CANZ Composers Conference, April 2014

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An analysis of *Interiors* for string quartet and the influence of Scelsi's sonorist aesthetic

Abstract

This presentation discusses my recent compositional interests through analysis of *Interiors* (2012) for string quartet and the influence of Giacinto Scelsi's sonorist aesthetic. The central focus of *Interiors* is to create a single sonic entity that undergoes gradual timbral evolution. Pitch material is limited and the work is devoid of melody, pulse, and harmonic progression in order to draw the ear to minute changes in timbre. This presentation will also address the use of the Fibonacci series as a temporal guide and the advantages and difficulties of time-space notation on performance.

For a quite while now I've had an interest in timbre and a couple of years ago that morphed into an interest in sound itself. I came across the notion of the 'interior of sound', one that many composers have explored in their own ways. For me, the idea that the inherent properties of sound contain a potential richness was fascinating. I became drawn to the idea of listening to sustained single sounds, especially in an environment that focussed one's attention on the nuances and gradual changes within that sound.

The sonorist aesthetic of Italian composer Giacinto Scelsi (1905 – 88) was a big influence.

In his later works Scelsi approached music from a philosophical understanding of sound as a living object, focussing on what he described as the 'depth' of sound.

Influential to his approach was the musical spiritualism of composer Dane Rudhyar (1895 – 1985). His philosophy, in particular his notion of the tone as a living cell, encouraged the examination of "each note as a living organism that has a unique potential, power, and energy" (Elezovic, 2008, p.4).

Scelsi was also influenced by Rudolph Steiner's (1861-1925) belief that a "single note might reveal an inner richness … comparable to the variety of aesthetic experience conveyed by melody" (Reish, 2006, p.150).

Based on these ideas, Scelsi rejected the axiom of pitch as the primary musical parameter, and thus also the traditional compositional devices of melody and harmony, turning his attention to the inner space of sounds.

In many of Scelsi's works the ensemble create a global sound, centred around a single pitch. For example the chamber orchestra work *Quattro Pezzi (su una nota sola)* (1959) is comprised of four movements that each focus on the timbral transformation of a single pitch.

I'd like to play you an extract from the beginning of piece no. 1 from *Quattro Pezzi.* As you can see here the focus is on timbral transformations of a global sound with all instruments centred on a single pitch class, F. Instruments fade in and out; brass instruments use different mutes as well as open and closed positions; quick repetitions, vibrato and in the cello an oscillation between two notes using only one finger, provide movement that is largely perceived as timbral variation. From b.6 microtones are introduced providing colour changes and also creating tension and release. Dynamics also play a part in creating timbral variation and help to shape the sound.

All of these compositional devices play a part in creating a single sound that has the impression of being alive, of moving and transforming through space and time.

- *Listen with pages of score displayed*

Sound / Timbre

I often found myself musing on what the 'interior of sound' actually is and why that seemed to result in a musical focus on timbre.

The way I've come to see it, sound could be described as being made up of pitch, duration, intensity, and timbre. However these first three elements can also be seen as parameters of timbre, largely due to the their ability to affect changes in the presence of partials, perceived as a change in the colour or quality of the sound.

So in trying to draw attention to the properties of a single sound, I find myself focussed on timbre as a compositional parameter.

Interiors (2012) for string quartet

In my own work I wanted to create a very focussed musical environment that would draw the listener's attention to timbral nuances. I envisioned a singular sonic entity that very gradually and organically transformed. I tried to achieve this in *Interiors*, a work for string quartet written for my Post-Graduate Diploma at Waikato University in 2012.

I decided a string quartet would be an appropriate medium for this concept. The ability of string instruments to sustain sounds and create very gradual changes in timbre was important. The instruments also offered a wide variety of timbral variation, more than I was planning to use, and as an ensemble

they can create a very cohesive sound – important in creating a singular sonic entity.

In order to encourage focussed listening to the nuances of sound I chose to use very limited material, soft dynamics and reasonably gradual timbral variations. I also avoided traditional melodic, harmonic and rhythmic content to help draw attention to timbre.

The timbral transformations are controlled by pitch and performance technique that also create varying degrees of consonance and dissonance. Pitch is used as an element of timbre, creating variation through the use of octave displacement, microtonal inflections, gradual expansion to create a cluster around D natural, and partials from the harmonic series of D natural, D quarter-sharp, and D quarter-flat. The gradual addition of vibrato and trills also widens the harmonic language and adds subtle movement within the overall sound. Furthermore, the varying presence of partials resulting from different bowing positions (such as *tasto, naturale,* and *ponticello*) is exploited to affect not only timbre but also levels of tension.

Wanting this to be a very linear and organic process I used the Fibonacci series to provide a naturally increasing rate of timbral change. I used the first five numbers of the series (1, 2, 3, 5, 8) in reverse with a base unit of 25 seconds to create temporal guidelines for the rate of change and control of tension and release. Each section was also further divided using the Fibonacci series. Creative licence did play a part - I used this system as a structural guide rather than a strict system to adhere to.

- *See displayed diagram*

Total length of each section:

A 8 x 25” = 3’20”
B 5 x 25” = 2’05”
C 3 x 25” = 1’15”
D 2 x 25” = 0’50”
E 1 x 25” = 0’25”

To create an increasing rate of change within the longer sections (thus helping to provide some forward momentum and shape) the duration of that section was divided by 6 (3 + 2 + 1) then multiplied by 3, 2, and 1 respectively to create subdivisions.

A = 3’20” (or 200”) 200/6 = 33.33” (new base unit)
A1 = 3 x 33.33 = 1’40”
A2 = 2 x 33.33 = 1’06”
A3 = 1 x 33.33 = 0’33”

B = 2’05” (125”) 125/6 = 20.83
B1 = 3 x 20.83 = 62”

B2 = 2 x 20.83 = 42”
B3 = 1 x 20.83 = 21”

- *Display score*

You’ll notice on the score that I chose to use time-space notation to remove any sense of pulse and create a more organic movement of sound through time. For a small ensemble such as this I would still do this in future to achieve that effect. However I would encourage the performers to all have stopwatches in front of them. The quartet who performed this work preferred to sense time naturally, which was fine expect that their performance was over a minute and a half shorter than it should have been, meaning they moved through the timbral transformations at a faster pace than I’d have liked.

- *Play extract of Interiors, from beginning*