestration became most apparent, necessitating much subsequent field work on my part.

Having experienced great creative difficulties throughout the composition of *Signaux*, largely due to an overly-constricting and inflexible approach to material, I undertook the composition of *Moving* (2006), for piccolo oboe, viola and piano. At the time I was not very concerned with issues of practicality, and had a totally utopian attitude towards the use of esoteric instruments. The dramaturgy of *Moving* was founded upon

simple binary oppositions, but attempted to push these as far as possible, resulting in the constant threat of the work's basic precepts being violated, until all possibility of continuing is blocked.

Relatively satisfied with *Moving*<sup>3</sup>, which I nevertheless had to write three times before feeling I had done justice to the idea, I then composed *Stopping* (2006) for two vibraphones for a residency at Royaumont. *Stopping*, as the title indicates, is a sister-work to *Moving*, and in some ways its opposite. To the frenetic, hyper-intense trio of piccolo oboe, viola and piano, I contrasted a pair of vibraphones, for a radically different sound. This piece, which I considered to be one of my best up until then, allowed me to subject the vibraphone to an extremely minute analysis of its technical possibilities, many of which, it seemed to me, had been overlooked. In particular, I was intrigued by the idea of rehabilitating the instrument's dreaded motor. I found that by setting the motors to different speeds—or by modulating them en cours de route—I could compose interesting interference patterns between the two instruments. The formal side of the composition was far more spontaneously arrived at this time, the various articulation possibilities of the vibraphone serving to create large-scale contrast. At the end of the residency at Royaumont, Marc Texier offered me a commission, my first since moving to Europe: a work for solo bass oboe. It was premiered at the Archipel Festival in Geneva the following year.

It was at this point that I began studying composition at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse de Paris (CNSMDP) with Frédéric Durieux, as well as taking analysis classes with Claude Ledoux. The constant exposure to performing musicians of the highest calibre allowed me to improve my orchestrational skills rapidly, freeing me up as well to write at a faster pace, and hear each new piece performed under ideal circumstances soon after its completion. Durieux made me acutely sensitive to the importance of notation, and encouraged me to zero in on the aspects of my music which seemed most personal. But perhaps most importantly, he stressed what I might call an ethics of composition, the importance of rigorous honesty at all steps of the process.

I returned to my formal speculations in *Nets Move Slowly, Yet*<sup>4</sup> (2006, withdrawn). This piece was the first of mine to deal directly with the question of disjunction as a compositional principle. I wanted to create a work in which various heterogeneous streams would be simultaneously operational, and moving independently of one another. These streams could be heard simultaneously, interpolated, or made to disappear altogether at times. I also was starting to get into a quasi-microscopic approach to orchestration, giving a constant, subtle motion to the music by means of minute shadings of pitch, timbre and duration. This piece was followed by the quintet *La Pendule de Profil*<sup>5</sup> (2007), in which I tried to subject the intuitively unfolding streams of *Nets Move Slowly, Yet* to a consciously-defined grammar. The initial version of the piece didn't work as I'd hoped, however: the material was too compacted and demanded a more expansive treatment. I withdrew the work after one disappointing performance.

In March 2007, I began composing my commissioned work for the Archipel Festival. The result was *Micrographia*, which developed the repeating large-scale metric periods found in certain sections of *Nets Move Slowly, Yet*, as well as the binary-opposition principle of pieces such as *Moving*. The premiere performance was another disappointment, however, as I was dismayed to find that the fine gradations of pitch and intensity upon which the piece depends were simply not idiomatic to the bass oboe. Extremely few performances, most of them unsatisfying, in the context of assured and permanent economic catastrophe: the beginning composer's path is not always easy. Nevertheless, I had no doubts regarding the basic soundness of my choices.

A pair of instrumental compositions for ensemble, *Night Division* (2008-10) and *Stars in the Dice* (2009, withdrawn), occupied the larger part of my creative energies for the following two years. These works had two very different starting points. *Night Division* began as an attempt at fragmentation of some basic material, a constant recombination and development of a large number of autonomous figures. This relentless 'division' was also to take place at the level of timbre, instrumental sonority being explored in greater depth than I had attempted up until this point. *Stars in the Dice*<sup>6</sup> (withdrawn) was a radically different experience. Having grown exasperated with the at times excessive amount of pre-compositional sketching my way of working required of me, which was starting to impede rather than enable spontaneous generation of ideas, I wanted to start with no generative material at all beyond a single anacrusis – accent – decay gesture with which the piece opens; what follows is an investigation of various possible extensions of this opening. Its perceived rate of change is hence considerably slower than that of *Night Division*.

At this point, rather than continuing to begin new projects, I felt it was more important for me to rework a number of older pieces. I felt this would allow me to calibrate more precisely the direction I would be taking in future works, and also to remember which paths I had abandoned, and which techniques no longer served my purposes. To this end, I entirely rewrote *La pendule de profil* (2007). This piece was by far the most extensively revised, entirely new sections having been added, existing ones extensively improved. As the problems of musical notation were becoming an obsession, I also re-engraved nearly all pieces I'd composed up until *Night Division*, partly in order to fix small inconsistencies and achieve a greater simplicity of notation while remaining faithful to the text of the scores, and partly to make minor improvements to my instrumental writing, reflecting my greater experience.

By then I felt I had successfully dealt with most of my initial precepts and began to be preoccupied with other questions. For instance, I no longer believed in the necessity of each piece having central organizing features. My search for a highly integrated technique led me ultimately to feel that the sensations I was after—disjunction, multiplicity, ambiguity—could better be arrived at through other means. I wanted the material to be as simple as possible, more sharply defined, even minimal at times, the better to make its radical disfigurings, decontextualizations and decouplings perceptually relevant. Articulation, resonance and timbre gradually assumed defining roles in my compositional practice.

*Cinq pièces* (2010) was, and is, a rather eccentric item in my worklist. The music sounds linear, even repetitive, on the surface. The piece as a whole is strikingly directional, something I had rarely attempted before and have not done since. In the first piece, a descending rhythmic figure played on four cymbals is heard dozens of times in the same, unvarying succession; yet the exact number of repetitions on each cymbal varies each time, resulting in music at once predictable (in terms of the overall shape of the gesture involved) and unpredictable (in that the duration of the figures changes each time). The pieces are made up of overlapping loops of varying durations. These loops are sometimes directly evident to the listener, sometimes discernible only through analysis. The work inaugurated a new focus on issues of perception, and on a tighter correlation between generative technique and sounding result.

At the Darmstadt festival in summer 2010, I met the Australian saxophonist Joshua Hyde, who encouraged me to revive *Micrographia* and re-write it for tenor saxophone, which I did. The piece was so perfectly suited for saxophone that it only took a few days to make the necessary changes. Suddenly the work snapped into focus, and it went from being one of those cordially forgotten festival items, to one of my most performed pieces. I also completed both *Cinq pièces*, writing the 2nd movement which I had had trouble with before, and *A moitié gommé*.

In *A moitié gommé* (2010, withdrawn) I wanted to take what I'd learned about the possibilities of repetition in *Cinq pièces* and explore the ambiguity between new and unfamiliar material. The score consists of 10 unbound, unnumbered pages which can be played in any order, as long as all are played. Each page contains the same succession of small, fragmentary figures, but presented in a different light each time. Two of the pages include only one bar, to be repeated various numbers of times. It usually takes a few minutes before the listener realizes that they are hearing the same material over and over again, and even then it is not always consciously apparent. The idea was to frustrate any sense of a linear progression in the music: everything is repeated an unpredictable number of times, broken up, continually changed.

The biggest piece I had attempted to write up until then was *Along Unseen Rails* (2010-11) for large ensemble. My initial point of departure had been to write a large number of short movements, perhaps 10 or so, but have different material re-appear cyclically throughout. As it happened though, the piece ended up containing only 4 movements, each one more or less a world in itself: the first is a slow, inexorable canon played mostly by the strings; the second, a rapid, scherzo-like movement continually interrupted by unrelated, repetitive material. The third movement is a miniature concerto for oboe d'amore, and the last presents overlapping cycles of heterogeneous material in ever-varying configurations. The piece made a more disparate impression than I had hoped for, and I don't find it a total success. However, it signaled the end of my formal composition studies. I spent a year at IRCAM after this, a period which produced one short piece for cello and live electronics, *Jonché de croulantes merveilles* (withdrawn), and *Vérifications*, a piece which signaled the beginning of my ongoing collaboration with Ensemble Proton Bern, and allowed me to go farther than had previously been possible in my exploration of rare instruments.

The single most important area of focus for me remains an essentially perceptual one. I am extremely concerned with the position of the listener. My pieces all aim for an essential openness, a precisely-rendered ambiguity which encourages multiple pathways of listening. Yet they must also allow for meaningful connections and associations to be made by the listener. I expect the level of the immediate encounter, the first hearing, to be stimulating and engaging, but a piece should also reward (and require) multiple listenings. The quest, of course, is for a transcendent experience, one which allows space for paradoxes and contradictions to manifest in ways not assimilable in 'normal life'. It should open things up.

My work contains multiple incongruencies and ambiguities within the framework of a cohesive project, rather than striving for some form of seamless perfection at all costs. Instead of linear, unipolar, directional processes, I am preoccupied by the search for temporal and perceptual spaces which are disjunctive, polyvalent, and cubistic (in the literary sense, Gertrude Stein and Tom Raworth being important references), allowing multiple simultaneous viewpoints which can be unconsciously felt as coexisting at all moments of the piece and therefore always available as perceptual vectors, whatever their actual degree of 'presence' in the moment-to-moment progression of the music.

## NOTES

1. Title after the novel of the same name by Raymond Roussel (1914).
2. McCaffery, Steve, *Seven Pages Missing Volume One: Selected Texts 1969-1999* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2000), p. 390
3. Title after the poetry collection of the same name by Tom Raworth (1971). This title contains a subtle pun: Moving both in the sense of motion, and in an (undoubtedly sarcastic) reference to sentimentality.
4. Title after the poem of the same name which appeared in my book *Evidence* (Toronto: Quattro Books, 2009)
5. "When a clock is seen from the side (in profile), it no longer tells the time" (Marcel Duchamp to George Heard Hamilton, 1958)
6. Title taken from "Something Blue", a poem from *Evidence* (see note 5)

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