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Representing Benjamin

Brian Ferneyhough and the Aesthetic of the Moment Part II

Lois Fitch

In a previous article, I considered Brian Ferneyhough's only opera, Shadowtime (2004), the culmination of his longstanding interest in Walter Benjamin's modes of thought, but also consolidating Ferneyhough's own reflections on time and history, placing them at the forefront of his compositional concerns. As the opera's very title suggests, time is – allegorically – as much a protagonist as the character of Benjamin himself.

Although in subsequent works the aesthetic context is much less explicitly Benjaminian, it is nevertheless the case that a concern for time and the listener's experience of it remains a key consideration, permeating the opera's form and expressive means. Benjamin's 'now time', the moment outside history, disengaged from the chain of cause and effect, is invoked in all but name in Ferneyhough's most recent approach to composing works in many tiny sections, which do not appear to follow from each other logically, or predict developmental lines within a work. This form is first encountered in Scene II of the opera, *Les Froissements d'Ailes de Gabriel*. Time is also treated allegorically here: angels are reputed to be unable to experience time (hence Benjamin's frequent references to Messianic time as another example of the moment that exists outside of the historical continuum), to which Ferneyhough responds by creating over 100 tiny fragments that pass by the listener too quickly to be assimilated into a larger-scale continuity. Ferneyhough carries this essential principle over into many works composed since the opera, which however manifests itself in different ways in each piece to be discussed here. These include *Plötzlichkeit*, *Chronos-Aion*, *Exordium*, *Finis Terrae*, *Liber Scintillarum*, and the Sixth String Quartet.

Since *Shadowtime*, Ferneyhough's formal approach has been predicated on discontinuity, which resonates with Edward Said's characterization of 'late style':

Each of us can readily supply evidence of how it is that late works crown a lifetime of aesthetic endeavor. Rembrandt and Matisse, Bach and Wagner. But what of

artistic lateness not as harmony and resolution but as intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction? (Said 2006: 7)

Said's discussion of 'late style' in relation to numerous figures in music, art, and literature draws significantly on the work of Theodor W. Adorno, particularly his critique of late style in Beethoven; but it is perhaps Said's analysis of the Greek Alexandrian poet Constantine Cavafy (d.1933) that is most germane to Ferneyhough's situation, and in which Said draws close to Benjamin's concept of the moment. In Cavafy's poems,

[t]he characters [...] are seen at passing — though sometimes crucial — moments in their lives: the poem reveals and consecrates the moment before history closes around it and it is lost to us forever. The time of the poem, which is never sustained for more than a few instants, is always outside and alongside the real present [...] His poems enact a form of minimal survival between the past and the present. (Said: 145).

Said's words echo Benjamin's formulation: 'the true image of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again' (Benjamin 1999: 247). Said goes on to offer a reading of Cavafy's poem *The God Abandons Anthony*. In the poem, Anthony is enjoined to witness Alexandria as 'an animated, disciplined spectacle in which he once participated' for the last time, although Anthony must do so in silence

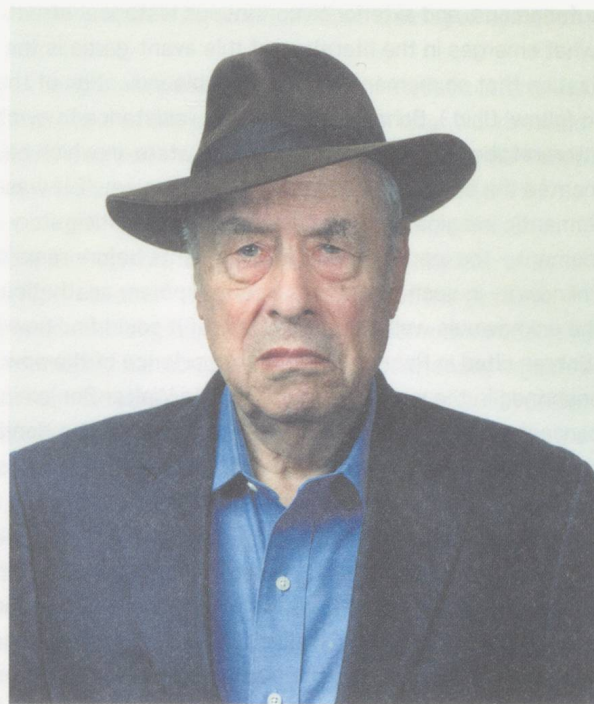
(Said: 147). Said observes that 'the convergence of absolute stillness [Anthony's] and totally organized, pleasurable sound [Alexandria outside the window] is wonderfully held together in an almost prosaic, accentless diction' (Ibid.). This could almost be a description of Ferneyhough's formal approach, in which the short fragments of animated material are often held together by short periods of silence prescribed in the scores. A final remark of Said's is pertinent to Ferneyhough's fragment style:

This is the prerogative of late style: it has the power to render disenchantment and pleasure without resolving the contradictions between them. What holds them in tension, as equal forces straining in opposite directions, is the artist's mature subjectivity, stripped of hubris and pomposity, unashamed either of its fallibility or of the modest assurance it has gained as a result of age and exile (Said: 148).

Although it is speculation to suggest that Ferneyhough's style conveys unresolved tension between 'disenchantment' and 'pleasure', it might be argued that his own published reflections on the recent fragment form imply as much. He observes that 'in today's young composers it's extremely interesting to note that their forms are almost formless. When I look at their scores I often have no idea what to make of them' (Meyer 2007: 51). Whilst it perhaps stretches the point to imagine that this signals disenchantment, the observation doubtless informs his own approach to composing, for 'on the definitely positive side they often leave me convinced that the old formal rhetoric no longer works. That's why I now try to work with tiny sections in juxtaposition' (51). Nevertheless, Ferneyhough's assurance in his recent path, no doubt 'gained as a result of age and exile' is also evident from his comments on his greater acceptance of more influences and styles from the 'real world of music': 'I've found that I even enjoy it a bit. I don't have to prove anything' (57).

The first of the recent works to be considered here adds a further theoretical context, the terms of which resonate clearly with both Benjamin and Said. The orchestral work *Plötzlichkeit* ['Suddenness'] lasts over twenty minutes and includes 111 fragments, but its title indicates the particular aesthetic perspective Ferneyhough adopts by means of the form: as will be discussed below, 'Suddenness' has been conceptualized by German theorist Karl Heinz Bohrer (b.1932). Ferneyhough's piece explores the suddenness of aesthetic experience and, in contrast with his earlier examinations of the performer's psyche (typical of the notational 'overload' of the 1970s), he transfers this 'study' to the listener, who must attempt to assimilate the suddenness of the moment into the continuous listening experience. The form becomes, in effect, a kind of anti-rhetoric, since rhetoric is predicated on continuity and building a persuasive argument; suddenness, by contrast, promotes discontinuity and undermines traditional formal logic.

Suddenness adds to the qualities of lateness, untimeliness,



Karl Heinz Bohrer. © Spencer Murphy

'now time' (the eternal present) and measured time that Ferneyhough previously explored in the opera. *Plötzlichkeit* forms a trilogy with *Chronos-Aion* for large ensemble and the Sixth String Quartet, in that all three address various temporal qualities from different perspectives, principally through the treatment of musical form, instrumentation and texture. In each case, Ferneyhough composes in small sections or 'slices', although these are less miniaturized in the Sixth Quartet owing to a modification of the formal concept (as will be seen below). For all that it takes its name from Bohrer's concept and owes much to the latter's theory of the moment, the relationship to Benjaminian thought in *Plötzlichkeit* is inescapable, and the work forms a bridge to the other two works, in which the expression — one might go so far as to say the representation — of different types of time becomes increasingly direct, encompassing the smallest musical detail.

Bohrer's concept of the Suddenness of aesthetic experience is set out in his text *Plötzlichkeit: Zum Augenblick des ästhetischen Scheins* (1981). Suddenness is captured in the discontinuities of modern literature, which Bohrer observes to be characterized by interruption or the protagonist's sudden awareness of epiphany, as in James Joyce (*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Dubliners*). According to one commentator, 'for the sudden moment to have any force whatsoever it must announce its occurrence in a "now" [...]. Bohrer points to this sudden moment within the aesthetic form, whose emphasis on narrative has traditionally insisted on development and progress' (Ferris 2008: 212). The epiphanic moment is described by Hugo von Hofmannsthal as one that 'cannot be interpreted "symbolically," does not point beyond itself [but rather] [...] problematizes every sort of presumed continuity' (Hofmannsthal, cited in Rennie 2005: 116). The moment is

autonomous, and exterior to continuous historical structures: 'what emerges in the literature of this avant-garde is the realization that no moment can be a reliable indication of the one to follow' (Ibid.). Bohrer also identifies resistance to symbolic interpretation in German Romantic literature, in which he locates the emergence of aesthetic modernism: '[i]t was the Romantic imagination that first grasped the anticipatory moment – the leap into what just moments before remained unknown – in such a way that a contemporary aesthetics of the unknown as well as our very fear of it could find new life' (Bohrer, cited in Rennie, 116). The importance of the *now* enshrined in the sudden moment recalls Walter Benjamin's concept of 'now time' [*Jetztzeit*], mentioned earlier. Benjamin conceives of an image that does not endure – it is lost as soon as it appears – in order to expose the falsity of the construction of history as continuity; Bohrer by contrast, 'build[s] his account of a historical period of literature around [the moment]: [it] does not disappear like it does in Benjamin. Bohrer maintains its indeterminacy as a phenomenal aspect of modern literature, that is, the significance of modern literature is determined by Bohrer through an appearance condensed into temporal moments' (Ferris: 215). It is likely that Ferneyhough came to know Bohrer's writing through the latter's engagement with Benjaminian thought, but Bohrer's particular concept of the moment, and its sudden appearance, have ramifications for Ferneyhough's recent approach to musical form: 'for the moment to appear, time must be out of joint. The challenge posed by Bohrer's text is then whether modern literature presents time as something no longer joined to a larger context such as consciousness or whether time cannot be placed within any joining or disjoining' (Ferris, 214). Ferneyhough echoes this when he argues that 'I feel that the events in my music pass by so quickly that they can't be completely deciphered. You can't take them apart, reequip them with appropriate terminology and send them back into the world organized so to speak along pat classical lines' (Meyer: 55). Here, he describes a musical 'time out of joint', suggesting that 'I want to attain new types of narrativity in discontinuity' (52). The autonomy Bohrer conceives for the sudden – temporally condensed – moment is also manifest in Ferneyhough's approach to his material: '[w]hat I don't want here is a meaningless string of elements; I want to work in a dialectic of the fractured or non-continuable, not as fragments, but as very small holistic entities, perhaps no more than one or two bars long' (Ibid.).

The gestural language of *Plötzlichkeit* reinforces the tiny sections that constitute the form: they are direct, shaped and enhanced colouristically by the enrichment of 'core' orchestral instruments with atypical ones. The very first gesture is a descending slide in the brass, first sounded by soprano trombones. In addition to the clarity of dramatic gestures, the space between them is vital to Ferneyhough's formal concept: he has always interested himself in the definition of borders and the act of crossing them (as he emphasized repeatedly in discussions of his *Carceri d'Invenzione* cycle in the 1980s), and borders abound in this work in the shape of double bar

lines between tiny sections and as horizontal instrumental colour layers. For example, between sections 47–63 each instrumental subgroup of the overall ensemble is characterized by particular materials. Later in the work, regular homorhythmic pulsed gestures cut across these groups to occupy the entire ensemble (e.g. fragments 82 and 84). From as early as the border between fragments 2 and 3, pauses of indeterminate length are indicated. At first, these require complete silence; later, certain sounds filter through, 'outside' time, lingering until the sudden arrival of a new tempo announced by a combination of some (or all) orchestral instruments. The appearance of three female voices at fragment 3 is a manifestation of suddenness, since their material is unexpected and they are seated discreetly within the large orchestra rather than as prominent soloists, adding a further colour layer. In contrast with Ferneyhough's earlier work for large orchestra, *La terre est un homme*, which is characterized at the start by what the composer refers to, in sketch materials, as a forty-part polyphonic 'string carpet', *Plötzlichkeit* makes a feature of ostinato and homorhythm (as in the upper strings in section 18, or the brass in 88). These pulsating textures, though brief, have the dual function of being themselves sudden statements and of lending a similar sense of the unexpected to the short-lived flourishes around them, such as the fanfare-like materials in the brass between bars 117 and 120. The composer describes a pre-composed book of rhythms which cycles three times in the work: it is possible that the three longer sections in reduced texture that punctuate the work (sections 42, 64 and 89, for brass, strings and wind respectively) offer the listener 'windows' onto that 'book' (Meyer: 51). Of these, the third contains the most linearly conceived, lyrical material, but gradually the ostinati return, and thereafter Ferneyhough consolidates discontinuity and suddenness by maximizing the difference between abutting fragments through instrumentation, dynamic and attack (for example, fragments 93 and 94, separated by a substantial silence, are given markedly different tempi, the former for the main part *pppp* slurred wind and *non vibrato* strings, and the latter accented pulses announced *fp* and *sfz*, including *vibrato in glissando* (lower strings)).

Plötzlichkeit, *Chronos-Aion* and the Sixth Quartet are specifically linked by what Ferneyhough refers to as a 'sausage-slicer' technique 'where the length of sections would be predetermined – the rhythmic structure, the instrumentation and general dramatic flow of each of these sections would be determined – but [...] the other elements which go to make up the musical discourse would not then in advance be determined to the same degree. So I was working very much on the section-to-section basis and these sections would be very small' (Archbold 2011: 19). The small sections that together constitute *Chronos-Aion* are, at least initially, characterized by two particular types of 'dramatic flow': 'Chronos' and 'Aion' are different types of time, and Ferneyhough's approach to form enables him to contrast sections in a striking manner, some perceptibly representing *Chronos*, and others *Aion*. *Chronos* (one of the Greek words for time) is also the name for the pre-Socratic personification of Time. The term refers to counted,

quantitative time or sequential time (past moving to future). It also denotes cyclical time, and on the evidence of Ferneyhough's sketches for earlier works, it is possible to imagine his having devised rhythmic cycles as at least one background layer of material to the piece. *Chronos*, in this context, is 'the temporality of the concrete figure, of abrupt changes of texture' (Ferneyhough, 2008). The beginning of the work, marked by several such changes, epitomizes *Chronos*.

Aion, by contrast, is eternal time: past and future at once. *Aion* is the name given to a Greek deity, traditionally represented as an unbroken circle surrounding the universe. Where *Chronos* is divided into past, present and future, and measured, *Aion* is an eternal, unbounded present: Ferneyhough's *Aion* is first encountered at the arrival on a long-held chord at fragment 7. These concepts are discussed by Gilles Deleuze in *The Logic of Sense*, which presents 34 series of paradoxes, sense and nonsense, from Stoic philosophy to Lewis Carroll. For Deleuze, *Aion* is the time of the event, 'the past-future which in an infinite subdivision of the abstract moment endlessly decomposes itself in both directions at once and forever side-steps the present' (Deleuze 2004: 77). Therefore, the present is *also* ruptured time: as captured in the movement from section-to-section in Ferneyhough's work, nothing develops logically. But where in *Plötzlichkeit* it is difficult to discern longer-term strategies, beyond the inclusion of the three extended reduced-texture passages that seem to join together three larger panels of internally fragmented material, Ferneyhough suggests that in *Chronos-Aion* the material 'gradually begins to reveal an underlying deceleration' (Ferneyhough: 2008). A registral decrease, such that the flute is exchanged for the bass flute towards the end is mapped onto the deceleration (a condensation of the registral trajectory of the *Carceri d'Invenzione* cycle from some twenty years earlier). This slowing down suggests that *Aion* — eternal time — prevails at the conclusion: Ferneyhough refers to it as 'flowing time', in the background (Ibid.). Although towards the beginning of the piece small sections may be confidently ascribed to either *Chronos* or *Aion*, as it progresses the listener is encouraged to hear both at once, as though Ferneyhough were evolving back- and middle-ground strategies, and sliding the contrasted types of time over each other. He refers to this as a 'bifurcation of temporal perspective' (Ibid.). As in *Plötzlichkeit*, tiny sections are sometimes separated by pauses, some of which permit sounds to sustain through them (as at 50–51, violins). The pauses intensify towards the centre of the work, and around fragment 56 the 'bifurcation' of time is again evident: tied minims (rare in Ferneyhough!) in the winds contrast with regular pulses in the percussion. From fragment 80 onwards, the tempi (which change fragment-to-fragment) become slower, yet the foreground materials are 'micro' figures, lyrical and linear in one moment (e.g. at 92) and vertical pulses the next (93). The final moments of the work seem to accentuate discontinuity and textural change, but the piece ends ambiguously. After a lengthy pause, percussionists swirl metal boxes in loops 'like quiet breathing', surely exemplifying *Aion*, 'a time which enfolds

the sonic dimension in its slow unformed tracing of somatic intensities' (Ibid.).

Ferneyhough acknowledges a variety of stylistic inferences in *Shadowtime* that are similarly present in later works including *Plötzlichkeit* and the Sixth Quartet, such as late Romantic harmony, 'not to reclaim it for [himself], but [to accept it] simply as a phenomenon' (Meyer: 57). As a result, the Sixth Quartet is perhaps his most expressively direct piece to date, employing — albeit with twists — elements of the gestural, tonal and formal languages of late Romantic extended tonality. The fundamental harmonic material is a microtonally adjusted augmented triad based on B \flat , D \sharp and F \sharp (pitch material often being positioned 'around' this core). Ferneyhough plays on the theme of 'longing' associated with unresolved chromatic (or in this case microtonal) lines — he calls this technique 'hyper-tona' — and the piece concludes by failing to settle on the main chord for which it has been striving (Archbold: 23).

Although the piece contains more than one hundred fragments, the 'cello's opening lyrical statement rises in register over a considerable span of time (bars 1–39). Ferneyhough's later remarks, tongue-in-cheek, that a 'second subject' appears at bar 85 retrospectively casts the 'cello solo' as the first. For all that such terms do not indicate the function of such material in earlier repertoires, they do reinforce Ferneyhough's flirtation with tonal idioms. The extended opening solo cuts against (or across) the 'tiny sections' principle, once again suggesting the creation of middleground strategies that transcend the individual 'slices' that are so prominently in the foreground of *Plötzlichkeit*. The materials characteristic of fragments of the Sixth Quartet (the odd one out in this trilogy) overlap each other, subverting the pattern typical of its companion pieces, in which each fragment change brings with it a reconfigured instrumentation and character. As this would have been impossible to achieve in the quartet medium, Ferneyhough lends each instrument its own character: the viola for example is stubborn, sounding a regular *pizzicato* pulse at the start in direct contrast with the cello.

Throughout his quartet-writing career, Ferneyhough has sought to reflect on the medium: the inclusion of the voice in his Fourth Quartet (1989–90) clearly references Schoenberg's iconic Second Quartet and, like its 'mode', addresses the expressive possibilities of the form that Ferneyhough considers Beethoven took to the height of discursive logic (Ferneyhough 1995: 153). In his own Second Quartet (1979–80), Ferneyhough creates a 'superinstrument', treating the four individuals as one larger identity, at first sounding in unison rhythm, dynamics and articulation, and gradually becoming differentiated by means of slight dynamic discrepancies, and later by more obvious rhythmic incongruities between the layers. Subversive secondary material, including silence, progressively undermines the assurance of the 'superinstrument'. Reflecting on his own quartet output, Ferneyhough establishes a similar principle of main and subsidiary materials in the Sixth Quartet: the opening 'cello solo is set against many *mezzo legno* and *col legno* figures in the violins, which then 'mediate' between the brusque viola pulses and the voluble 'cello. The *legno*

sounds are used to subversive effect at various points in the piece (e.g. against the first violin's solo (bar 105ff.)), and in an extended 'cadenza' (bars 184–201) during which the first violin seems to acquire a 'multiple personality', with lyrical material being continually interrupted by *col legno tratto* gestures). As the piece progresses, the *legno* sound proliferates (e.g. at bar 215ff.) to the point of acquiring a unifying function, drawing all four instruments into one 'superinstrument' at the end of the piece, thus reformulating the strategy of the Second Quartet within a wholly different tonal landscape.

The directness of Ferneyhough's expression is generally captured in the extreme attention to textural and timbral detail (one respect in which the Sixth Quartet declares its affinity with *Plötzlichkeit* and *Chronos-Aion*, since all rely on sharply defined texture-types to foreground the 'moment'). Two particular features stand out in this regard: 'Suddenness' is invoked by the ensemble's arrival at bar 237 at an exact unison passage (similar to the opening section of the Second Quartet but this time in all parameters, including pitch), a most untypical sonority in Ferneyhough's music. This unexpected texture tests the 'superinstrument' principle, the rhythmic intricacy (albeit largely unencumbered by complex 'tuplets') and microtonal pitches presenting a formidable challenge to the performers, resulting in a palpable intensity that is fleeting but arresting. It recalls Benjamin's concept of 'now time', an interruptive event that suspends the listener in the present. Listening to this passage can elicit the curious sensation that this moment intervenes on what has, until then, been a multi-faceted textural counterpoint culminating in the *col legno tratto* passage (bars 215–234) mentioned above, as though cut from an entirely different musical cloth. Similarly, the ensuing texture (bar 243 ff.) again incorporates the *legno*, revisiting and reconfiguring the regular pulse idea from the beginning of the work in the lower three instruments. This is another means of conveying expressive directness: Ferneyhough refers to

one of the challenges [which] was how do you deal with the time implicit in the little fragments themselves — in other words the sort of relationship to human gestuality, to human temporal sensibility, to somatic tensions, to heartbeat and breathing and so on — and at the same time write a piece which is made up of a rather large number of these small sections which has to sustain itself and its musical architecture over quite a considerable time (Archbold: 47).

The regular pulse fulfills several functions in the piece: it indicates measured time (*Chronos*), but also 'somatic' or human time. The *col legno* material acts as a background 'pulse', which increasingly emerges into the foreground. The passage between bars 136 and 153 is labelled *testardamente* ['stubbornly'], later revealed to be an implicit reference to the 'programme' of Charles Ives' Second Quartet: four characters arguing whilst climbing a mountain (Archbold: 14). The *testardamente* material gradually infiltrates each instrument in Ferneyhough's quartet, the viola in particular reviving its regu-

lar pulses from the opening, as in bars 154–156, ornamented with controlled, regular *glissandi*. The inferred heartbeat recalls the first scene of *Shadowtime*, in which Benjamin's material also contains regular (and irregular) pulses representing his heartbeat, and his efforts in crossing the Pyrenees.

Only two years before the Sixth Quartet, Ferneyhough composed the string quartet piece *Exordium* (2008) for Elliott Carter's 100th birthday. *Exordium* is very short, and although Ferneyhough had intended it to consist of 100 tiny sections, its final version contains 43. In microscopic form, the work 'in common with many medieval grimoires and books of spells, [...] elevates the non-sequitur to a formal principle' (Ferneyhough: *Exordium*, 2008). The overall scope of the work, compared with the Sixth Quartet, is vastly different, but some treatment of the ensemble in the latter is prefigured here in more concentrated form. The work begins homorhythmically (indeed, the first two fragments are virtual unisons in every parameter, barring some ornamental differences in pitch in fragment II), with secondary 'noise' — pitch distortions, *glissandi* and harmonics — being prominent, as well as extreme contrasts in dynamics from moment to moment — all announcing the writing of the Sixth Quartet. Invoking Carter's own strategies, Ferneyhough devises proportional tempo relationships (sometimes governed by metric modulation), which change with each fragment. Aside from the gestural content that demarcates each fragment quite audibly, the structure offers as clear a manifestation of Ferneyhough's 'time slice' principle as may be found among the recent works. The unison 'superinstrument' from the beginning returns at intervals, effecting 'suddenness' (including two relatively lengthy and complex tuttis whose inflectional microtones are almost impossibly difficult to perform in unison), whilst other fragments introduce the instruments in a staggered but incrementally measured fashion (as in the arc at VIII, XV, XXVIII and XXXII) or subject the same pitch material in each instrument to a process of 'prolation', so that each layer proceeds at a different speed (as at XIII). Gestures return periodically (such as the *glissando* arc from I, which reappears at XIV), and it is much easier to hear the section turnover in this piece than in the Sixth Quartet, in which the attention is detained by longer-term middleground strategies. In *Exordium*, the similarity between certain gestures in non-neighbouring fragments creates an illusion of synthesis, perhaps reflecting Ferneyhough's characterization of the work as 'a special case of "sympathetic magic"', and maybe even hinting at Benjamin's fragment essay *The Doctrine of the Similar* (already prominent in *Shadowtime*), in which Benjamin reflects on humans' earlier, near-magical capacity for perceiving resemblances between natural phenomena and the human form before these became rationalized in written and spoken linguistic idioms (Ferneyhough: *Exordium*). As *Exordium* continues, a greater emphasis on regular pulsing emerges (e.g. XXXV and XL), leading to some very atypical repeated notes, free of complex tuplets (e.g. XLI).

Ferneyhough's *Liber Scintillarum* for sextet refers to the Seventh-Century *Book of Sparks*, compiled by a monk known as 'Defensor', who extracted proverbs from the Bible

(an altogether different book, then, to *Exordium's* 'grimoire', although to the medieval mind, there would have been little distinction). To simulate the principle of extracting 'sparks' from a comprehensive structure, Ferneyhough created a book of rhythms in twenty layers, drawing from this matrix a few layers at a time and deploying them in the ensemble before reconfiguring them in the next little section (Ferneyhough: 2012). Whilst the work is again divided into many 'slices', a larger-scale trajectory towards extreme discontinuity is perceptible, not least because from the midpoint onwards the composer introduces the now familiar pauses between sections. Towards the beginning of the work, progress from one gesture type to the next is relatively smooth: sections are longer than they later become and have an internal expressive coherence (e.g., from bar 19 the tone is rather more introspective than in the livelier opening fragment). Early on, held chords signal the arrival of a new fragment (as at bar 32), or introduce stillness — a form of inverted suddenness, one might say — into a longer fragment (as in bar 7). Later, these moments of stillness are placed 'outside' the time of the work, appearing as lingering 'coloured' pauses between tinier sections, as encountered in the last five bars of the piece (each bar a separate fragment). This strategy recalls the aesthetic of *Chronos-Aion*, and by extension Benjamin's contrast between the eternal present (time of the 'now') and historical time. These complementary forces are the more prominent here for the consistency of the gestural materials (the viola figurations in bars 217–220 for example), which appear continuous on the page, but are interrupted in performance by indeterminate pauses. From bar 93, a structural shift takes place: repetitive figures occur frequently, bringing to the fore the ostinato patterns seen in several recent works discussed here. The sextet texture becomes more differentiated, Ferneyhough at times using the two trios (flute, oboe and clarinet, and violin, viola and cello) as allies, as from bar 96, and at others, as dialoguing or antiphonal forces, as at bar 112 or 161–177. This recalls the chamber 'concertos' of the 1990s (such as *Incipits*, and perhaps even more appropriately, *Flurries*, another sextet of similar instrumentation, from which the composer extracts smaller subsets, which are continually reconfigured). This similarity notwithstanding, *Liber Scintillarum* firmly belongs to the latest group of works by virtue of its fragment form. Arguably, it reflects a 'late style' in the terms proposed by Said, for it both brings to mind the composer's earlier techniques (one can indeed draw structural comparisons with an early work like the wind sextet *Prometheus* (1967)) while presenting them according to a new discontinuity. In the second half of *Liber Scintillarum*, reduced textures reinforce the general tendency to disintegration or 'sparks'. Attempts at stability (such as the strings' *glissando* gestures from bar 125, leading to a separate string trio that develops these gestures (bars 134–146)) result only in the consolidation of pulsing, repeated note textures (bar 149 ff.), conflicting layers and ultimately single bar bursts (bar 181 ff.). Although the precompositional material is formidably complex in rhythmic terms (the rhythms

as they appear in the piece generally reflect filtered versions of the matrix, which routinely includes up to four nested tuplet levels in each of its twenty layers), Ferneyhough does not precompose the gestural character, echoing his recent approach in several works including the Fifth and Sixth Quartets, in which he responds to the contextual demands of the moment in the process of composition. It might be argued that, to this extent, 'suddenness' is built into the composer's own experience as much as it is intended to arrest a listener. According to Ferneyhough

it was a great relief when I could finally accept what had happened from day to day before my eyes. The materials took on belligerent shapes of their own and unveiled aspects of their original identities of which I knew nothing in advance. I love that: then one is truly working, not just a spectator but part of the action [...] you feel at one with the working process and sometimes don't even know what the work is (Meyer: 62–63).

The most recent work for larger chamber ensemble, *Finis Terrae* (2012), once again exemplifies a late style, insofar as it invites contrast with the hermetic aesthetic 'world' of an earlier work for ensemble and voices, *Transit*, conceived in response to a pastiche woodcut image of a Renaissance magus, who peers through the cosmos beyond the sphere of the earth and into the heavens (see Ferneyhough: *Transit*, 1972–5). There, Ferneyhough drew on texts such as the *Corpus Hermeticum* (Hermes Trismegistus). Layers of instruments represented certain spheres (e.g., the voices represented the 'earth'); in *Finis Terrae*, six voices also signify the 'earth', or rather humanity, but now reflect disenchantment (as the title suggests). This is humanity reduced to its last representatives amidst a bleak terrain characterized by huge moraines, millennial mounds of earth arising from pre-historic glaciation. As in *Transit*, the position of the performers is crucial: in the earlier work, the singers sat in a semicircle, in imitation of the ring signifying the earth in the woodcut image; in *Finis Terrae*, the singers are embedded within the surrounding ensemble, a metaphor for their near-extinction. At times they speak rather than sing, and their text is drawn not from philosophers of the cosmos (such as Heraclitus, for whom earth's elements are continually renewed by fire) but from mundane internet resources that describe moraine formations in factual terms. The decidedly un-poetic text is another ploy aimed at undermining the vocal ensemble's rhetorical power. In contrast to Ferneyhough's earlier vocal and choral works, no phonetic obscurations of the text mask its semantic meaning: it is delivered for the most part homorhythmically and relatively directly, though as alluded to above, the irony of its diffusion within, and obfuscation by, the instrumental ensemble, symbolically reinforces the decline of humanity. In its counterpoint of geological time and human history, the aesthetic of *Liber Scintillarum* recalls Benjamin's contrast between the eternal present and historical time. Quoting an unnamed 'modern biologist', Benjamin asserts that

"In relation to the history of organic life on earth [...] the paltry fifty millennia of *homo sapiens* constitute something like two seconds at the close of a twenty-four hour day. On this scale, the history of civilized mankind would fill one-fifth of the last second of the last hour." The present, which, as a model of Messianic time, comprises the whole history of mankind in an enormous abridgement, coincides exactly with the stature which the history of mankind has in the universe (Benjamin, 255).

Finis Terrae also comprises many tiny sections. At the beginning of the score, Ferneyhough does not use the double bar-lines familiar from *Les Froissements* to demarcate the fragments, but in common with the pieces discussed above, the tempo and instrumental configuration changes with each one. These smaller fragments are gathered into slightly larger 'panels' defined by particular gestural activity or instrumental behaviours. For example, the strings' presence in the first panel (according to my reading bars 1–31, which also contains the first full vocal statement) is characterized by wide-ranging *glissandi* in all instruments, typically double-stopped. From bar 32 the character changes, the texture now comprising several short 'sparks' (such as the vocal interjection at bar 38), tiny bar lengths and the first sustained presence of percussion material. Ferneyhough also introduces pauses between sections. There is a suggestion of cyclic elements (the periodic return of the distinctive string *glissandi* implies as much): it may not be too fanciful to suggest that each 'pane' (such as those marked out by the piano 'solo' at bar 112 or the percussion from bar 170) is a musical

moraine. A remark on the website of the vocal ensemble Exaudi, who premiered the work, asks

[w]hat of the instrumental 'moraines' themselves? (Loath as one is to make so simplistic an identification, it seems impossible to avoid — and this almost baroque-style emblematising is hardly alien to Ferneyhough's aesthetic universe). They are intensely dramatic, with a gestural clarity that typifies his recent music. Pauses over barlines (with instruments holding their notes through) are used repeatedly to great rhetorical effect ('frozen catastrophic abrupts') (Exaudi: 2012).

In theory, Ferneyhough could continue to add panels to the piece as it currently exists. This is only one practical consequence of his latest, non-teleological formal approach. Although the forms of his earlier works could hardly be called conventional, they have tended towards classicizing models and consistently prioritized linear continuity (a tendency reinforced in his statements on his gestural discourse and personal style). But the recent 'time slice' form described in this article has radically altered Ferneyhough's conception of musical time, not only in terms of the tiny sections themselves, but in its relation to the work as a whole. Hence the close chronological proximity of an *Exordium* and a Sixth Quartet: he knew at the time of writing that the latter had to be substantial and the former comparatively brief. In both cases, the overall duration became, to use Benjamin's terms, a model of 'time filled by the presence of the now' — a suitable epithet for Ferneyhough's late(st) style.

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