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The Music of Howard Skempton

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Since 1967, when he first moved to London to study privately with Cornelius Cardew, Howard Skempton has pursued an even and consistent course in his music, focusing and refining his central concerns. His concentration on the quality of sound and his economy of means are already clearly evident in early works such as *A Humming Song* (1967), *Snowpiece* and *September Song* (both 1968) and *Piano Piece 1969*.[1] These piano pieces are predominantly static and without development, presenting in chance-determined sequence a limited number of carefully pre-selected notes or chords. The usual playing direction is 'very slowly and quietly', and there is little sense of forward momentum; each individual sound is allowed to resonate freely, and successive notes or chords are related to each other only by juxtaposition. There is a clear relationship with the earlier music of Feldman, but in Skempton's pieces the means are even more economical.

A Humming Song was actually written in April 1967 when Skempton was 19, a few months before he began studying with Cardew. It is for a pianist who is asked also to sustain certain notes by humming; this, incidentally, requires considerable control and relaxation and disproves the false notion that Skempton's music is always technically easy to perform. This composition is worth describing in some detail, since it uses methods which can be found in many of Skempton's other works. The sound of the piece was conceived statically, and may be described as a projection in time of different aspects of a single harmonic structure, consisting of eight basic pitches arranged symmetrically around the C sharp and D sharp in the central register of the piano, with intervals increasing outwards; the two central pitches are the ones that are hummed as well as played. There are also two auxiliary pitches, an octave above and below the highest and lowest of the other eight notes. This source material is never heard in its complete form. Six possible sounds were selected from it: a single note, two 2-note chords, two 3-note chords and a 4-note chord. Chance was then used to determine the order and number of occurrences of each of these six possibilities, within a total of 32. Whenever this procedure led to an immediate repetition of a chord including the highest or lowest note, the auxiliary note, an octave above or below, could be brought into play. There is thus already in this early piece a finely balanced relationship between chance and intuitive selection. The method of composition gives the music a rather loose and 'timeless' quality, drawing attention to the unique sonority of each note or chord as it occurs, rather than to the structure of the piece as a whole.

In *Waltz* and *Two Highland Dances*, both piano pieces dating from 1970, a more clearly defined metrical structure is introduced. In the *Highland Dances* there is a regular alternation of two 8-bar or 4-bar sections respectively, and in *Waltz* the four 16-bar sections of the piece are repeated over and over in predetermined sequences. These pieces are tonally

static: both of the *Highland Dances* have an open-fifth drone throughout, and *Waltz* has been well described by Michael Nyman as a paradigm of experimental flatness and uniformity.[2]

With *First Prelude* (1971) there emerges a more definite sense of harmonic movement. This is, however, always contained within narrow limits and is never allowed to achieve the dynamic, developing quality of a chord progression in traditional music. There is, rather, oscillation around a harmonic centre, focusing attention on it instead of using it as a point of departure or for dramatic contrast. The uniform repetition of each chord, which gives to this and similar pieces some apparent rhythmic momentum, is in fact used simply as a way of prolonging and emphasising the sonority. The same is true in *Quavers* (1972); here only four chord-types are used throughout, and while their succession and the number of occurrences of each type, within the total of 16, was again determined by chance, there is more harmonic cohesion within the material as a whole. *In Riding the Thermals* (1973) there are again only four chord-types, but variety of succession is guaranteed by the choice of six different paired sequences. All these piano pieces have the ability to illuminate their very limited chosen sound material from different angles, in such a way that in performance they give the impression of being much more varied and extensive than appears from the notation.[3]

In contrast with the more purely abstract pieces, there are other piano pieces which are more subtly evocative, seeming to make oblique reference to traditional procedures. Such is *One for Martha* (1974) with its unresolved tonal ambiguity, which hangs in the air like a prolonged moment from an imaginary late-19th century piano piece (see Example 1).

Ex. 1: *One for Martha* for piano
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Quavers II (1974) (see Example 2) is again more abstract, dealing directly with the musical material as such.

Ex. 2: *Quavers II* for piano
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Here the full twelve notes are used; they are divided into four groups of three, which are combined to give four 6-note chord types. In this piece a more formal time-structure is created; it was determined that each of the four chord-types was to occur an equal number of times so that, while the succession was again determined by chance, the proportions were fixed and, given the limited possibilities, certain symmetries and regularities were bound to occur. The measured repetition of the dissonant chords creates a strong impression; as in the first *Quavers*, each chord is to be struck eight times, with the sustaining pedal held. Repetition is again used as a way of extending the chord, for long enough for the ear to grasp fully its rich sonority, but not long enough to allow one to lose one's bearings in the time-structure. The whole piece is contained within a strict framework of equal-length units and consists of layers of juxtaposed sound with clear stepped movement from one level to another. Because of its simple, symmetrical proportions, this piece has more formal definition than the earlier works, and the effect, within its brief duration, is one of monumental gravity and strength.

The static and unitary character of these pieces may be related at least partly to the influence of La Monte Young, whose music Cardew was enthusiastically propagating at the time when Skempton first came to study with him. In the late 60s Cardew presented performances of, among other pieces, *Poem*, *X for Henry Flynt* (both 1960) and *Death Chant* (1961); Young's work of the early 60s also featured prominently in Cardew's Experimental Music class at Morley College (1968-69) and in the early activities of the Scratch Orchestra (1969-71), with both of which Skempton was closely involved.[4] The emphasis on a single type of sound, on drones, repetition and extended time-scales in the music of both Young and Terry Riley certainly had a decisive influence on the manner of performance as well as on the initial conception of Skempton's *Drum No. 1* (1969): 'Any number of drums. Introduction of pulse. Continuation of pulse. Deviation through emphasis, decoration, contradiction'. This was written as a direct, practical response to the situation in the Morley College class in 1969, when everyone was asked to bring a drum. There were widely varying degrees of musical experience and ability, and Skempton's text provided a central focus to which everyone could relate. One player would introduce and maintain throughout a constant pulse (MM. 120), which provided an essential point of reference for everyone else; the definition of the piece was clear but wide enough to embrace intentional and accidental deviations, and the more players there were taking part, the more dense and complex the sound would become. This piece soon established itself as one of the most useful and satisfying works in the Scratch Orchestra's repertory; performances often lasted an hour or more and were always full of interesting and unpredictable details.

The influence of Young may also be heard in two lengthy tape pieces which Skempton made at this time: *Indian Summer* (1969), which used wild crackling and feedback sounds produced with an erratic tape-recorder, and *Drum No. 3* (1971), made with an amplified scraped cymbal. In both of these pieces an intense involvement with deliberately abrasive, noise-like sound was evident. This is an interest which Skempton does not seem to have pursued further, though it may not be too far-fetched to relate to it his choice of the accordion, with its rather strident timbre and rough intonation, as his main performing instrument. In May 1977 he participated in the Fluxus retrospective concert at the Air Gallery, London, performing as a single sustained sound on the accordion Young's *Composition 1960 No. 10*: 'Draw a straight line and follow it', in reference to which he also provided the following programme note:

> 'Draw a straight line and follow it' is simultaneously ascetic and hedonistic in character. It demands total commitment (c.f. 'You've made your bed; now lie on it!'). The hedonism is reflected in the total suspension of time. We should define this music, not as 'organised time', but as 'borrowed time'.

to which he later added this further statement:

> The power of music to inspire confidence is more than equalled by its ability to alleviate anxiety. Through music we are no longer manipulated by time. . . . We can stem the tide of time through the practice of repetition; or through silence, the last refuge of the fastidious.[5]

It is with Feldman's music, however, that Skempton feels a stronger affinity.[6] He quotes a recent saying of Feldman's: 'For most composers, form follows function; for me, function follows form',[7] and explains:

> I take this to mean that there is no ulterior motive; the creation of form is sufficient. It's the purity that is so impressive . . . there's nothing extraneous. Every note, every rest is carefully weighed.[8]

If, in comparison with that of Feldman, Skempton's own recent music shows a more conscious concern with structure, it is because

> Feldman is more organic, less subject to gravity; it's a different kind of power. I like a piece to have a strong foundation, to have its feet firmly on the ground. It's only by putting structure first that you can create something strong enough to survive.

Skempton's commitment to clear structural principles has been encouraged by a close association with visual artists working in the constructivist tradition. Since 1974 there has been mutual interest in each other's work and a fruitful exchange of ideas, notably with Peter Lowe and Jeffrey Steele, to both of whom Skempton has dedicated pieces, and with younger artists such as Trevor Clarke and Emma Park. Constructivism is concerned primarily with coherence, intelligibility and the clear definition of form; the aim is always to create perceptible interrelationships within a defined field. Skempton refers in particular to the interdependence of structure and material which is an essential characteristic of constructivist work; the structural idea must be in complete agreement with the means of its physical realisation, so that they enhance and complement each other.[9] He believes that there is a need for more emphasis on rationality:

> Composing is thinking musically. If today's music seems less intelligent than it should, the composer's job is to restore the balance. This is why Bartok, Stravinsky and Webern are still so important.

Among other composers whose work he admires are Gorecki and Xenakis, both of whom have a strong feeling for the objective physical nature of sound; and, a more conservative group, Malcolm Arnold, Britten and Shostakovich, whose craftsmanship and practicality he greatly respects. His own approach is summed up in the following statement:

> Self-expression is not the aim. One looks out and responds to an external necessity, observing and discovering possibilities in the chosen material. The aim is to fulfil a need. One studies the technical properties of the instruments, the abilities and limitations of specific players, the amount of rehearsal time available, the place, the performance situation and potential audience; all these things determine the character of what is to be composed. The objective requirements are paramount. Once I know these things, the piece is there in all its essentials.

This objective approach does not mean that the music is lacking in expressivity. On the contrary, much of Skempton's music has an immediate attractiveness and engaging warmth. As with experimental music generally, however, the intention is that the expressive quality of the sound itself should be allowed to come into play. This lies in the nature of the musical material; intervals, rhythms and timbres have their own particular expressive characteristics and these are revealed rather than exploited.

Skempton's music takes a fresh look at some of the basic elements of musical language; scales, familiar melodic shapes and chords are often freed from their traditional associations and presented in a new light. A good example is the chromatic scale in the *Waltz* for piano mentioned earlier, which has none of the expressive implications of chromaticism in classical music. It is introduced here with surprising directness, simply as a new piece of material, a straightforward rising and descending line. Basic elements of this kind are used in all innocence of their conventionally accepted meanings, and what is sometimes mistaken for sentimentality or nostalgia is rather a recreation of something long taken for granted.

Semitonal movement occurs frequently in his music, both melodically and harmonically. Instead of being treated as a leading note, with implied harmonic direction, the semitone is used for what it literally is: a slight shift in position. In *First Prelude*, for example, the oscillation between E natural and E flat in successive chords recurs throughout, and in many other pieces movement from one chord to the next makes use of this kind of shift; *Quavers III* (1975) and *Air* for piano (1979) have bass lines descending regularly in semitones.

Ex. 3: *Air* for piano
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The same kind of movement is prominent melodically in *Autumn Waltz* for two baritone horns (1976), in *Children's Dance* (1977) for accordion and piano and in the recent *Scherzo* (1979) for two horns.

Ex. 4: *Autumn Waltz* for two baritone horns
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Another form of semitonal relationship is the simultaneous use of major and minor thirds, sixths or sevenths — the 'false relation' of English 16th century music — which is found in the accordion piece *One for the Road* (1976) and elsewhere.

Ex. 5: *One for the Road* for accordion
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In addition to the continuing flow of brief, concentrated piano pieces, Skempton's more recent work includes a number of compositions for percussion duo. These are demonstrative in character and clearly dictated by the extreme limitations of the chosen medium: two players each with one drum and one stick. Within these limits the various possibilities of pulse, repetition, alternation and cross-rhythm are explored. In the considerable number of short accordion pieces also, the instrument itself provides the inspiration. Some of these are straightforward melodies, with simple chordal accompaniment which arises naturally from playing a twelve-button accordion on which only six chords are available, all of them major triads. Particularly ingenious use of the instrument is made in *One for the Road*, where a dense texture is created by the overlapping of notes common to keyboard and chord buttons. Melodic phrasing in these pieces makes use of the natural 'breath length' of the alternate in-and-out movement of the bellows, and in Skempton's playing care is taken to respect this break in the flow of air, instead of, as with most accordion players, to try and conceal it. The accordion pieces are very varied in character, ranging from the raucous fairground style of *Ada's Dance* (1971–75) to the sobriety of *One for the Road* and the grave formality of *Pendulum* (1978).

A number of works for orchestra must also be mentioned. There are three orchestral pieces dating from the period of the Scratch Orchestra: *Pole* (1970), *May Pole*[10] and *Movement for Orchestra* (both 1971), in which the material, again consisting of a limited number of chordal types in a chance-determined sequence, is presented in open score. The instruction is that each player should choose any one pitch from each chord and play it for any length of time, beginning within the duration of 20 seconds specified for that chord; notes of one chord may be sustained to overlap into those of the next. These works thus have the practical virtue of being playable by any instrumental combination; the indeterminacy of orchestral colour clearly leaves much to the skill and fine judgement of the performers. The willingness to let sound take care of itself in performance, characteristic of the free-and-easy approach of the Scratch Orchestra days, may now seem somewhat optimistic, and it has been replaced by a more controlled approach in recent pieces. In 1978 Skempton made a fully realised version of *Pole* for nine instruments,[11] and he is currently (March 1980) at work on a new orchestral piece *Serenade*, in which the instrumentation will be fully composed.[12] This work reveals a continuing preoccupation with methods of composition established over the last 13 years: as in *A Humming Song*, all the pitch material is derived from a single harmonic source, with notes arranged symmetrically around a central axis; there are four chord types presented in a chance-determined sequence, and as in *Riding the Thermals* they occur in six ordered

pairs so that certain connections are guaranteed. In the orchestration the aim will be, Skempton says, to use maximum variety of instrumental colour in trying to recapture the intuitive feeling of an improvised performance of one of the earlier orchestral pieces, but without ever obscuring the basic chord-structure itself.

The elemental simplicity and clarity of Howard Skempton's music belong essentially to the experimental tradition, which stands in sharp contrast to dominant avantgarde tendencies. In an age in which musical significance tends to be associated with virtuosity and complexity, a music so devoid of drama and self-expression, so reduced to bare essentials and of such apparent technical simplicity may seem paradoxical. It may not always be evident from the economy of the notation how much skill, restraint and disinterestedness are required to realise it successfully in performance. Nevertheless, its unpretentious strength and integrity provide a convincing alternative to the distracted novelties and emotional gesturings which are characteristic of so much contemporary music. It proposes a different set of values, both musically and socially.

It may, finally, be appropriate to call to mind these words of the sculptor Brancusi, with whose work Skempton's music seems to have certain qualities in common:

> Simplicity is not a goal, but one arrives at simplicity in spite of oneself, as one approaches the real meaning of things.[13]

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Notes

[1] *A Humming Song* and *September Song* were originally published in Howard Skempton, *Piano Pieces* (London: Faber Music, 1974); *Snowpiece* and *Piano Piece 1969* in EMC's *Keyboard Anthology* (London: Experimental Music Catalogue, 1972). These pieces are included in the OUP collection (1996).

[2] *Waltz* and *Two Highland Dances* are likewise to be found in EMC's *Keyboard Anthology*, in addition, *Waltz* and *Snowpiece* are reproduced in Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (London: Studio Vista, 1974), pp. 145–146, in the course of his discussion of Skempton's music in the chapter 'Minimal music, determinacy and the new tonality'. See also Nyman, 'Hearing/ Seeing' in the 'Art and Experimental Music' issue of *Studio International*, Vol. 192, No. 984 (November–December 1976), pp. 236-237, which again reproduces *Waltz*.

[3] *First Prelude*, *Quavers* and *Riding the Thermals* were also published in the Faber collection of *Piano Pieces* (All the pieces mentioned in notes 1, 2, and 3 are in the OUP collection, 1996, except for *Waltz*).

[4] See Dave Smith, 'Following a Straight Line: La Monte Young', *Contact* 18 (Winter 1977–78), pp. 7–9 [reprinted in *Jems*], in the course of which *September Song* is again reproduced; see also Nyman, *Experimental Music*, op. cit., especially pp. 112–118 for a discussion of the Scratch Orchestra.

[5] Quoted in Keith Potter, 'New Music Diary', *Contact* 18 (Winter 1977–78), p. 49.

[6] See Howard Skempton, 'Beckett as librettist', *Music and Musicians*, Vol. 25, No. 9 (May 1977), pp. 5–6, in which he writes about Feldman's one-act opera *Neither* and quotes from a conversation with the composer.

[7] In conversation with Skempton, February 1979.

[8] This and the following three quotations are from a conversation between Skempton and the author, February 1980.

[9] For a more detailed account of the relationship between the English systemic composers and visual artists see Michael Parsons, 'Systems in Art and Music', *The Musical Times*, Vol. 117, No. 1604 (October 1976), pp. 815–818.

[10] *May Pole* is published in the *Scratch Anthology of Compositions* (London: Experimental Music Catalogue, 1971). *Jems* note, 2004: This anthology is out of print.

[11] The version of *Pole* for nine instruments (flute, clarinet, horn, two guitars, keyboards, vibraphone, cello and double bass) was made in July 1978 for Douglas Young and an ILEA schools' ensemble.

[12] The orchestra for *Serenade* consists of piccolo, flute, oboe, cor anglais, clarinet, bass clarinet, bassoon, double bassoon, horn, trumpet, trombone, tuba and strings.

[13] Quoted in David Lewis, *Constantin Brancusi* (London: Academy Editions, 1974), p. 20.