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Howard Skempton: Chorales, Landscapes and Melodies

Michael Parsons

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Since the appearance of my previous article on Howard Skempton¹ there has been a steadily increasing interest in this composer's music, both in this country and abroad, which has resulted in a growing number of performances and commissions, as well as recent invitations to appear as composer and performer in Cologne (May 1983 and October 1985) and Vienna (May 1985). A major achievement has been *Chorales* for orchestra, written in 1980 in response to a commission from the Merseyside Youth Orchestra, which gave the first performance in 1982.²

With this growth of interest there are also new dangers. Skempton feels that creative energy may be dissipated if expended in too many directions; commissions may sometimes prove to be a distraction, especially if a composer is tempted to write for a variety of new media with insufficient time available for more than a cursory understanding of their possibilities. He is well aware of the risks of over-diversification, preferring, on the whole, to clarify and extend his knowledge of a limited number of media, in particular the solo piano and solo accordion, to both of which he has a longstanding commitment. This slow exploration in depth, over a long period, provides an intimate understanding of an instrument's resources which goes far beyond purely technical acquaintance. Self-discipline, restraint and economy of means have continued to be the prime characteristics of Skempton's music, which

offers an exemplary illustration of Stravinsky's dictum that 'Music thus gains strength in the measure that it does not succumb to the seductions of variety'.³

A further danger, that of misrepresentation, may arise from increased exposure to performers and listeners who may not be familiar with Skempton's experimental background, and whose expectations have been formed by the mainstream of classical and avant-garde music, the habitual modes of performance associated with it, and the type of critical and interpretative writing which surrounds it. Discussion of much of today's music still presumes a close analogy with language. Even when the music is not overtly narrative or illustrative, it is tacitly assumed that a composer is 'saying something', putting forward an 'argument' which will evolve in a linear way. Drama and momentum are considered indispensable to such an evolution, whether it is seen in terms of developing a thematic discourse, as in the classical tradition, or of setting in motion and following through more abstract processes of transformation and interaction, as with Boulez, Carter or Femeyhough.

Skempton's work is, in contrast and like most experimental music, essentially non-discursive. It is more akin to the spatial arts and especially to sculpture, where the object, while affected by variations of light, surroundings and the

changing experience of the viewer, itself remains constant. It can suggest, paradoxically, an ‘outside-time’ experience which is reflective and contemplative, but not hypnotic. The emphasis on the presence, quality and structure of sound, rather than on expression or argument (discourse), invites and requires a type of concentrated and attentive listening in which expectation of change is suspended and time is subjectively slowed down. This type of listening is clearly distinct from the regressive, trance-like mode which can be induced by multiple repetition. With Skempton’s music there is no loss of awareness; through association with intelligibility and clarity of structure, the contemplative mode is revalidated as a conscious form of understanding.

Walter Zimmermann, in a recently published article called ‘Stillgehaltene Musik’ (not yet available in English),⁴ has described this quality in an illuminating way. The title-word ‘Stillgehaltene’ (literally ‘held-still’) and the phrase ‘bewegende Nicht-Bewegung’ (moving non-movement) are both used to suggest the sense of a possible movement — restrained but not entirely suppressed, a hovering between stability and mobility — which is one of the central features of Skempton’s music.



Ex. 1: *Campanella 3* for piano

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The slow melodic oscillation around a still centre in *Campanella 3* (Example 1) and the mobile-like, chance-determined sequence and recurrence of a few carefully chosen chords in *Eirenicon 3* (Example 2) could well serve as illustrations for another phrase of Zimmermann’s, ‘der sich drehende Moment’ (the moment turning back on itself).



Ex. 2: *Eirenicon 3* for piano

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They also illustrate his statement that ‘Just as Wittgenstein made recognisable the boundaries of language, so Skempton attempts to give us the experience of music, as an art of time, *at its threshold of standstill*’ (my italics).⁵

The following dialogue with the composer is selected and adapted from several conversations which took place during August and September 1985.

Chorales for orchestra

MICHAEL PARSONS: Can we begin by discussing *Chorales*? The form of the single movement is very clear: the three chorale sections for full orchestra, like pillars supporting a double-arch structure; and between them two melodies, a scherzo and three short interludes with translucent chamber scoring. What impresses me, looking at the score, is the lucidity of the instrumental writing, the subtle balance of individual sonorities. Every sound is carefully considered, and nothing is lost. There is an implicit exhortation to each player to listen attentively, as in the music of Cardew and Wolff, giving the work a quality which is often conspicuously absent from the current ‘neo-expressionist’ type of orchestral writing, which calls for a display of extreme technical virtuosity. One is never overwhelmed by an excess of sound; instead, there is a virtuosity of restraint. I am reminded of Webern (in the exchange of tone-colours following bars 100 and 165), as well as of Bartók and Messiaen (in the chromatic contour and harmonisation of the first melody at figure B). But these are reminiscences rather than borrowings — the music never sounds eclectic.

Do you feel that with this work you achieved something substantially different from the earlier short pieces for solo piano and for small instrumental groups?

HOWARD SKEMPTON: No — it’s essentially the same as what I was doing before, but on an orchestral scale. The sixteen chords which form the main chorales existed for a long time in open score; the material was ‘quarried’ almost a year before the work was written. The melody for violins (figure D) also existed independently as an accordion piece. *Chorales* is built up as a linked sequence of sections, each of which is closely related to a previous type of shorter piece.

MP: But there is also a strong sense of architecture in the large-scale form. The transitions from one section to another are beautifully managed, so that the piece never sounds episodic.

HS: This linking of sections is also related to the way any of the individual piano pieces can be grouped in performance. Rather than playing them as isolated single pieces, the performer may choose to arrange them in linked sequences, paying attention to the way one follows another in terms of pitch, texture and movement, and to the balance of the group as a whole. This has, in fact, become the way they are now usually performed.

Solo piano works

MP: The piano pieces continue to be a central concern. Musicians who are not familiar with your work are sometimes puzzled by the absence of specific indications of tempo and dynamics, as in *Eirenicón 3* and in some of the pieces in the Faber collection.⁶ Is there a danger that this may appear to offer licence for types of performance which differ widely from your intentions? There have been, for example, fast and loud versions of *First Prelude*....

HS: It’s a risk you have to take. One trusts the performer to be sympathetic. The absence of instructions will leave an unprepared performer at a loss, and a thoughtless or antagonistic player could always abuse the piece by taking advantage of the lack of instructions. But, on the positive side, the performer is encouraged to think carefully and to assume full responsibility for the choice of how to play the music. Each performance situation is different, subject to practical conditions over which the composer has no control. There is a point beyond which the composer should not go.

MP: Isn’t the absence of instructions also itself a positive indication? I am reminded of a remark by Paul Valéry, to the effect that one’s actions are best defined by what one abstains from doing.⁷ When we were discussing a recent piano piece⁸ — eventually notated, like so many of your works, in even notes without rhythmic inflection — I remember that, having considered the possibility of indicating nuances of performance by means of varying time signatures, tied grace notes and pedalling indications, you decided to write none of these things, but to leave the score ‘clean’.

HS: The ‘clean’ score is crucial. It clarifies structure and emphasises what is purely musical. As in constructive art, form and content are identified. The score exemplifies the underlying principle on which different performances are based, and provides a model for any and every realisation.

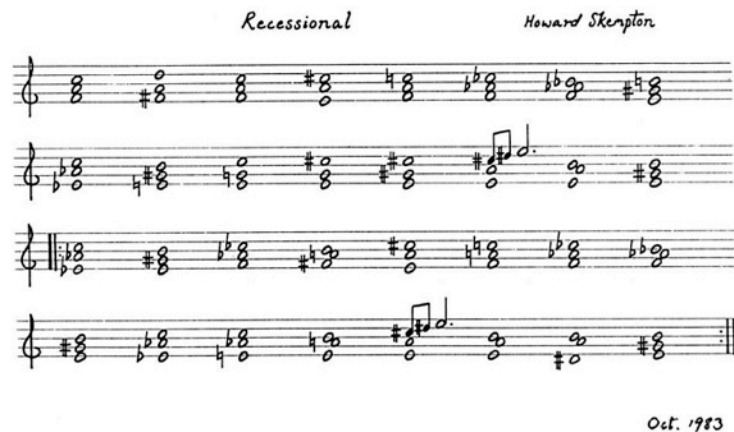
MP: So it's up to the performer to deduce from the notation, and from the absence of qualifying instructions, how a particular piece is to be played?⁹

HS: Yes.

MP: It's very refreshing to come across scores which are not overloaded with phrasing, articulation and dynamic markings. It gives the performer room to breathe; it also makes clear the distinction between composition and performance.

What about arrangements for different instruments? Some of the pieces exist in different instrumental forms,¹⁰ and a number of recent pieces are written in open score. I have myself made versions of some of the piano pieces, including *First Prelude* and *Slow Waltz*, for small groups of instruments.¹¹

HS: One hopes that the pieces will be as useful and accessible as possible. New situations may arise which could not have been foreseen, and the pieces may evolve in response to this. *Recessional* (Example 3) is a case in point; here no instrumentation is specified.



Ex. 3: *Recessional*

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It has been performed as an accordion solo and, on several occasions, with the addition of a stringed instrument (violin, cello or double bass) which doubles the upper part one octave below the written pitch.

MP: Some of the piano pieces, on the other hand, are difficult to imagine in any other form; the first three *Eirenicons*, for example, which seem essentially to do with the resonance of the piano. One must be careful not to offer a 'blank cheque' for any kind of instrumental arrangement. A recent piano work, *The Durham Strike* (Example 4), written in 1985 for John Tilbury, differs from your previous piano pieces in being sectional, like a set of variations. And yet the relationship between the theme, a traditional folk tune from north-east England, and each of the other sections is by no means obvious. Do you think of this as a theme and variations?

for Tom Tilbury

THE DURHAM STRIKE

Howard Skempton

Slowlly
And. pp

(pedalling free to the end)

Extremely Slowlly

January 1985

Ex. 4: *The Durham Strike*

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HS: Yes, but the variations are obliquely related. I think of the piece again as a sequence of linked sections, for which I was able to use the theme as a starting point. There are six sections, and the theme appears only in sections 1 and 3. Section 2 is a variation ‘once removed’, and the material of section 4 existed previously, as an independent sequence of descending chords.

MP: As with *Chorales*, the continuity from one section to another seems both logical and natural, yet here the sequence is looser and more relaxed; each section has a distinct and independent character of its own. Section 5 gives the impression of a rather remote interlude, and in section 6 there is a new melodic idea, related to the opening phrase of the original theme but continuing quite differently.

HS: I do not like to vary or ‘develop’ the theme; it has its own integrity, which must be preserved. I try to allow the material to speak for itself, without pushing it around. This is getting close to Feldman! So it could be described as an assemblage of related short pieces, an association of similars; a society of smaller pieces in which each individual retains its own identity.

Solo accordion works

MP: There have been a number of new accordion pieces since 1980, haven’t there?

HS: There is an external reason for this. In 1981 I moved from Ealing to Clapham, where I was able to practise. Up till then I had played only the twelve-button accordion; at that time I became interested in extending my playing and, as a step towards the full-size instrument, I acquired a 48-button accordion, which has a much wider range, including minor, seventh and diminished chords as well as more major ones. Two of the movements in the 1982 Suite for accordion require the extra resources of the larger instrument.

MP: But more recently, in your own performances, you have reverted to the twelve-button instrument.

HS: Yes, the smaller instrument is considerably lighter, and this means that one has more control of the bellows, which can be fully extended. This increased flexibility allows for more dynamic subtlety and greater expressiveness.

MP: Zimmermann in his article also refers to your accordion playing; he describes the slow opening and closing of the bellows as an example of ‘moving non-movement’.¹² He suggests that in your hands, through the way this elementary character of its ‘breathing’ is exposed, the instrument approaches ‘the generality of a sound-object’. Many of the accordion pieces appear to be popular, even traditional, in style, but at the same time they are highly abstract. It is not only the directness and economy of the material which create this overall impression, but also the sense of concentrated attention in your playing. There is always a respect for the amount of time needed to perform each action and, as a result, the music is spacious and unhurried, reflective in a way that gives it a distance, even detachment, from its popular associations. But to return to the accordion itself — you were suggesting that the greater flexibility of the smaller instrument more than compensates for the limited range of only six major chords. I am tempted to quote again from Stravinsky’s *Poetics of Music*: ‘...my freedom will be so much the greater and more meaningful the more narrowly I limit my field of action and the more I surround myself with obstacles. Whatever diminishes constraint, diminishes strength. The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees one’s self of the chains that shackle the spirit’.¹³ Is it a case of ‘less is more’?

HS: The advantage of working with a limited amount of material is that you can keep it constantly in mind and feel at home with it. Once it’s there, you’re stuck with it! This gives the imagination sufficient time to explore it in depth, and allows it to find its strongest and purest form.

MP: I wonder how many other composers can remember everything they have written?

HS: Satie perhaps? I’m sure he never regretted a single note.

MP: What you say recalls Brancusi, one of whose aphorisms I quoted at the end of my earlier *Contact* article on your music.¹⁴ One can visit his studio in Paris which has been reconstructed as it was left at the time of his death in 1957. There are many examples of sculpture from different periods of his life, and it can be clearly seen how he constantly returned to the same few themes — making different versions of them, with slight variations, over a long period. Is there an affinity here, in the search for the essential form of the image?

HS: If there is an affinity, it lies in the constant preoccupation with material and structure. Chorales, landscapes and melodies are the central concerns which recur in my own work. By having several parallel and related concerns, one retains a freshness of insight as one is drawn back to each of these in turn.

Chorales and landscapes — the experimental tradition

MP: How has the chorale come to assume such significance for you?

HS: The material almost invariably comes in the form of chords, and the chorale is a way of presenting this primary harmonic material in its strongest form, without embellishment. The chorales generally have a clear melodic shape, and there is a sense of movement arising from harmonic tensions in the material, which is often chromatic. *Postlude* (Example 5) is a chorale.



Ex. 5: *Postlude* for piano

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MP: What distinction would you make between the chorales and the pieces which you describe as ‘landscapes’?

HS: The landscapes simply project the material as sound, without momentum. They are more static; they are concerned exclusively with the structure and quality of the sounds in themselves. Sequence is not important and is sometimes chance-determined, as in the early pieces such as *A Humming Song*, *September Song* and *Snowpiece*.

MP: How would you define the characteristics of the ‘landscapes’? In the past you have sometimes used the phrase ‘spacious flatness’. They are obviously not illustrative in any literal way. Perhaps they are metaphorical landscapes, more to do with a mental imagery of space.

HS: There is no sense of forward movement in the landscapes; each chord is self-sufficient. They express a state rather than a progression. The spaces are more important than the features — the openness of the chords evokes spaciousness. The sounds are given as much time as they need. The recurrence of identical chords at different points in a piece is also a spatial feature, in that it contradicts the listener’s expectation of events as an ongoing sequence. *Eirenicon 3* is a landscape.

MP: Isn’t this sense of landscape also very much part of the experimental tradition? There are Cage’s *Imaginary Landscapes*, in which sounds and silences are presented discontinuously, within a structure of predetermined time-lengths. The discontinuity enables one to hear the sounds freshly, without always anticipating where they are leading. But in your pieces, instead of discontinuity there is a more subtle displacement of expectation. In *Eirenicon 3*, though the movement between chords is unpredictable, they are all part of a related set. It’s a field-situation where each of the six possible chords may be followed by any of the others, or may recur itself.

HS: Then there are the ‘plateaux’ of sound which Cardew used to refer to in Feldman’s early work — in *Two Pianos*, for instance — where a single chord, or a short sequence of notes, is repeated several times; this is another spatial image.¹⁵

MP: This awareness of space has always been a distinguishing feature of experimental music. Other forms of new music seem overcrowded in comparison, as if reflecting the image of an acquisitive society whose streets are jammed with vehicles, and whose TV screens are choked with information and entertainment. Every moment has to be crammed with stimuli, as if space were there only to be filled up. I see your music, on the other hand, as a way of

creating space, both for the performer and for the listener. Not pushing the sounds around means also not pushing the listener around.

HS: Yes; the need to create space is of central importance. It is a reaction to pressure and congestion; it is a contemporary need, both in musical and social terms.

MP: In detaching itself from the European tradition, experimental music opened up a dialogue with the visual and spatial arts; as well as the relationship of Cage and Feldman with Merce Cunningham and with the New York painters, there is La Monte Young's connection with land artists such as Walter de Maria. Young's *Composition 1960 No. 10*, 'Draw a straight line and follow it', is an image of spatial extension. He also describes 'the resonance from the natural characteristics of particular geographic areas such as valleys, lakes and plains'¹⁶ as being among the sound experiences which influenced his development - another landscape reference.

HS: We must draw a distinction here: it is not any kind of mystical feeling for landscape as such, but rather the conscious perception of relationships which creates an awareness of space. Whereas the American music of the 1950s and 60s was closer to abstract expressionism — to the unmeasured space of Rothko's paintings, for example — we are now more consciously concerned with structure and measurement. You get a sense of space in 'Draw a straight line and follow it', but it is not limited and defined.¹⁷ It's here that the link with systems art and constructivism becomes crucial. It is through structure and measurement that we create space.

MP: So there is a direct connection between the use of systems and the definition and articulation of space?

HS: Yes; and the use of systematic methods means that we are not oppressed by having to make decisions of taste and expression. Without the control of an external discipline, self-expression may enrich, but it can also overload and suffocate. The use of an objective decision-making procedure is a way of achieving a necessary distance between oneself and one's work.

Melodies in musical space

MP: What about the melodies? They seem generally to move back and forth over a very limited range of notes, sometimes within a confined harmonic area, as in *Campanella 3*; some of the more recent ones, like *Trace* for piano (Example 6) and *Bagatelle* for flute (Example 7), are purely monodic.



Ex. 6: *Trace* for piano

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Ex. 7: *Postlude for flute*

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HS: The great attraction of monody lies in its limitations. There are fewer variables. The subtlety of plainsong or Indian music lies in its movement within a restricted range. Whereas in the chorales the aim is to achieve gravity and in the landscapes to explore the quality of sound, the melodies are concerned more with suppleness and flexibility of movement.

MP: Can you be more specific about the means to achieve this? Is it a more intuitive approach, or are there external controls?

HS: The use of additive rhythm is one means. It allows for shifts of emphasis — any durational value can be expressed in additive combinations of twos and threes. One can refer to pulse without being dominated by it.

MP: So, again, measurement is important?

HS: Yes; it's interesting that the Americans call their bars 'measures'. I would not be in the least interested in writing an unmeasured melody. Pitch and duration can be precisely measured, and this is what the composer is primarily concerned with. It is important to define a specific range of pitches. *Bagatelle for flute* is serial; each of the twelve notes appears the same number of times.

MP: But it does not go through the usual serial manipulations — transposition and inversion and so forth. Instead of variation there is recurrence, which is more modal than serial in the accepted sense. The rhythmic interplay of phrases of unequal length is particularly subtle here, as it keeps returning to and going over the same limited pitch-range. In this sense it is also like defining a space by approaching it from different directions.

HS: I think of melody as tracing a path through a landscape. It's an exploration in terms of intervals and durations.

MP: Are there any models we can refer to? What about Varese's *Density 21.5* for flute? Here is an example of how pitch-space can be delineated with a single line. There is a sense of discovering a space — or rather, a linked sequence of interlocking spaces opening out from each other.

HS: *Density 21.5* is a marvellous example. The spatial quality is made clear if one thinks of the pitches as points of reference. Whereas the intervallic movement from one note to the next is linear, the vertical relationship of pitches considered as points of reference is outside time, and therefore spatial.

MP: Wolff has noted this also in Webern, in the *Piano Variations* and the First Cantata, and in the first movement of the Symphony, where the linear canons are dissolved into spatial relationships.¹⁸ We must remember that Webern was a crucial influence on American experimental composers of the 1950s and 60s: it was not the serial aspect, but the definition of points in space which interested them. Young speaks of the discovery of 'stasis' in Webern.¹⁹

HS: So the suspension of time in experimental music is not a weakness but, on the contrary, one of its greatest strengths. It is through the suspension of time that we discover space.

MP: There are many possible dimensions in musical space. If one is not thinking exclusively in terms of argument and linear development, differences of pitch, timbre, loudness, duration and moment of entry may all be experienced as spatial values. And in your music, where some aspects of the structure are intentionally left open, the performer and listener are invited to participate in the creation of musical space. So it is also a matter of social space. In common with experimental music generally, your work re-establishes the dialogue which other forms of new music have lost, and creates space for communication.

Selected Works

This list is arranged by year, but within each year pieces have been grouped according to instrumentation rather than chronologically. Thus solo piano pieces come first (48 out of the 131 works by Skempton listed here are for a single pianist), then pieces for piano (three hands), then other works for solo instruments (starting with those for solo accordion, the composer's other main instrument as a performer), then duos, trios, etc.; all, of course, as appropriate to each year.

Pieces published in conjunction with this article/interview have been marked in the worklist with a single asterisk. Fourteen other pieces by Skempton can be obtained through *Contact* under two separate headings as follows:

** indicates the five pieces published in conjunction with Michael Parsons' previous article on the composer in *Contact* 21 (Autumn 1980)

*** indicates the nine works for solo piano published in a special collection entitled *Piano Pieces* by Faber Music in 1974. Copies of this may currently be obtained from the composer.

In addition, eleven other pieces by Skempton have so far appeared in other journals and books. These are indicated in the worklist as follows, with the exception of one piece (published in the collection in *Soundings*, no. 10) which the composer has now withdrawn:

+ indicates the single work published both by the Experimental Music Catalogue (1972) and in Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (London: Studio Vista, 1974), p. 145.

+ + indicates the four pieces published in the American magazine *Soundings*, no. 10 (1976).

+ + + indicates the three pieces published in conjunction with Walter Zimmermann's article on the composer in *MusikTexte*, no. 3 (February 1984), to which reference is made in Parsons' text above.

+ + + + indicates the two pieces published in conjunction with the interview with Skempton in Kevin Volans, *Summer Gardeners: Conversations with Composers* (Durban: Newer Music Edition, 1985).

1967

A Humming Song for piano***

1968

Snowpiece for piano +

September Song for piano***

1969

Piano Piece 1969

African Melody for cello

1970

Waltz for piano + + +

Two Highland Dances for piano

North Wind for soprano saxophone

1971

First Prelude for piano***

Prelude for horn + +

May Pole for orchestra (open score)

1972

One for Molly for piano***

Quavers for piano***

*Simple Piano Piece****
Not-very-long Song for voice and accordion
Lament (open score) + +

1973

Intermezzo for piano***
Sweet Chariot for piano
Riding the Thermals for piano***
Eirenicon for piano + +
Rumba for piano
Slow Waltz for piano (three hands)***
Bends for cello

1974

One for Martha for piano**
Quavers 2 for piano**
senza licenza for piano
Invention for piano
Tender Melody for piano
Gentle Melody for accordion + +
Heart Sounds for two voices
Embers 2 for two voices
Equal Measures for two drums
Drum Canon for two drums

1975

Second Gentle Melody for piano
Colonnade for piano
Quavers 3 for piano
passing fancy for piano
Deeply Shaded for accordion
Summer Waltz for accordion
Ada's Dance for accordion
Surface Tension for flute, cello and piano
Surface Tension 2 for flute, cello and piano
Two Drum Trios
Prelude for flute and string trio

1976

Chorale for piano
Surface Tension 3 for piano
One for the Road for accordion**
Duet for piano and woodblocks
Drum Canon 2 for two drums
Acacia for two drums
Impromptu for two baritone horns
Autumn Waltz for two baritone horns**
Hornplay for two baritone horns

1977

June '77 for piano
Eirenicon 2 for piano
Saltire Melody for piano
Children's Dance for accordion and piano

1978

Eirenicon 3 for piano*
Postlude for piano*
Memento for piano
Merry-go-round for accordion
Pendulum for accordion + + +
Summer Sketches for accordion
Tuba da caccia for tuba
Intermezzo for viola and horn
Air Melody (open score)

1979

Friday's Child for piano

Air for piano**
Melody for a First Christmas for flute
Melody for horn
 Scherzo for two horns
 Trio for three horns

1980

Trace for piano*
Break for two drums
Fabric for two drums
Preamble for two drums
Song at the Year's Turning for four-part mixed chorus (words: R.S. Thomas)
 Chorales for orchestra

1981

Campanella for piano
Outline for piano (three hands)
Breather for cello

1982

Campanella 2 for piano
Well, Well, Cornelius for piano + + + +
Seascape for piano
Campanella 3 for piano*
 Suite for accordion
 Prelude for violin
Alice is One for voice and piano
Tree Sequence (1981-2) for voice, piano and woodblocks: From the Palm Trees; Willow; Laburnum; Mountain Ash; Duet (1976)
Highland Melody (open score)

1983

Beginner for piano + + +
Breathing Space for accordion
Call for clarinet
Wedding Tune for violin and autoharp
Lullaby for clarinet and cello
Second Tree Sequence for voice and piano: Tree, leafless; Under the Elder; Aspen Trees
Pigs could Fly for voice and piano
The Gipsy Wife's Song for mezzo-soprano, flute, oboe, vibraphone and piano (words: Bevan Jones, after D. H. Lawrence)
Recessional (open score)*
Christmas Melody (open score)

1984

Quavers 5 for piano
Twin Set and Pearls for accordion
Cakes and Ale for accordion + + + +
A Card for Lucy for clarinet
May Air for bassoon
Fanfare and Caprice for guitar
Lyric for cello and piano

1985

The Durham Strike for piano*
 Piano Piece for Trevor Clarke
Campanella 4 for piano
Eirenicon 4 for piano
 Second Suite for accordion
 Third Suite for accordion
Small Change for accordion
Home and Abroad for accordion
Bagatelle for flute*
Song without Words for horn and accordion
Agreement for two drums
Pineapple Melody for horn, accordion and double bass
Alone and Together for clarinet, bassoon and piano

1986

The Mold Riots for piano

Resolution for piano

Something of an Occasion for accordion

Axis for accordion

Axis 2 for accordion

Two Interludes for accordion and vibraphone

Two Voices (male voices)

Finding Home for clarinet, cello, glockenspiel and piano

From Waterloo Bridge for mixed chorus and two pianos (words: John Mackie)

Two Preludes for string orchestra

Suite for Strings (string orchestra or string quintet)

All music examples are complete pieces. Examples 1, 2, 4, 5 and 6 are © Oxford University Press (<http://www.oup.co.uk/music/>), 1996, from Howard Skempton, *Collected Piano Pieces*, and are reproduced by kind permission. Examples 3 and 7 are the copyright of the composer and reproduced by kind permission.

Skempton's two *Tree Sequences* are included on the vinyl record 'Slower than Molasses' (1986), performed by Janet Sherbourne (voice) and Mark Lockett (piano), which also contains two songs by Michael Parsons, pieces by Glyn Bush and the performers themselves. Copies of this record are still available from Practical Music, 1 St. Anne's Road, Caversham, Reading RG4 7PA, UK. Ten solo piano pieces of Skempton's are included on a disc of piano music played by Peter Hill; this also contains works by Nigel Osborne and Douglas Young; the record number is Merlin MRF 86585, and it can be obtained from Merlin Distribution, 29 Brickie Road, Norwich NR14 8NG.

Notes

¹ Michael Parsons, 'The Music of Howard Skempton', *Contact* 21 (Autumn 1980), pp. 12–16.

² Reviewed by Calum MacDonald in *Tempo*, no. 142 (September 1982), p. 41.

³ Igor Stravinsky, *Poetics of Music*, bilingual edition, trans. Arthur Knodel and Ingolf Dahl (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 43.

⁴ 'Stillgehaltene Musik: Zu Howard Skemptions Kompositionen', *MusikTexte*, no.3 (February 1984), pp. 35–7. All translations from this that follow are my own.

⁵ 'So wie Wittgenstein die Sprache an ihren Grenzen erkennbar machte, versucht Skempton Musik als Zeitkunst an ihrer Grenze zum Stillstand erfahrbar zu machen.' *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁶ Skempton, *Piano Pieces* (Faber Music, 1974). The nine compositions in this collection are marked with three asterisks in the list of works at the end of this article. The collection is temporarily out of print, but see the worklist for further information.

⁷ Paul Valéry, *Cahiers*, ed. Judith Robinson (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1973–4), p. 1373.

⁸ *Piano Piece for Trevor Clarke* (1985).

⁹ For an interpreter's view, see Peter Hill, 'Riding the Thermals — Howard Skempton's Piano Music', *Tempo*, no.148 (March 1984), pp. 8–11.

¹⁰ For example, *Second Gentle Melody* for piano (1975) was originally written in open score (1974); Parsons and Skempton played it on baritone horn and accordion in 1975. *Wedding Tune* for violin and autoharp (1983) is also played by the composer as a solo accordion piece. *Slow Waltz* for piano (three hands) (1973) was originally conceived as an accordion solo earlier the same year and subsequently played (though never written down) in this form.

¹¹ For student groups in the Department of Fine Art, Portsmouth Polytechnic in 1978: *First Prelude* (1971) was transposed up a perfect fourth and arranged for flute, clarinet, violin, viola and cello; *Slow Waltz* was arranged for flute, viola and cello. The latter has also been arranged for cello and piano by Alan Brett (1985).

¹² Zimmermann, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

¹³ Stravinsky, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

¹⁴ 'Simplicity is not a goal, but one arrives at simplicity in spite of oneself, as one approaches the real meaning of things.' In Parsons, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

¹⁵ In Cornelius Cardew, 'Notation, Interpretation, Etc.', *Tempo*, no. 58 (Summer 1961), p. 33, a passage from Feldman's *Two Pianos* is quoted (bars 24–67), with indications that a single chord is to be played seven times, and a passage of seven bars four times. This differs from the published version of the score (Edition Peters, 1962), which contains fewer repetitions and is unbarred. The passage quoted by Cardew is presumably taken from an earlier, unpublished version. Another clear example of this 'plateau' effect can be found in Feldman's *Extensions III* for piano (1952).

¹⁶ La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela, *Selected Writings* (Munich: Heiner Friedrich, 1969), un-paginated.

¹⁷ For Skempton's comments on performing this piece, see Parsons, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

¹⁸ Christian Wolff, 'Movement', *Die Reihe*, no. 2 (2nd, revised, English edition, 1959), pp. 61–3.

¹⁹ Young and Zazeela, *op. cit.*