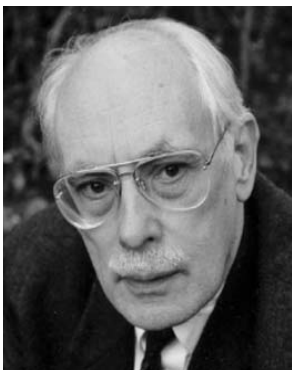
Tempo 66 (260) 15–22 © 2012 Cambridge University Press
doi:10.1017/S0040298212000137 Printed in the United Kingdom

KALEIDOSCOPES AND A LABYRINTH – THE MUSICAL VISION OF JUSTIN CONNOLLY

Anthony Gilbert

Abstract: This essay traces the development of Justin Connolly's music from the orchestral *Antiphonies* of 1966 through to the Piano Concerto of 2001–3, showing how within a remarkably consistent idiom there has been a slow process of focal change from a predominantly vertical structuring to a graciously complex, vertically rich, energetic linearity, embracing a wide variety of works on its unhurried journey, and by no means excluding drama and expressivity from its uncompromising idiom. Most of the analytical writing is on the Piano Concerto, which in its way summarizes all that precedes it, showing how a metaphorical labyrinth can be interestingly kaleidoscopic in its richness. The essay also demonstrates how, like several other British composers of his generation, Connolly has found his own individual, structurally significant way of bringing together techniques from the early Renaissance and the 20th century.


Justin Connolly (photo: Alix MacSweeney)

One of the more significant aspects of this fine composer's music is its inaudibility. Far too few performances are given, and too few recordings are available for audiences to enter knowledgeably into its fairly complex world. But this world is one of individuality, richness, strength and purpose, a fair reflection of his own personality, of a turn of mind which led him to study law before, and even during, his prizewinning years as a composition student with Peter Racine Fricker. Considering, however, that he has inhabited our world since 1933, that of his music is perhaps a trifle sparsely populated: by some 60 works all told. These are nevertheless characterized by clear groupings, by massive overall integrity, and by movement upwards, inwards and outwards towards the work on which this essay will dwell in most detail, the op. 42 Piano Concerto of 2001–3.

The composer's life-pattern has a similarly interesting shape. While still at the Royal College of Music he made a strong impact as a conductor of contemporary music for small-to-medium ensembles. In the mid-1960s, following Peter Maxwell Davies and Harrison Birtwistle, he was awarded a Harkness Fellowship to enable him to pursue further studies in the United States: with Mel Powell, in fact, at Yale. He was appointed Lecturer at that University, but for personal reasons returned to London in 1967, ultimately settling in Greenwich and pursuing a quiet routine of teaching and composing, alongside a certain amount of performing. Among the notable composers benefiting from his guidance is Minna Keal who, having returned to the profession in her mid-sixties, was thereby able to make a strong impact on our musical world during the last 25 years of her life. Connolly has distinguished allies, and unlike some more frequently-performed composers, no enemies.

Superficially, the overriding characteristics of Justin Connolly's work are complexity and consistency. Like those of many composers of his

generation, his scores are largely in manuscript, in most cases published in facsimile. Elegant and highly characteristic though his hand is, this, and density of the notational layout, may be contributory factors in the lack of performances in the case of works played from score. But even in broad overview, a significant pattern of growth and change is noticed, which, as I shall show, is a large-scale reflection of what goes on in many of the compositions themselves. The vast majority are for conventional concert performance: orchestral, with or without soloist, or chamber, with or without voice(s). I shall look at examples from each of these four categories, wherein we shall see that this is where convention stops.

The earliest published orchestral composition is *Antiphonies*, for 36 instruments. This 14-minute work was written in 1966 in response to a commission, whilst in the United States, from Yale University Summer School of Music. The instrumental set-up is reflected in the title, and itself reflects the design of the venue at Norfolk, Connecticut, at which it was to be performed. In fact, it anticipates an approach Connolly has adopted with subsequent large-scale works, as we shall see. There are five groups, placed quite separately around the performing area. The outer two are strings, next inwards are respectively woodwind and brass-with-percussion, and the central group mixes wind and percussion. Correspondingly there are five movements whose character in some ways reflects, but does not necessarily engage with, these instrumental contrasts. The antiphonies between the groups within the movements change constantly, throwing a separate group or pair of groups into prominence in each movement, in electrifying manner. Rhythmically free passages combine and alternate with the predominantly strict, precisely-notated music. Overall, the character of the work is that of a dance-concerto; the music has dance-like energy, and the antiphonal nature creates a sense of contest, if not conflict. It could easily be accepted as an early example of the burgeoning movement towards instrumental music theatre, which genre does not of course necessitate a set or even actors – the groups of players could equally perform that function, if optimally placed. Since the purpose of this essay is to describe and perhaps provide insights into Connolly's idiom and technical approach rather than give detailed analyses, I shall now move to an area in a sense diametrically opposite to that of *Antiphonies*.

In the summer of 1967 at Tanglewood I heard the electrifying première of *Poems of Wallace Stevens I*, since recorded by Jane Manning and the Nash Ensemble on an Argo LP.[1] The second in that series followed in 1970: a setting for soprano, clarinet and piano of three Stevens poems, premièred by Jane Manning, Angela Malsbury and David Pettit at Conway Hall in April of that year, part of the Music In Our Time series held at that fine venue. Jane Manning has recorded them with Dov Goldberg, Richard Benjafield and Dominic Saunders of Jane's Minstrels.[2]

Symbolist poetry is by far the hardest to set, even when, as here, the words themselves are eminently singable. There is always a difficult decision: whether to bring out the symbolic meaning in the setting in the hope that what you understand is what the poet intended, or simply to approach the text literally, allowing the hearers to interpret the symbolism according to their own sensibilities. Connolly very definitely opts for the first approach, and sets the poems almost as drama, creating sometimes quite complex interplays between the forces, and between strict and free notation. In fact, even the 'free' notation is strict in the

[1] Argo ZRG 747.
[2] NMC D 025.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040298212000137 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sense that only the broader rhythmic structures are free; the detail is microscopically defined. Poem 1, *Earthy Anecdote*, describes how a fire-cat can terrorize a group of bucks, later simply closing his bright eyes and sleeping. In its symbolism it has a curiously contemporary political relevance. Everything in the piano and clarinet is a response to the words themselves, and to the sharply articulated, almost hyperbolic way the soprano articulates them. This is drama on the edge. After a wild interlude for solo clarinet follows 2, *The Place of the Solitaries*. Now all is peace, and even greater freedom. The mystical undertones are brought out in the clarinet part, the piano only entering the picture when images of noise and thought are introduced. It then has its own interlude, later joined by clarinet in the chalumeau register, at the commencement of 3, *Life is Motion*, a song which embodies a concept introduced at the piano's entry-point in the previous song. Here we have metered music, a driving pulse and a feeling of circular motion. Bonnie and Josie, dressed in calico, are dancing round a stump, the erotic symbolism of which is again graphically brought to the fore in the instrumental writing, particularly in the final bar.

A good deal of Connolly's music is for one or two instruments, and much of it has external, if not always extra-musical connexions. This is certainly so of the *Tesserae* series of works, which are dependent for their nearly-hidden *cantus firmus*, or more exactly *infirmus*, on a hymn tune by Parry. It supports each of the *Tesserae* in a different way, in some cases merely providing the overall contour, and in others the actual notes, though these are seldom continuous but more like pieces of a mosaic dotted through the texture – hence the overall title of the series. If I have to declare a favourite, it would be *Tesserae F*, subtitled 'Domination of Black', for bass clarinet solo, written in 1982 and revised 17 years later. This 12-minute piece in three main movements draws upon two models: the contour of the hymn-tune and an early Wallace Stevens poem from which the subtitle is drawn. The poem swings between three contrasted images; the music does likewise, the effect being of gentle, then increasing conflict between high and low, between linearity and wild leaping, and between indifference and engagement.

Whereas in the preceding works we hear line determined by the implicit vertical structure of the harmony, which, when presented as chords, is characterized by widely-separated pairs of seconds, in this work no such simultaneous pairings can be achieved. However, the interval of a second does play an important part in the tightly linear textures as a way of building up tension before wild leaps or fanning-out shapes. The instability in the first movement, *Spettrale, minacciando* gives way to hollow-toned lamentations in the second. Instability returns in the third, the line being driven unsteadily downward to a long sustained bottom D, spanning the whole dynamic range of the instrument. A final upward leap merely falls again.[3]

An abiding feature of Connolly's approach to rhythm and texture is the contrast between strict metre and flowing rhythmic freedom, either in alternation or, increasingly, superposed. This could be why so much of his music is published in facsimile manuscript; the level of skill required to employ computer notation software for such situations is beyond the reach of most of us. An extreme but very beautiful example of such parallel rhythmic independence is *Scardanelli Dreams* of 1998, a Cantata for mezzo-soprano and piano to poems by Hölderlin. The five poems (five seems to be a structural quantity of almost magical signifi-

[3] *Tesserae F* is released on Metier's all-Connolly CD 'Night Thoughts' (MSV CD92046), performed by Andrew Sparling.

cance to Connolly) are almost surrealist and certainly multi-symbolist in nature; all but the fifth were written after the poet's mental breakdown and reflect his sense of complete isolation from reality. The first embodies images of flying or floating, each successive one coming a little closer to earth and optimism until we reach the final song, a setting of a poem from earlier in Hölderlin's short life, which seems to anticipate his tragic breakdown with its cries of loneliness. To emphasize the sense of detachment shown in the words, the piano part is not an accompaniment in the traditional sense but a stream of seven continuous variations, in different metres and tempi from the voice part. The voice seems to float above and inside these variations. The result could be completely chaotic, but is in fact magical. It is possibly the result of this approach that the 'perpendicular' inclination of much of Connolly's earlier architecture is now replaced by a much clearer linearity. The piano writing is sparse, non-emphatic, embodying his typical harmonic and linear language in a new and completely appropriate manner. The composer says that the part does not reflect upon the poems as they come but provides 'a continuous commentary', yet there are moments of intense reflection between voice and piano in each song, and the vocal writing itself brings home the strange, haunting mystery of the words. The whole sequence works in the most extraordinary manner, not least because of the finely sensitive performance given by Sue Anderson and Nicolas Hodges.[4].

Until fairly recently, there were no compositions for conventional chamber ensemble in Connolly's output, simply a rich supply of works for more unusual groupings – perhaps another explanation of the lack of performances. One among these which particularly grips my imagination and whirls it into wild new domains is *Nocturnal*, a 20-minute work written in 1991 as a tribute to the late Edward Shipley, composer and printer, and a figure held in high respect by all London-based composers for the best professional reasons. Connolly calls the work a quartet for flutes with piano, double bass and percussion, presumably because the flautist uses in succession concert flute, alto flute, piccolo and bass flute. Doubtless it could involve four flautists, particularly as the time allowed to change instruments is sometimes rather short. Perhaps in such instances one should call it a septet.

There are six continuous movements. The explosive, fragmented first and flighty fourth are for flute and piccolo respectively, the others in different ways somewhat dark and slow. The second, for alto flute, gradually and dreamily restores linearity; the third, again with flute, is a dark echo of the first; the fifth, *Oscuro, misterioso* is a remarkable vision involving bass flute. In the final *Barcarola*, marked *teneramente*, we have very clearly a deeply-felt elegy to a man with a love for the sea and for nature. Here we find gentle alternations between rhythmic strictness and freedom, and some brief moments where the two happen together. With the flute singing out, we also hear a gentle struggle to break out of the vertical landscape that Connolly's lines and harmonies have erstwhile largely inhabited, and create a truly linear dimension. In this movement he almost succeeds, due in no small part to sensitive and gentle percussion writing – a welcome contrast to the part's activities in the other movements. The work overall shows a true mastery of a highly personal idiom, now intensely warm and expressive.[5]

Since the chief aim of this essay is to put the op. 42 Piano Concerto into relevant context, we should now look at close antecedents, in medi-

[4] On the Metier CD already mentioned in footnote 3.

[5] Also on the 'Night Thoughts' CD, performed by Nancy Ruffer and Nicolas Hodges with Corrado Canonici (double bass) and Julian Warburton (percussion).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040298212000137 Published online by Cambridge University Press

um and form if not in proximity of date. Besides the Piano Concerto and the quasi-concerto for orchestra *Antiphonies,* there are two other compositions for soloist and orchestra in Connolly's output: the op.27 viola concerto *'Anima'* of 1974 and *Diaphony*, op. 31 for organ and orchestra of 1977. In this latter work, dedicated to Stephen Plaistow, who during his 35 years as a BBC producer did so much for contemporary music, we find Connolly exploring whole new ways of bringing soloist and orchestra together. In his introductory note he declares significantly that 'the work is in no sense an organ concerto, but rather an equal discourse between two evenly matched and independent timbral entities, each complete in itself' – an interesting challenge, which could in some venues be difficult to bring off, particularly where the organ is set well away from the orchestra. Yet in one sense it is indeed a concerto, since not only is there concerted dialogue on a presumed equal footing, but also there are four instances in the fourth movement where the orchestra bluntly interrupts the organ's free 'Voluntaries' with 'Entries', against which the organ is forced to play ostinato figures, which invite the conductor to match them orchestrally or deliberately enter into conflict with them, each force being rhythmically independent of the other.

The opening Allegro, in its overall nature a long anacrusis for soloist and orchestra ending in a triple *forte* followed by a seven-second pause, did not exist in the work's first version. It doubtless has the purpose of establishing equality between the two forces, though in fact the orchestral writing must surely predominate over what are simply sustained clusters or brief gestures for the organ. In best Connolly manner, all is vertically oriented in this movement; whereas in the second, consisting of two independent sequences of variations – independent in the sense that while the orchestra is playing its eleven, the organ, in matching barring, plays its nine – there has to be a move towards the horizontal because of this structural device. The movement commences at a tempo of crotchet 30, but each variation, whether in organ or orchestra, offers the chance to accelerate, so that by Variation 8 in the orchestra and Variation E in the organ we are at a *scherzoso* minim 80. Lightness prevails even through the succeeding *Maestoso* section, climaxing and sweeping into movement III, now at minim 30. The organ rests, and the orchestra reverts to vertical mode, providing its own internal dialogues between a succession of string sections. This condition of calmness flows over into the fourth movement, providing episodes for soloist and orchestra combined, before and between the 'Voluntaries' versus 'Entries' passages previously mentioned. Calm prevails.

A Sonatina for solo piano seems an unlikely link between the lush writing of the above work and that of the final work I shall deal with, yet there are other, more subtle but more telling, connexions than that of the keyboard. The most perceptible link is that despite being initially written in 1970, the Sonatina's harmonies show a movement away from the vertical block structures of the other works of that period to a subtle sense of gentle forward movement. Perhaps its revision 30 years later, before its first-ever performance, had something to do with that. Then there is the question of internal relationships. *Diaphony* employs schemes of variations in which related material is re-cast in different modes and shapes. The Sonatina, subtitled *Ennead* because of its nine distinct movements, does something very similar as a way of creating unity between the movements' marked dissimilarity. Both of these features are taken several steps further in the Piano Concerto, as I shall show. Connolly likens the Sonatina to those of Alkan and Busoni; I prefer to think of it as a completely fresh approach to form.

Hearing Nicolas Hodges's superb performance, one can imagine

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040298212000137 Published online by Cambridge University Press

scanning around a partially-lit room at night through a kaleidoscope, seeing the same images turned sideways, enlarged or reduced, moving past quickly or very slowly, in varying colours.[6] With the ninth movement one has realigned the kaleidoscope to its original setting. In the meantime, in successive movements we have experienced solemn poetry, volatile drama, dreamy stasis, lively alternations of identity, simultaneous conflict between stasis and instability, wild activity, and openness and clarity. All are unified by overriding harmonic conditions and gestural types, a far more subtle genetic relationship than that achieved by simple motivic or thematic variation. In the first three movements there is an increasing sense of forward linear movement. The fourth, *Calmo e sognando*, has a sense of deliberate stasis, a 'still centre' perhaps, which thereafter gives way to more gentle, hesitant linearity, in a different manner in each successive movement. By the ninth we have completed the circular journey, which in its way brings us, via a non-linear succession of short, truly linear pieces such as *Gymel–A* of 1993 for flute and clarinet, and *Remembering the Butterfly* (1998) for flute and piano, to the Piano Concerto, op. 42, completed on 31 August 2003 – a remarkable circular, even spiral journey in itself.

This Concerto was a BBC commission for Nicolas Hodges, a notable champion and most sensitive performer of Connolly's work, both as soloist and as member of ensembles. Its dedicatee is Christopher Yates, former Vice-Principal of the Royal Northern College of Music and likewise a great supporter of Connolly. It is a magnificent sweep of a work, ostensibly in three-movement classical form overall, with the standard central slow movement. In fact, though, it is effectively in one continuous flow, with the first 'movement' falling smoothly into six 'waves' or variations having different energy-levels, the second 'movement' into two such waves, and the third again into six. The second and third movements together balance the first in duration, creating an interesting double, overlaid symmetry. But as one listens one becomes aware that the waves not only group themselves within the movements, but themselves have internal 'phases' of varying lengths, the result of alternations between strict and free rhythmic control. Each of the two central, slow waves contain four of these, for instance. Overall there are 35 such phases, creating a mysterious, subtle sub-structure which, far from disturbing the clarity of the whole, provides an interesting structural rhythm, not just through the alternation of strict and free but also through balanced energy contrasts. Moreover, in my view of the work, the number 35 is also significant.

In his introductory note, Connolly says that the Concerto's 'form and character derive from the ancient idea of the labyrinth'. He mentions Theseus and the Minotaur, but there are wonderful labyrinths still in existence which have a strongly ritualistic, even musical connexion. These are not mazes, with the possibility of getting lost, but single, almost musically-conceived, quasi-spiral paths. We need to travel no further than Chartres in Normandy to see one of the finest examples, beneath the West Rose window of the Cathedral. Whether one moves inwards to the labyrinth's central rose-shaped heart, or outwards to the straight path pointing directly to the West Rose, the journey has 35 phases, grouped symmetrically to the north and the south of the ring – the longer ones, as one proceeds outwards, being the first, and the shorter, those approaching the exit line. The common assumption is that one proceeds from the rim to the centre of a labyrinth, but it can

[6] The performance is also on 'Night Thoughts'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040298212000137 Published online by Cambridge University Press

also be considered a journey from solid earth towards eternity, which in Chartres means outwards towards the West Rose, depicting Judgement Day. And it seems to me that, whether deliberately or by instinct, this is the path that Connolly has chosen, as will briefly be demonstrated in the next paragraph. This makes perfect musical sense if one considers the need for an exposition embodying tension and thereby engendering developmental activity, then climax and final release. There is drama in this Concerto, though perhaps not of the kind one finds in its classical equivalent, since here the title should be understood in its Italian sense, of combined effort, rather than that of its original Latin, of conflict. The labyrinth parallel can be pursued further, particularly in matters of detail, but there is a danger of this becoming a metaphysical, even a hypothetical approach, not to mention an over-lengthy one. However, at risk of directing focus away from the music's own power, I will give three general but significant examples.

As mentioned above, the longer curves in the medieval labyrinth occur early in the journey outwards from the centre – a metaphor for reluctance to leave the earth, perhaps; the shorter are in the final stages, as one accelerates towards one's final outcome. Without precise correspondence, the same happens overall in the Concerto, with the interesting extra detail that the first phase in each of the three movements is the longest for that movement, as though to emphasize the connexion. The last phase in the first movement, reaching the midpoint time-wise and corresponding to wave VI in the 14-wave plan, has the highest tension. Thereafter the music moves with greater and greater certainty through the succeeding movements to the wild excitement and sense of release in the final phase. This, in the labyrinth, is of course the moment in its choreography when one steps out, via the short straight path, towards the brilliant West Rose. In that half of the journey, there are short phases where one is forced to head eastwards, away from the aspired-for outcome; in the Concerto, these are matched in the central movement by phases of tense uncertainty, then in the final movement by shorter phases of heightened, but more static energy.

Whatever one may think about these perceived correspondences, all that I have described makes perfect compositional sense. Likewise, there is no doubt that the music is a metaphorical journey, with waves of alternating freedom and resolution, with the significant feature that neither soloist nor orchestra appears to lead the way. Nicolas Hodges perfectly understands this in his masterly performance of the work, engaging, phase by phase, in a close partnership with the orchestra. The orchestral layout itself presents the following intriguing possibility. It is divided into three blocks: left, right and centre as viewed from the dais. Brass and percussion are in the outer blocks, strings, woodwind and timpani in the central grouping, with the soloist in the customary position, left of the conductor. Horn 1 is in the left grouping (left, of course, being equivalent to labyrinthine west), and moves for the first two movements to a position slightly up-stage of the group. Horn 4 is initially off-stage, to the right (or east) of the right-hand grouping. From the outset, the horns play an important rôle in creating harmonic, then linear focus, in what could otherwise be overwhelmingly rich textures in the orchestra, and virtuoso activity in the piano. Horn 1 presents, from its detached position, a strong line at the beginning of waves I to V, virtually guiding orchestra and soloist around each of the more tricky phases in the metaphorical labyrinth. In the first part of wave VI both horns unite in a strong line to ensure the music is firmly directed, via a climax, into the central, slow movement, consisting of waves VII and VIII. In this movement, Horn 1 is effectively a second soloist, focusing and driving the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040298212000137 Published online by Cambridge University Press

music gently through phases of uncertainty, ensuring that all arrive safely at the commencement of the third movement, at which point both horns assume their designated positions in their groups. From now on, soloist and orchestra must find their own way to journey's completion. The piano takes on an increasingly volatile, even nervous rôle, while the orchestra, with gently persuasive harmonies and quite firm lines, holds it on course, only occasionally responding in kind to the piano's frenzy. The music becomes ever more excited, not to say exciting, with alternations of strict and free in best Connolly manner, until the piano reaches its emphatic conclusion on a full-force, sustained major second around middle C, as though to reassure the hearer that Justin Connolly is still in charge. The orchestra responds with wild joy, and a final quiet 'there you are' gesture.

So there we are. Justin Connolly's work has great strength of character. It is very challenging, but by no means unperformable, nor indeed incomprehensible. The idiom is unfashionably modernist, with undertones of serialism but not at all faceless, built as it is on a philosophy of 'technique in support of vision'. In fact none of the techniques in his vocabulary are terribly obscure, as I have tried to show. They have consistency and logic, as well as interesting interrelations. To summarize, the music is usually built on characteristic vertical harmonic structures: very often superposed trichords containing the interval of a second, often built over a subtle *cantus firmus*. The predominant approach to growth and development involves the subtle use of block variation, in which passages are 'recycled', not necessarily in sequence, but with subtle or dramatic colour-changes on each reappearance. All ideas have strong 'family' connexions – another aspect of variation technique, perhaps. Overall, the small is reflected in the large. This survey aims to show how a very consistent approach can work with compositions of very different scales and at different structural levels, and how the techniques have evolved over time. Once one enters into engagement with his consistent idiom, all of the 15 works studied in preparation for this essay are immensely moving, without been slushily expressionist.

Connolly's most recent work at the time of writing this essay was a String Trio dedicated to the late Milton Babbitt, then still very much alive. The American connexion remains significant. Works written before 2001 are largely published by Novello under the Music Sales umbrella, and appear to be purchasable under the new 'print-on-demand' policy. The only works available on commercial CD are those mentioned above, plus Sonatina in Five Studies, op.1, performed by pianist Steven Neugarten, on Metier MSV CD92008. There are two LPs: Argo ZRG 747 has *Cinquepaces* for Brass Quintet, *Prose* for SATB, *Triad III* for oboe, viola and cello and the above-mentioned *Poems of Wallace Stevens I* for soprano and seven instruments; and on Soma 781 we have *Tesserae D* for trumpet and tape, in which the trumpet is played by John Wallace.

Far too few.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040298212000137 Published online by Cambridge University Press