

Continuum

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It can happen that a new work is summoned into existence by a phone call : a request for a piece for viola and piano, say, and suddenly that becomes the very piece I want to write. This is part of the history of *Continuum*, although only a relatively small part.

In 1997 Simon Clugston, BCMG's administrator, asked if I would write a large scale piece for them, to be toured by Simon Rattle in 2000. It was to be large-scale both in terms of duration and of the ensemble. Initial thoughts were that it might be as long as an hour, and that it would use at least 20 players (in the event I used 23, but it became a standing joke that if I were to phone up Simon C. to ask if I could use 20 offstage Alphorns he would cheerfully agree, and set about booking Alphorn players). There would be a voice, though I had no idea of what texts. I toyed for a long while with the idea of using electronics (something which, with my very limited experience, I would obviously need to work at). And I thought that the piece would fall into a number of separate sections, two of which might be miniature concertos for clarinet and for trombone (to fulfil long-standing promises to specific players). I planned to write the piece during 1998 and 1999, hoping to get it finished at least six months before the first performance, which was provisionally scheduled for the autumn of 2000.

In spite of the success of the near simultaneous premieres of *Renewal* and my Second Cello Concerto in 1996 I'd felt drained and wary of public exposure. I'd anticipated the need for a breathing space, but before that could happen I had promised to write a small chamber piece for the Nash Ensemble for an Australian tour early in 1997. I tried to get the piece under way, but for the first time in my life I found I simply couldn't write anything that made sense, and returned the commission fee.

In March 1997 I started making some sketches for an apology to the Nash, fired by a combination of guilt and enough time spent brooding. I wanted also to write something in memory of Berthold Goldschmidt, who had died, aged 93, the previous October. I sketched two independent melodic lines of different length and different rhythmic values, and combined and extended the two to become (after considerable elaboration) an *Elegiac Chaconne* for five (rather sombre) instruments - alto flute, bass clarinet, viola, cello and piano. Berthold had been a master of the chaconne.

I couldn't get to the first performance at Cheltenham in July of that year

as I was teaching at the Britten-Pears School in Snape, and heard the live broadcast over the car radio of the oboist Nick Daniel. I found it surprisingly moving (I'm usually pretty detached) : but there was an additional reason. The cellist Chris van Kampen was desperately ill with pancreatic cancer, and this was to be the last new piece he took part in, although he continued playing right up until his death at the end of September. Chris went back all the way to my Cello Sonata of 1969, and had played in nearly twenty pieces of mine. On the day that he died I searched for a diary to find when I had first met him : not only did I pick up the right diary (1970) but it opened at February 12 to the entry 'Christopher van Kampen 10am Rayners Lane'. (It doesn't happen every time : to confirm that date took ten minutes and a search through three diaries.)

Now I had my first concrete idea for *Continuum*. I would expand the Chaconne into an elegy for Chris for the 15-player line-up of the London Sinfonietta (of which, of course, he had been principal cellist for many years) and this would be one of the sections of the work. In fact I scored it for 14 players since the cello part is silent, and with the BCMG's agreement, gave it as a present to the Sinfonietta.

Towards the end of 1997 ideas were beginning to come for the shape of the piece; but my work schedule was starting to get cluttered. First there was a great deal of time spent on the recording of Anthony Payne's reconstruction of Elgar's Third Symphony; a visit to Jerusalem for the jury of the Bernstein Composers' Competition became unexpectedly extended when the whole of Israel (including the airports) went on strike; then the date for the horn concerto which I had long ago agreed to write for Richard Watkins and the Philharmonia was brought forward, meaning that I would have to fit it into the first half of 1998; and finally in December I got a phone call from Hugh Hudson to ask if I would work on the score of his new film *My Life So Far*.

Since this meant a collaboration with the CBSO and Simon Rattle, I agreed after some hesitation - it would mean giving up most of the first two months of the year. But, as these things tend to, it did much more than that. The whole of January was taken up with the score; we recorded at Abbey Road in mid February; and that should have been more or less that. But I was more involved with the editing and mixing than I'd expected, and there were conferences, sound sessions and screenings through to mid March. But by early March and the first New York screenings it was clear that something was going wrong, and that Miramax were not happy with the film. Although the screenplay and not the score was the object of attack at this stage, information and contact with the studio gradually dried up without explanation. In the end nobody from the production company had the guts to tell either Simon or me that the score was going to be dropped, and only from a newspaper

interview in June did I finally learn that a new score was being written by Howard Blake, of 'Snowman' fame. (The film eventually opened in the West End late in 1999 and closed within a week.)

What was demoralising about this was not the junking of the score - I knew that it worked - but the huge amount of wasted time. In retrospect almost the only thing to be grateful for is that it allows me to date the scrap of paper on which I had noted the ground plan for *Continuum* which I showed to Simon R. when we played through the film score in January. This reads (alarming in retrospect) as a nine movement symmetrical structure : Parodos - Ostinato (crossed out and Continuum written in) - Song 1 - Concerto 1 (Trombone) - Ekstasis - Concerto 2 (Clarinet) - Song 2 - Elegeia (CvK) - Exodos. There are marginal notes suggesting the use of electronics in numbers 1, 5 and 9, and possibly in the two songs as well. There are tentative durations, which suggest a total length of between 55 and 65 minutes. Later I crossed out the two concertos; and later still I crossed out the whole plan.

I've often tried to build works around symmetry, and it nearly always goes wrong - *Broken Symmetry* was written to prove the point. What throws music out of gear is the time frame, and the difference of perspective that moves along with the piece. Thus the idea of a central movement with mirrored structures either side of it looks fine on paper, but it doesn't take account of how the musical argument on the way towards the central structure will affect the progress of the music after the centre has been reached. Without pre-planning it I have found a surprising number of times that what I have thought would be the centre of the work is in fact off-centre, and in terms of the overall duration, at the golden section point.

This is more or less what happened with *Continuum*. Looking back at that ground-plan, once I had decided that the concertos would not after all fit, the positions of 'Ostinato/Continuum' and 'Song 1' have only to be switched to arrive at something surprisingly close to the final shape. Even what then becomes an overall duration of around 40 minutes is correct, although the individual proportions of the movements are quite different, and the centre is not - or at least I don't think it is - what it was meant to be, the emotional centre of the work.

A word about the electronics. I spent a remarkable week in February 1997 editing the recording of Birtwistle's magisterial *Mask of Orpheus*, working closely with the sound engineer Ian Dearden. I came away with the firm intention of getting to grips with the electronic manipulation of sound so that I could use it in a meaningful way in *Continuum*. I tried to set up dates with Ian; I set aside some money (a wonderful surprise) left to me in Berthold Goldschmidt's will, for the purpose of buying electronic equipment (knowing that he would have been horrified at the

idea). But there was never enough time, and I gradually begin to worry about the problem of trying to get electronics to work in different locations on tour; and so I abandoned the idea - although a tiny element remains. And much of Berthold's legacy was spent instead on the new complete edition of the works of Richard Strauss (he probably wouldn't have approved of that either).

By now my happy two years of working on *Continuum* were disappearing rapidly. After the film debacle I found it difficult to get started again, and work on the horn concerto stuttered - fortunately the premiere was postponed to April 2001. I managed to complete the *Elegeia* movement (the elegy for Chris) by the end of the year, and to make a few other sketches, but by now other commissions had appeared - a major work for the Huddersfield Choral Society for performance in May 2000; a ballet score for the reopening of the Royal Opera House; and completely out of the blue, a request from Kent Nagano that I add *Pluto* to Holst's *Planets* (also for May 2000), which took a great deal of arm-twisting before I gave in and said yes - he had tried to persuade me to add Earth as an extra planet as well.

It must have been early in 1998 that the title materialised - always a good moment (Toru Takemitsu couldn't even begin a piece until he had a title). The substitution of *Continuum* for *Ostinato* on my scrap of paper is annotated 'for EC' which means I had already decided to compose this part of the piece as a 90th birthday present for Elliott Carter. Under the title of *Little Continuum* it was paired with *Elegeia* under the title *Two Tributes* and the BCMG were happy to let the London Sinfonietta give the first performance (yet another date in May 2000!). *Little Continuum* is a huge elaboration of the material of the original Chaconne, the two short melodic lines expanded into a contrapuntal whirlwind of (in the original version) nearly 500 bars, although it only lasts 5 minutes. I completed this in draft well before Carter's birthday, which he celebrated in London in December 1998, but for some reason I found it painfully slow to put into score, and I wasn't able to give him the completed work until the following March in New York.

1999 was a good year for composing, and the Huddersfield piece and the ballet score came easily. Oddly enough they both had links with the BCMG : the choral piece *Aftertones* sets Edmund Blunden, a line from whom had been the hidden agenda of my second BCMG commission, . . . *through the glass*, while the ballet score was based on *Hidden Variables*, to which I added a matching piece with the title *Unfolded Order*. Even *Pluto* caused far fewer problems than I had expected.

But *Continuum*, which should have been at least half written by now, was feeling like a growing menace. I started work on it again well before the end of the year; but there were the ballet rehearsals to get through

(and nothing that has been written about the chaos of the reopening of the Opera House is an exaggeration); I had promised to write a short viola piece (the phone call) for the Park Lane Group's January series; and suddenly, and coincidentally, the viola player Paul Silverthorne asked if I would expand a tiny solo piece I had written for him about 10 years ago, for a recording. Bearing in mind that May would be impossible, and I would be spending half of June at the Aldeburgh Festival, could I - should I - really pull together a piece of such size as *Continuum* in what would amount to little over six months?

In the midst of this Belinda and I added to the alarming mix by achieving a long held aim and, with the help of unexpected family money, bought a house on the Somerset/Dorset border as a retreat. It would mean peace and quiet, but it would also mean a huge effort to make it habitable quickly enough to serve as a work place. This we accomplished by early April 2000. I was, though, a little worried that a studio from which I could watch sheep and cows roaming over the nearby hills might turn me into an English pastoral composer before my time.

Returning to the viola pieces : here might be an opportunity to write studies for the two song settings, which meant that I had to come to a decision on the texts. I had always intended the song element to be in more than one language, and had worked a little on some of Rilke's late French poems in the summer of 1998. But the scope of the vocal element was growing in my mind, and nothing of Rilke seemed suitable for the large-scale - I had no intention of making an attempt at something as daunting as the *Duino Elegies*. I had been reading a lot of Italian poetry during the summer, and in October I took the plunge and committed myself to setting two poems by Eugenio Montale - *Crisalide* (1924) and *Casa sul mare* (1925), both from the collection, *Ossi di seppia*. I asked Faber Music to obtain copyright clearance.

Casa sul Mare would, I knew, be the second setting, but I wrote its viola study first, based on a chorale-like sequence of chords I had sketched for *Continuum* during the summer, and pervaded by a gentle rocking rhythm. I deliberately composed without reference to the poem, other than to its mood : I didn't want the viola piece, which I called *Calmo* (and dedicated to Reinbert de Leeuw, for his sixtieth birthday), to be a mere peg for the vocal line, but a work in its own right; and the chords of the chorale would be used elsewhere in *Continuum* in any case. When I subsequently expanded it into the song, I faced a problem : the Italian had too many syllables to sit comfortably with the rhythm of the piece. But I had been attracted first to *Casa sul mare* by Jonathan Galassi's fine translation, and the opening words 'The journey ends here' seemed particularly emotive¹

¹ Subsequently I made a further arrangement, with this title - back to solo instrument, but this time for cello and ensemble, to mark Simon Clugston's leaving the BCMG at the end of 2001.

: besides it fitted with my multilingual design. So I decided to set it in English, and found an uncanny correspondence of the music to the text : I had only to make minor moderations to the structure and one fairly substantial insert. But what I had written only carried me as far as the last four lines : I would leave these for later. The other viola piece had originally been written as a tiny solo study, called *Chiaroscuro*. Re-composing it as *Oscuro* (another birthday present, for Sue Knussen's fiftieth) meant a complete reworking of the material, and an expansion to about ten times the original size. Again I did not refer to the text of *Crisalide* : less of a problem, as the texture of this viola piece was much freer and more atmospheric, and could be pulled about a lot more to allow for the words, which I had never thought to set other than in the original language. In any case, the viola piece would comprise probably less than a third of the material I needed for the song.

Crisalide was composed during February and March : it's a big poem (83 lines long) and needed great concentration to sustain its length. In setting it I was helped hugely by my bilingual neighbour, the singer Patrizia Kwella, who read the poem for me onto tape. Montale's (mainly) hendecasyllabic lines were also a guide to the amount of elision that would allow the words to flow freely. I felt constrained to leave out four lines that I simply couldn't fit with the pacing of the structure - just as the music needed to speed up, the words pulled it back. So I omitted them: an unpleasant decision to have to make, but I hope forgivable.

By this stage I knew that, although there would be clear divisions between the sections, there would be no break in the piece, and *Crisalide* would run straight in to the already composed *Little Continuum* - whose textures also supplied much of the faster music of the setting. But as with *Casa sul mare*, I couldn't get to the end of the poem : in this case for different reasons - I simply couldn't see how to effect the transition into the *Continuum* music. I was also not sure how near to the beginning *Crisalide* would appear, nor indeed of how the whole work was going to begin, although I had earlier sketched an unsatisfactory opening based on the chords that underpinned the first of the viola pieces. The opening itself didn't crystalize until much later; but I suddenly realised that fragments of the Rilke poems I had earlier tried to set would serve as beginning and end of the piece (my original 'Parodos' and 'Exodos'). The first music I wrote in April, in unfamiliar Somerset surroundings, was a declamatory setting of the lines

Tout s'éloigne, tout s'éteint, tout change,
même sur la route ou nous nous trouvâmes.

Setting it above my previously unsatisfactory opening completely transformed its character. I still needed to find a way in to this music, but that could wait, and it seemed more urgent to start work on scoring the two nearly complete vocal sections, whose drafts had by now been sent

to the BCMG so that the soloist, Cynthia Clarey, could have a vocal score and Simon Rattle have some idea of how the piece was shaping up.

This brought me to the beginning of May, and the end of this period of concentrated work. *Pluto* was the first event, and I was beginning to be very nervous about it : a few months before the journalist David Ward had phoned me about the piece, and as much to his surprise as mine, found his article on the front page of *The Guardian*. Radio 4's *Today* programmed phoned up for a live interview the same morning; and I became aware that what I had thought of as an interesting exercise was being interpreted as an assault on a sacred cow. There were TV cameras at the first performance, and I was expecting to be booed off the stage. Instead the piece was encored, and with huge relief I headed for Huddersfield and *Aftertones* and what I knew would be a much more enjoyable experience.

The trilogy ended with the London Sinfonietta's performance of the *Two Tributes*, and the unusual bonus of hearing a work in progress. But although I was very happy with the pieces, I had made a notational mistake. As Olly Knussen, who conducted, discovered and gently told me, the bar lengths of *Little Continuum* were too short : at such a speed, 'one in a bar' conducting meant that the players had difficulty in knowing where they were. Although the piece was perfectly performable, he suggested and I reluctantly agreed that there should be twice as many notes in each bar, and therefore half as many bars.

This meant that the whole piece needed to be rewritten before it could be incorporated into the 'big' *Continuum*; so I took it down to Somerset at the end of May, and over an intense weekend did exactly that. I needed a day off afterwards, and drove to Birmingham to make contact with the BCMG and see John Woolrich's remarkable wordless opera *Bitter Fruit*. It was a round trip of nearly 300 miles, and on the way back I could feel the unmistakable symptoms of a cold.

What followed became a nightmare. The worst cold of my life lingered on and on, and seemed to start affecting my nervous system. Then came the worst moment : Faber had omitted to tell me that the Montale Estate had some time ago refused permission for me to set the two poems. This was devastating : if the Estate wouldn't give way, the only solution I could think of was to commission a poet to write new words to the already existing music. If I was to continue with the rest of the piece I had to put it to the back of my mind; but after several weeks of precarious negotiation, the decision was reversed and permission granted.

In mid-June I managed to get to Aldeburgh, where I continued scoring *Casa sul mare*; but in the middle weekend of the Festival I had some

kind of panic attack and fled home. For several weeks I couldn't work, I couldn't do anything; but I clung on to the impossibility of having to abandon *Continuum*, even though I had by now lost around six weeks of work. In addition another commitment was looming - the last ten days of July would be taken up by the Aldeburgh Composition Course, of which Olly and I have been co-directors since 1992.

With some extra assistance I got through the Course, and even managed to work on *Little Continuum*, which, after the re-notation, I now needed to rescore for the larger ensemble of *Continuum*. Even this was subject to misadventure when I left the score, which for once I was writing in ink rather than my usual pencil, in front of an open window in The Red House. A summer storm rendered more than three pages nearly illegible.

The first performance was now little more than two months off. I needed to compose the beginning, provide a bridge between the Rilke setting and *Crisalide* and link the end of that to *Little Continuum*; score the whole of *Crisalide*; compose the central section - ideally ten minutes of music, to join up with *Casa sul Mare*, whose score was only half finished; I now knew that from where I had stopped in that song I could go straight into *Elegeia*; but from there to the end of the work was still uncomposed. And - the last remnant of my hoped for electronics - I had to find how to place what would be a pre-recorded tape of the opening over the final bars. All this had not only to be done on paper, but had also to be put onto computer. The deadline - allowing just under a month for part extraction, and for Simon R. to get to know the score - was September 13, when I had agreed to go to Besançon to be on the jury of a composers' competition.

I can remember very little of August, except that somehow everything seemed to fall into place in spite of a very badly-timed computer breakdown, and what needed to be done got done. I came within reach of the end on September 2nd, when the BCMG had scheduled a 'Meet the Composer' day for their Sound Investors (a remarkable group who buy a 'share' in the piece, although the only return on their investment is a signed copy of the score). It was very good to hear a read-through of the first twenty minutes of the piece (without voice) - superbly sight-read by Sakari Oramo - but all I wanted to do was get on and finish it : which I was able to do on September 11th, with one day to spare.

The first performance, and the unforgettable European tour, culminating in Vienna where Cynthia Clarey sang entirely from memory - an extraordinary feat - to an audience of over 2000, seem strangely unconnected with the ordeal of writing the piece. But there was a final surprise. On the train from Brussels to Amsterdam, Cynthia asked me why I had omitted half a line from *Casa sul mare* : puzzled, I looked at the poem and realised I had by mistake left out seven words. I added

them to the score while still on the train, and the following day they had their first performance in the Concertgebouw. The words were, 'And, who knows, you can do it'.