'SUBTLE SHIFTS': HOWARD SKEMPTON'S TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY MODERNISM

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ABSTRACT: Howard Skempton's distinctive presence on the British musical scene, and his prolific compositional output since the mid-1960s, have presented commentators with certain challenges as they contemplate which labels to apply, and, for music analysts, which techniques to deploy. Skempton's own comments, in various interviews and essays down the years, remain the ideal starting point, suggest a range of contexts, some of which underpin this study. With reference to a few of his smaller vocal and keyboard compositions, the quality of constantly shifting rather than strictly fixed elements is explored. When pitch materials conform more or less exactly to tonal or modal tradition, rhythm is particularly important as a determinant of subtle shifting. But it is often the case that pitches identities themselves shift between functions best defined as tonal scale degrees at one extreme and post-tonal pitch classes at the other. The result is a very personal and unaggressive kind of modernism.

Back in 1997 Ian Pace concluded a discussion of 'Howard Skempton in his fiftieth year' with a remarkable comparison.

> Both Schubert and Skempton write with a level of honesty and innocence that is almost painful in its extent, making contact with that which is repressed by taste and decency. It is this degree of proximity that makes Skempton's music cross the fine line that divides the staid and trivial from the transcendent and ubiquitous.[1]

'Almost painful … proximity' is a telling phrase for pinpointing how much of the most powerful and ambitious modernist music distances itself from performers and audiences, in the sense that its intensity and complexity need lengthy and dedicated study if its essential processes and possible purposes are to be plausibly hypothesised: the listener has to make an effort to achieve genuine depth of understanding, just as the performer has to put in hours of work in order to achieve accuracy and empathy. This does not mean than a modernist composition's immediate impact is of no account: but there is, and has been, at least since the early modernist Wagner, an extreme contrast between the instant, total and passive surrender that those works seem to demand, and the elaborate critical and theoretical

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[1] Ian Pace, 'Archetypal Experiments', *The Musical Times* 38, no. 1856 (1997), p. 14.

interpretations of them that a small proportion of dedicated advocates spend so much time devising.

It is little surprise that music historians have responded to the grand designs and broad perspectives of post-tonal modernism – music since 1900, loosely speaking – with ideas that strive to provide a cultural-historical scenario able to embrace the polarised boundaries of an exceptionally diverse drama whose cast of characters includes everyone from Schoenberg and Stravinsky to John Adams and Gerald Barry. The capacious binary of Apollonian and Dionysian is one such scenario that has commended itself through its actual use by composers, thereby offering the prospect of making modernism, aesthetically, as meaningful as classicism and romanticism.[2] Though capable of being endlessly trivialised – loose enough to fit any composition that moves between being slow and fast, quiet and loud – the proper context of Apollonian and Dionysian music is something aspiring to a determined transcendence of the mundane, the everyday, the ubiquitous; if both restraint and exuberance are to be present, they should embody something mysteriously different from the restraint or exuberance that humans manifest in their daily lives, in activities not commonly regarded as artistic. Yet being puzzled or surprised, not quite grasping a formal essence or spirit, are very human qualities; 'mysterious difference' is perfectly capable of manifesting itself in music without evoking the transcendentally superhuman, by way of a simplicity and immediacy that can disconcert in a context determined by the conventions of serious music's presumed richness and profundity, not least in suggesting parallels with pop music instead. Howard Skempton seemed to be latching on to such features in offering John Fallas an explanation for what he saw as a basic difference between his own music and that of Laurence Crane. Skempton explained his agreement with Michael Parsons's neat-and-tidy 'Crane as classical: Skempton as romantic' designation as follows: 'I'm interested in harmonic instability. I like subtle shifts. I feel there's something very formal about Laurence's approach, whereas mine is more elusive – certainly more flexible, even unstable'.[3]

The unaggressive, contemplative states of mind to be sensed in Skempton's music remain within the everyday human world, with moments of strangeness or nonviolent disorientation which do not aspire to the otherworldly. Skempton – as his comparison with Crane's 'classicism' suggests – may sense romanticism's historical role in launching the full majesty of modernistic instability and elusiveness. It is as if the only thing preventing romanticism before 1900 from turning into full-blown modernism was the persistence of good government in the shape of the tonal system and its classical formal principles, emphasising balance and symmetry in genres ranging from Prelude and Fugue through Symphony and Concerto all the way to Grand Opera and Music Drama. Not the least of the elusive aspects of Skempton's music is how – without a complete change of personality – it can turn from simple triadic, consonant tonality in one piece to something still simple but not simply tonal in another. No less striking is how it can inhabit a world of clear-cut melodic motives just as comfortably as it can avoid melodic thematicism altogether: or how it

[2] See Arnold Whittall, *Exploring Twentieth-Century Music: Tradition and Innovation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
[3] John Fallas, 'Howard Skempton in Interview', *TEMPO* 66, no. 262 (2012), pp. 23–4.

can embrace what Richard Taruskin, referring to Morton Feldman, called 'the specialness of the esthetic experience'[4] without (so far) including pieces of up to six hours' duration.

Without opening out into either grandly Apollonian or uninhibitedly Dionysian vistas of expression, Skempton's compositions transmute the sublime otherness of overtly transcendent strategies into a much less assertive but no less elusive musical atmosphere, where stark polarities converge on shared yet still separate fusion-resisting strategies. Pace locates what he calls 'the essence of his Englishness' in 'the soft-spoken, non-didactic nature of his music' which 'can make the utterances themselves all the more penetrating and substantial', and offers something 'akin to the type of secular contemplative experience that Feldman so admired in Rothko's Chapel. Skempton's work does not present an (inevitably empty) escape from reality, but rather a heightened perception of that which is real. It is music of one who is ever the optimist'. As a further instance of such positive thinking, Pace observes that 'Skempton does not spoon feed his listeners with discernible processes with which to engage, but rather opens up a state of mind, within which they are to think or feel for themselves'.[5] Music theorists might think they can pin down this or that 'discernible' process, but can then find themselves asking in what sense what is discernible in Skempton is a process capable of being theorised or otherwise analytically explained.

Songs of Sorrow?

Pace's alignment of Skempton with Schubert suggests one very direct association with un-Crane-like 'romanticism'. But Skempton's is not a romanticism in which simplicity and directness turn transcendent through forceful expressive intensity, or though highlighting the fragmentary nature of small formal units, eventually opening itself to the pathos and tragedy which makes the austere despair of *Die Winterreise*'s 'Der Leiermann' into a distant forerunner of *Erwartung*-like expressionism. In Skempton, 'elusive' modernism shows itself most radically when conventional ideas of how music might set a text are side-stepped, and when a presumed emotional quality of rhetoric – tragic, comic, spiritual, earthy – is put into suspense as a potentially surreal kind of otherness takes over. Few musical genres have been more eagerly embraced by the major modernists than the lament, because the essential ambivalence of sighing semitones and chromatic inflections recalling centuries of precedent from Dowland and Purcell onwards seems to extend naturally and inevitably into the fully chromatic explosions of tormented grief and guilt to be heard in Stravinsky's *Threni*, Ligeti's Solo Viola Sonata or Birtwistle's *The Shadow of Night*.[6] Skempton, 'ever the optimist', offers a very different response. For example, in his *Lamentations* for bass voice and theorbo (2001) – whose texts come from John Donne's *The Lamentations of Jeremy* – the musical setting is almost entirely syllabic, and shuns word-painting. In its four short, closely related movements there is no Promethean defiance or anger. Rather, the poet's

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[4] Richard Taruskin, *Music in the Late Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 101.

[5] Pace, 'Archetypal Experiments', p. 13.

[6] See Whittall, *Exploring Twentieth-Century Music*, and also '"Let it drift": Birtwistle's modernist music-dramas' in *Harrison Birtwistle Studies*, ed. David Beard, Kenneth Gloag and Nicholas Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 1–25.

Example 1:
Howard Skempton, the ending (bars 21–41) of 'For oughtest thou, O Lord' for bass and theorbo, from *Lamentations*, © Oxford University Press, 2008

description of vindictive Divine punishment – 'He hath led me to darkness, not to light, And against me all day, His hand doth fight' – might be felt as recounting the obsessive essence of despairing defeat, and a determination – drained of the power to resist or complain – to survive as cut-down-to-size, human with absolutely no pretensions to imitate the god-like: not optimism, exactly, but shoulder-shrugging stoicism. The final movement (see Example 1) is perhaps the most enigmatic with respect to generic prototypes, framed by an unusually extended theorbo solo in a limping waltz-like rhythm, and comprising a firmly shaped protest at divine intransigence, stated twice, whose dignified and eloquent seriousness is offset by the theorbo's refusal to offer any visionary contextualising. The limitations of humanity rather than the unreasonable of a vengeful God seem to speak through chordal and melodic patterning that avoid goal-directed motivic and phrasal structuring in favour of a more circular, permutational quality and the bass singer, negotiating a line that flows between its extremes with a moment-to-moment immediacy, becomes the agent of Skempton's resistance to emotional grandstanding, however great the provocation of natural disaster or social injustice.

In June 2003 Skempton wrote his *Three Emerson Songs*, and the final setting of 'Xenophanes' is a duet for soprano and baritone. Here the musical persona is not that of the human individual awestruck by entitlement to question and reproach Divine indifference. The Greek philosopher Xenophanes, as imagined by his nineteenth-century American successor, hymns the evident yet mysterious oneness of Nature: 'all things / Are of one pattern made; bird, beast and flower, / Song, picture, form, space, thought and character / Deceive us, seeming to be many things, / And are but one'. This is rationalism in transcendentalist guise, ending with an Emersonian musical metaphor: 'and universal Nature, though her vast / And crowded whole, an infinite paroquet, / Repeats one note'.

Radically simplifying everything to oneness risks excluding otherness entirely, cueing Skemptonian scepticism no-less vividly than breast-beating biblical moaning did in *Lamentations*. Soprano and baritone are indeed at one, rhythmically, throughout in their unvaried B-major mode. But just as one metre does not persist throughout, neither does one mode of melodic progress, or of vertical alignment. The single pattern from which all things are allegedly made is, like God –

Example 2:
Howard Skempton, the ending (bars 60–76) of 'Xenophanes' from *Emerson Songs* for soprano and baritone, © Oxford University Press, 2003

to the believer – elusive, mysterious, both present and absent. As is often the case with Skempton, the function of recurrence is not that of the layered replications that emerge in Schenker's vision of mastered tonality. The imagery seems to have more to do with organic particles floating, circling in space than with humanly engineered mechanisms unfolding as they approach their predetermined goals – or with the living but not consciously composing bird, the 'paroquet' or parakeet, which, even if it literally 'repeats one note' and one note only, is presumably not aware that it is taking an excessively minimalistic view of music. Skempton, by contrast, shows an elemental yet freshly minted feeling for tonal closure: the last interval sounded in the last Emerson song – the 188th – is the only perfect fifth (see Example 2).

The relatively genteel, tentatively pious vocal persona to be heard in the *Lamentations* and *Emerson Songs* is also predominant on the much larger scale of Skempton's 2015 setting of (most of) Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* – a 30-minute engagement with a topic where – given the poem's gothic narrative – the absence of anything expressionistic is as surprising as it is refreshing. Here the musical focus is not on the farouche eccentricity of the mariner but on the straitened narrator, conveying with innate restraint the horrors of the mariner's recollected experiences. The effect is closer to a sermon, parable, or homily than to an illustrated lecture or (melo)dramatic monologue. At the end the final verbal references to 'agony', 'ghastly', and 'burns' are not painted into the music: rather, the conventional piety of the final moral – 'for the dear God who loveth us,/He made and loveth us all' – pervades the whole, and is shown as an historical phenomenon to be recollected as objectively and respectfully as the inexorable rhythms of the Coleridge ballad.

Instability in Miniature

The persistent plainness of *The Rime*'s harmonic style might be another way of non-parodically reflecting on the early-romantic ethos of the poem: and Skempton's music, which tends to float but is not (even when short in duration) fragmented after the fashion of high or late modernism, often echoes the tonal characteristics of early modernism, with its specific classical associations. The oft-cited view of Skempton as an 'emancipator of the consonance'[7] comes from the feeling that chords as traditionally consonant or dissonant are less salient in his music than chords whose instability and elusiveness

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[7] Hans-Christoph Müller, 'Emanzipation der Konsonanz: Howard Skemptons Orchesterstück *Lento*', *MusikTexte* 75 (1998), pp. 77–83.

embodies elements of both. The 1996 volume of 55 *Collected Piano Pieces* (written between 1967 and 1993) is an ideal source for investigating how Skempton's avoidance of expressionism has not also required the avoidance of modernism. This non-chronological sequence of miniatures (almost all of them with the month, year and sometimes day of composition appended) is an important introduction to a musical persona in which simplicity, while far from deceptive, is also far from unambiguous. Skempton, it appears, is not so much in headlong retreat from the expressionistic complexity beloved of several of his most distinguished contemporaries, including the dedicatee of two of these piano miniatures, Michael Finnissy: rather, he is exploring in what ways 'simplicity', especially as regularity and repetitiveness, doubling and mirroring, can establish certain degrees of stability (which means, aesthetically, the evocation of 'classical' principles) or instability (modernism) while simultaneously throwing them all gently into doubt. To risk a slogan, he does this by using well-tried procedures in new ways: to turn the slogan towards jargon, he does this by extending or even suspending tonality,[8] and by showing how the opposing poles of classicism and modernism get along when they are encouraged to interact rather than mutually self-destruct. So pervasive is this quality that few if any of the 55 individual items, apart from the special case of the Cardew tribute, 'Well, well, Cornelius', can be convincingly analysed throughout by means of traditional chord labels.

The first of the pieces, 'First Prelude' (September 1971) (see Example 3), provides a useful encapsulation of Skempton in non-melodic mode: for the opposite extreme, monodic motivicism, see the 21-bar 'Trace', written on 27 August 1980. The technical constraints and fixed expressive character of 'First Prelude' are transparent, and wide open to statistical, arithmetical summary: yet its governing 'language' seems designed to elude definitive functional labellings. Like the most celebrated of all first preludes, those of Bach's '48' and Chopin's Op. 28 (both in C major), it makes its introductory status obvious by avoiding melody. Only slightly shorter in bar numbers – 30 – than Bach's (35) or Chopin's (34) it shares their strong focus on repeated rhythmic patterns: unlike them, it avoids the piano's propensity for flowing figuration, for 'broken' chords, in favour of unbroken chords. It is also far less committed than Bach's or Chopin's preludes to using its repeated materials to provide 'textbook' demonstrations of diatonic tonality's ability to functionally differentiate its structural levels – background, middleground, foreground – to such supremely harmonious effect that these differences all but disappear within the blended congruence of the sounds on the surface.[9] In all probability, Skempton in 1971 was not offering his first prelude as an ideologically committed demonstration – 'First Prelude, not in C major' – of the irrelevance of Bach's and Chopin's strategies to properly contemporary music. Even so, to conclude that the persistence of Ds throughout – 138 of them – at the top of the texture is deliberate rather than accidental, the image of something aspiring to maximal stability that never resolves into the processes being

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[8] For these concepts, see Arnold Schoenberg's *Theory of Harmony* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978) and *Structural Functions of Harmony* (London: WW Norton, 1969). See also footnote 10.

[9] For relevant analyses of the Bach and Chopin Preludes, see Schenker, *Five Graphic Music Analyses* (New York: Dover, 1969) and Felix Salzer, *Structural Hearing* (New York: Charles Boni, 1952).

Example 3:
Howard Skempton, 'First Prelude' 55
Collected Piano Pieces, © Oxford
University Press, 1996.

offered by the lower voices (and above all by the bass line), suggests a governing notion of modernist divergence rather than classical convergence: that is, motion in the 'bass' is complemented by stasis in the 'treble'.

'First Prelude' in Close-Up

Classicism is most transparently demonstrated in the symmetrical, tripartite form of 'First Prelude': Section A (bars 1–10) is restated unchanged (bars 21–30) after a central segment (bars 11–20) best labelled 'A¹' to suggest something closely related but also contrasted to 'A'. What is different goes to the heart of the 'Apollonian' constraints Skempton imposes on contrast here, and to the way he treats the apparently homogenous five-note sonorities of Section A as superimpositions of divergent strands, the right-hand triads superimposed on the left-hand dyads, but not having a functionally irrevocable relationship with them, as would be the case in diatonic tonal composition.

What this means in Section A¹ is that, while the left-hand dyads repeat the sequence from bars 1 to 10, the right-hand triads change the middle note from A to G, except in bars 16 and 18, where it reverts to A. Skempton rejects the possibility of greater harmonic variety, perhaps to underline the elusive essence of the seven different chordal forms he has already used. Harmonic contrast is never greater than between Chords 1 and 2, and while Chord 2 sounds like a neighbour to Chord 1 – the three lower lines descending a step while the two upper lines remain unchanging, the process reversing in Bar 3 – post-tonal theory draws attention to a distinction between the tetrachordal essence of Chord 1 (with one pitch-class, D, appearing in two different octave

positions) and the pentachord that is Chord 2. The effect of this progression from and away from the chord used in bars 1 and 3 is to enhance the music's allusive rather than explicit commitment to modal formations that have the potential to create longer-term structural relationships. Here the identical nature of the bass dyads in each of the Prelude's three 10-bar sections is crucial.

The lowest line of all traces what in traditional voice-leading terms is a stepwise descent from G through F to E, followed by an arpeggiated reinforcement of E through its dominant B, and further reinforced by the fifths and octaves of the upper left-hand strand. The (Phrygian) modal character of the F♮ here lends some support to the suggestion that the prelude as a whole might have a principal tonal, or modal, centre of E. Yet the texture as a whole seems determined to resist such a simple, homogeneous, classically orientated judgement. If motion between G and E in the bass counts for more than a progression from something onto E, and if that interpretation is persuasively supported by the harmonic character of the music as a whole, then a better terminology for this resolutely non-triadic music might be that of suspended tonality, not so much in respect of a key whose tonic never appears, but in the way the music moves between allusions to G and E centres, granting unambiguous priority to neither.[10]

The strongest countering of this argument comes with the 'altered' E-major chord which ends all three 10-bar phrases. The D♮ which started off as the doubled fifth of an 'altered' G-rooted but E-including chord (pentatonic rather than diatonic in quality) is still there, preventing unambiguous E-ness even though the surprising G♯ in the centre makes the survival of an ambiguous G-ness hard to defend at the purely local level. Schoenberg himself – had he been discussing 'First Prelude' as the work of a Californian student in 1945 – might have left open the possibility of an 'extended' tonality of E overall, given the possibility of hearing bars 5 to 10 (and their subsequent repetitions) as an E-major-tending cadence against which the reiterating D♮ struggles in vain. Had Skempton included dynamic variation in his notation he might have encouraged some such 'dramatic' scenario, in terms of an unresolved conflict, or a 'triumph' clouded by doubt. As it is, the radical abstractions of post-tonal theory, transforming pitches into pitch-classes and chords into set-classes, provide the ironic possibility of indicating connections – reinforcing connectedness – while at the same time abandoning the endless equivocations of the competing 'tonal' identities.[11]

Sets in Suspense

Tabulating Skempton's repertory of seven chords in 'First Prelude' as set classes involves excluding the doublings that is one of the composer's primary means of differentiation. But with the facilitation of comparison that integer notation provides, the most persistent invariant element connecting all seven sets is the [025] trichord. This at least serves to underline the mildly dissonant 'added sixth' or 'added

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[10] For a penetrating consideration of the pros and cons of 'suspended tonality' as a theoretical concept see Richard Kurth, 'Suspended tonalities in Schoenberg's twelve-tone compositions', *Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Center 3* (2001), pp. 239–66.

[11] For critical exposition and exploration of these techniques, see Joseph Straus, *Introduction to Post-Tonal Theory* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1990, and subsequent editions), Arnold Whittall, *Introduction to Serialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Table 1:
Pitch and Set Classes in Skempton, 'First Prelude'

CHORD	PITCH-CLASSES	SET-CLASS
1 (bar 1)	D, E, G, A	0257
2 (bar 2)	F, E♭, D, C, A	02358
3 (bar 5)	D, E, G, A	0257
4 (bar 6)	E♭, D, B, A	0146 – A, B, D = [025]
5 (bar 10)	E, D, B, G♯	0258
6 (bar 11)	D, E, G	025
7 (bar 12)	C, D, E♭, F, G	02357

major second' aspect of Skempton's harmony in the complete absence of pure major or minor triads (see Table 1).

'First Prelude' gives explicit emphasis to invariance through simple repetition and predominantly stepwise motions – the only leaps are in the lowest of the five 'voices'. By contrast, the piece that concludes this collection initially appears to be entirely different – *omega* to First Prelude's *alpha*. 'Ring in the Valiant' (March 1993) carries a dedication to the composer and teacher Justin Connolly. It consists of 24 bell-like sonorities (see Example 4), all of which are notated as semibreves. Unlike 'First Prelude', there is no time signature but a metronome mark of crotchet 120: and more importantly, complementing the simple rhythmic repetitions of 'First Prelude', 10 of the 24 sonorities have pause marks to extend their length. Further differentiation is provided by a series of dynamics: *pp*, *p*, *mp*, *mf*. Also departing radically from the emphasis on close-connected linear continuity in 'First Prelude' is the apparent avoidance of a logic of succession in the deployment of the piece's events. Even calling these events 'chords' is discouraged by the three occasions each on which a single note or a dyad is sounded: and instead of 'First Prelude's polarity between

Example 4:
Howard Skempton, 'Ring in the Valiant', *55 Collected Piano Pieces*, © Oxford University Press, 1996

the single-pitch upper line and the more traditionally progressing bass, the 24 sonorities of 'Ring in the Valiant' seem to float randomly in space.

The main feature to counter randomness is a basic formal division. If Part One comprises the first 11 sonorities, Part Two (sonorities 12–24) begins as a repetition, but soon diverges, reordering the succession of Part One and adding a twelfth sonority at an early stage: the effect is developmental.

> Part One: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11
> Part Two: 1 2 12 7 9 8 10 11 3 4 5 6 7

Further resistance to randomness comes in the construction and character of the sonorities themselves (Sonorities 4 and 11 are single notes, Sonority 7 is a dyad, and therefore all are excluded from the nine chordal sonorities tabulated in Table 2). Although the first three chords comprise a total of twelve notes – $4 + 5 + 3$ – the presence of repetitions indicates that this is not a twelve-tone statement.

This process suggests a reliance on similarity as a principle comparable to that found in 'First Prelude'. As shown in Table 2, the mix of similarity and difference between the three forms of [048] is reflected in the other set classes, all of which involve the [08] span, and most of which include the [048] trichord complete. In addition, a simple comparison of the abstracted chordal repertory of this pair of compositions (see Table 3) highlights the basic invariants which, even if generated randomly, bring a quality of unoppressive consistency to Skempton's music.

Poetic Memories

At the very least, what I have termed the 'radical abstractions' of integer notation highlight the pivotal nature of 'subtle shifts' in Skempton's harmonic vocabulary. Such shifts are not confined to harmony, of course, and in the piano miniatures that have been my main focus here, they can also be felt through allusions to degrees of regularity in rhythmic patterns that nevertheless avoid the relentless repetitions of mainstream minimalism. With harmony, subtle shifts make their presence felt through traffic between tonal (consonant) and post-tonal (dissonant) paradigms, so that sonorities most simply described

Table 2:
Pitch and Set Classes in Skempton, 'Ring in the Valiant'

CHORD (SONORITY)	SET-CLASS	PITCH-CLASSES ('core')
1	0358	
2	01458	
3	048	A♭, C, E
5	01458	
6	048	E♭, G, B
8	0348	
9	0348	
10	0158	
12	048	as Chord 6 up an octave

Table 3:
Chord (Set-Class) Repertory

First Prelude	Ring in the Valiant
025	048
0146	0158
0257	0348
0258	0358
02357	01458
02358	

by way of integer notation as pitch-class sets are by no means lacking in consonant elements, while more traditionally tonal formations can be infused with unusual degrees of mild but persistent dissonance. How these shifting techniques work in Skempton's larger designs is a subject for another occasion. But whether the forms are miniature or more substantial, the motivation for such shifting identities is evidently poetic, intent on a sustained yet un-coercive estrangement, and not merely technological. In the last of the *55 Collected Piano Pieces* the title 'Ring in the Valiant' refers to a segment (106) of Alfred Lord Tennyson's long poem *In Memoriam*, which begins 'Ring out wild bells, to the wild sky': 'Ring in the Valiant Man and Free ... Ring in the Christ that is to be'. The visionary yet pious euphoria of Tennyson's poetic style, the epitome of an establishment ethos, might seem worlds away from Skempton's habitually oblique angle on mainstream musical projects. In 'First Prelude', a [025] core enriches rootedness; in 'Ring in the Valiant', a [048] core helps to dissolve rootedness, the essence of stability itself. Instead of the classical convention of conformity between pattern and coherence, pattern as partial questions coherence as all-controlling. In a similar vein, as a realistic optimist, Skempton might set Christian texts not in a spirit of modernist scepticism so much as to offer an objective acknowledgement that this form of religious faith persists, with all the cultural associations built up down the centuries. The cultural memory of modernist man is inescapably permeated by such associations, and Skempton's most characteristic music often remembers them, along with those individuals who have mattered to him.

In the 55 pieces, 'Well, well, Cornelius', is a tribute to Cardew which uses tonality, short melodic motifs and song-like texture to suggest affinities with the workers' songs of Cardew's final years. Immediately preceding this is 'Of Late', headed 'In memory of John Cage', and dated 23 September 1992 (see Example 5). Lacking the motivicism, tonality and time signature of 'Well, well, Cornelius', 'Of Late' pursues relative abstraction in also avoiding bar lines, durational values, and any dynamic or phrase markings.

Example 5:
Howard Skempton, 'Of Late',
55 Collected Piano Pieces, © Oxford
University Press, 1996.

The piece's single two-stave system contains a sequence of 16 chords whose constituent pitches range from the bass stave's bottom G♭ to the treble stave's upper D♭. Fourteen of the sixteen have four notes, the remaining pair have three and repeat a first inversion F-minor triad. This repetition is part of the piece's internal design, which can be described as bipartite, with nine chords in Part One and seven in Part Two. Each part ends with the same chord, and a form scheme identifying the complete sequence is as follows:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 : 10 11 12 3 4 5 9

If the four chords that repeat are considered separately, and Chord 9 is translated from sharps into flats, a certain bias towards a D-flat tonality might be deduced. However, deducing that 'certain bias' goes against the randomness of the layout: there is no salient linear process here, the point being that chords that *could* form a diatonic sequence, or the background to such a sequence, resist the singularity and functionality of tonal progression through their actual place in the wider context of the 16-chord composition. According to integer notation, as I use it, the 12 different chords used in 'Of Late' are constituted as the following set-classes:

Trichords: 025 (Chords 1, 10); 027 (Chords 6, 9); 037 (Chords 3, 4, 12)
Tetrachords: 0247 (Chord 7); 0358 (Chords 2, 5, 8, 11)

There is already an appealing erosion of the distinctions shown in this listing by the fact that of the three trichords, only the last appears in the piece without one doubled note. This erosion of the boundaries between trichords and tetrachords is just one of the ways in which Skempton's music floats or suspends the connecting logic that a tonal composition would embody, a process that might be tentatively summarised as balancing the pitch or pitch-class repetitions between chord pairs against the differences, as well as the steps against the leaps. Everything in moderation seems the aesthetic watchword or, in post-tonal jargon, every invariant brings a variant with it, though one pervading invariant is indicated by the notation: avoiding change in rhythm or dynamics.

Five years before 'Of Late' comes 'Toccata' in memory of Morton Feldman (see Example 6). Here, notated as stemless whole notes rather than stemless half-notes, is another sequence of 16 events, of which only four are different:

1 2 3 2 4 3 2 3 4 : 1 2 3 2 4 3 2

This binary division is suggested by the partial, but not otherwise re-ordered, repetition of Part 1 in Part 2. The sum totals of repetitions are different for each of the four different events: Event 1 is repeated

Example 6:
Howard Skempton, 'Toccata', *55 Collected Piano Pieces*, © Oxford University Press, 1996

twice, Event 2 six times, Event 3 five times and Event 4 three times. There is also much less differentiation of pitch within the individual events: whereas 'Of Late' uses 10 different pitch-classes (D♮ and G♮ are omitted), 'Toccata' makes do with the seven notes of a Phrygian Mode on G♯. Spaced out more widely than the chords of 'Of Late' (and marked to be played 'quietly, resonantly', at a *p* dynamic), 'Toccata' remains close enough to its G-sharp-minor origins to suggest particularly potent resonances with any traditional toccata-like composition in that key that the reader can call to mind.

Skempton's *55 Collected Piano Pieces* offer many other sub-groupings, whether by title ('Eirenicon') or dedication (the four left hand pieces for Benjamin Britten), as well as intimations of variety scarcely touched on in this essay: for instance, nothing is more start-ling in context than the four-bar segment heard twice in *The Mold Riots* whose *ff* dynamic and performance direction – 'massively' – are unique in this publication. Singular patterns of various kinds, celebrating Emerson's Xenophanean principle, are clearly in evidence: but in a world of such anti-triumphalist creativity, where blandness is as uncommon as blatancy, even such symbols of governing authority as persistent patterns are persuaded to remain aware of those unstable, elusive substrata to which Skempton unfailingly returns.