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PRELUDES AND CANONS

Howard Skempton

A recent exchange of emails with the composer Christopher Fox touched on Morton Feldman. Christopher commented, 'My "problem" with Feldman, and it is just mine and not a problem, is that he was not an innovator; but has there ever been a conservative composer who took more risks?'. This led me to consider the value of innovation, the need for risk and the nature of the risks we take.

Maybe there are two paths for the adventurous composer: one towards innovation and one towards radicalism? The difference between the two approaches would seem to be cultural and geographical – a difference of attitude rather than sensibility, if that is not too fine a distinction?

Who are the innovators, since 1945? Stockhausen, Boulez and the 'avant-garde', quite clearly. Who are the radicals? Morton Feldman, by default (if we accept Christopher Fox's observation), also Cornelius Cardew (my teacher), the American experimentalists and the minimalists.

The work of the innovators seems to be more rational and structured, that of the radicals more intuitive and informal. In which case, how do we view John Cage?

Cage was nothing if not a constructivist. This is evident in his use of percussion in the late 1930s and early 40s, in his reliance on rhythmic structures in the 40s and early 50s and in his devotion to the rigorous use of chance operations from the early 50s through to his death in 1992.

It is no surprise that Cage and Boulez found common cause around 1950, with Cage arranging the first American performance of Boulez's Second Piano Sonata.

And yet Boulez can seem the firebrand, Cage the easy-going dropout. In the 'Lecture on Nothing' (first delivered around 1950, and published in 1961 in *Silence*), Cage writes, 'I have nothing to say and I am saying it and that is poetry as I need it'.[1] This was followed by the 'Lecture on Something', in which Cage focuses on responsibility: 'When we re-move the world from our shoulders we notice it doesn't drop. Where is the responsibility?'.[2]

It is easy to take exception to this statement. My own view is that it is only when we take the world on our shoulders that we feel its weight. I realise now, however, that I have been reacting, over decades, to a slight misquotation. In the Peters Edition catalogue of Cage's work (published in 1962), there is an interview between Cage and the American composer Roger Reynolds. Reynolds quotes this characteristically rhetorical question from the 'Lecture on Something' when asking Cage about humanity's relationship to Nature. Cage compares the attitude of Europe, concerned with controlling Nature, to that of what he called the Far East, happy to accept it.

[1] John Cage, 'Lecture on Nothing', in *Silence* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), p. 109.
[2] John Cage, 'Lecture on Something', in *Silence*, p. 139.

In the Peters catalogue, when 'we remove the world from our shoulders' we do so without a hyphen in 'remove'. In the version in *Silence*, from which Reynolds was quoting, there is a hyphen in 're-move'. This is a small but important difference. If the world is re[hyphen]moved from our shoulders, it must first have been moved there.

Anyway, what follows in the 'Lecture on Something' is modification enough: 'Responsibility is to oneself; and the highest form of it is irresponsibility to oneself which is to say the calm acceptance of whatever responsibility to others and things comes along'.

Cage was an important influence on me as a young composer, but not initially.

Stravinsky's *Firebird* may have set the ball rolling but my passion for composition stems from listening to Webern and becoming fascinated by serial technique. The aural landscapes of Webern's Six Pieces for Orchestra led me eventually to the painterly soundscapes of Morton Feldman's piano music. My own *A Humming Song*, my first published piano piece, composed when I was 19, before my studies with Cardew, was a youthfully direct response to Feldman's *Piano Three Hands* of 1957. Feldman's music gave me permission to explore music slowly and quietly, and not to be shy of consonance. Feldman's forthright use of octaves in his early piano solo *Extensions 3* was an antidote to their banishment in much serial music of the time.

I have described my piano pieces, which are mostly short, as the central nervous system of my work. Most of the pieces from my early years, when I was working with Cardew and taking part in Scratch Orchestra concerts, were spacious and static. In years to come, I would call pieces of this type 'landscapes'. From around 1971, there was a need to write more expressively. *Simple Piano Piece* (1972) is slow and homophonic, but governed to some extent by the top line. Such pieces would eventually be labelled 'chorales'. Pure melody had already taken wing, even before I bought my small accordion in 1971. My Satie-esque (if not Chopinesque) *Waltz* was composed in April 1970 and performed by John Tilbury, who recorded it for BBC Radio 3.

These three labels, 'landscapes', 'chorales' and, yes, 'melodies', are still applicable. Example 1 shows one of my most recent pieces, one of 16 compositions commissioned by the pianist William Howard, for a CD project entitled *Sixteen Contemporary Love Songs*, a delightful collection including works by established composers Judith Weir, Robert Saxton, Piers Hellawell, Cheryl Frances-Hoad and others, and two remarkable pieces by young composers, prizewinners in a competition that attracted hundreds of entries worldwide.

So, here is the beginning of my *Solitary Highland Song* (see Example 1); it takes its title from William Wordsworth's 'The Solitary Reaper':

> Behold her, single in a field,
> Yon solitary Highland Lass!

In my CD note, I comment that 'Wordsworth was haunted by "the melancholy strain... the maiden sang", but we are left to muse on his feelings for the singer. What is palpable is the poem. What is palpable in the case of my *Solitary Highland Song* is the sound of the piano'.[3]

Wordsworth was of crucial importance to me when I was studying A Level English Literature at school. I had chosen the wrong subjects

[3] Howard Skempton, 'Sleeve Notes', *Sixteen Contemporary Love Songs* (Orchid Classics, ORC100083, 2018).

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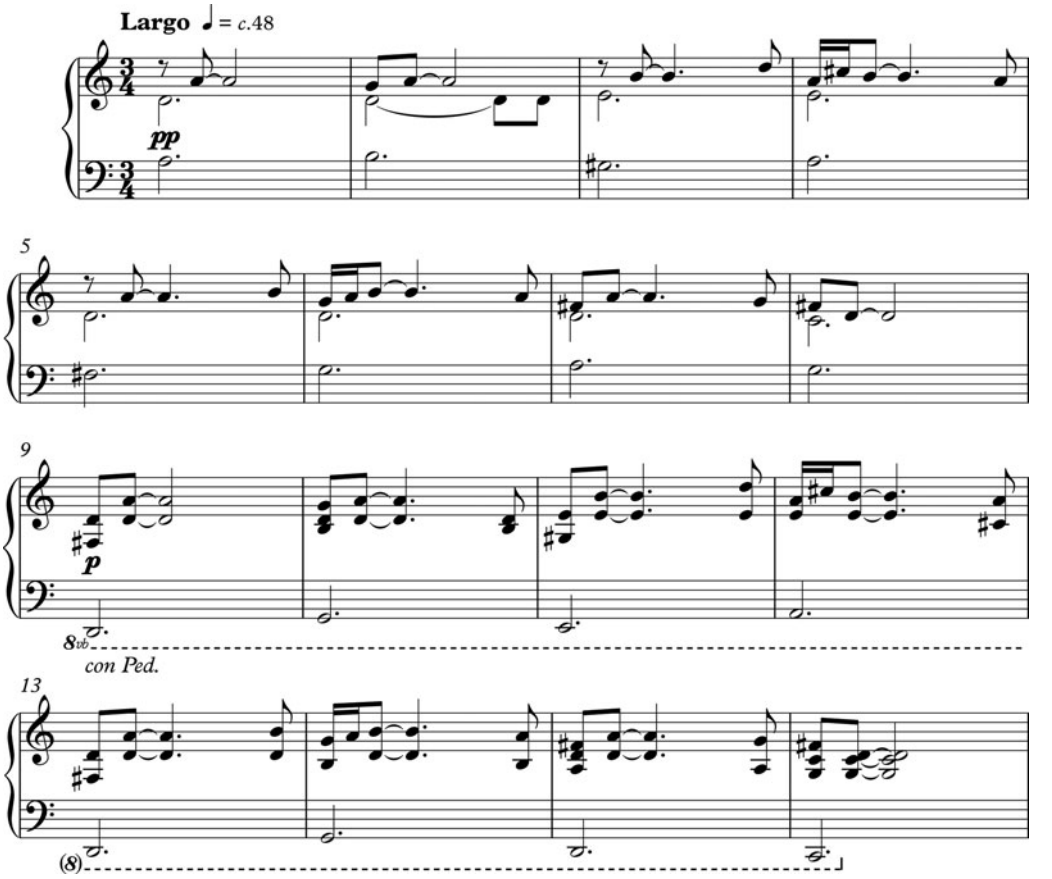

Example 1:
Howard Skempton, *Solitary Highland Song*, bars 1–16. © Oxford University Press 2020. Extracts reproduced by permission. All rights reserved.

to study at A Level and was a negligent student. I had chosen to study English because I loved the language, took part in every available school play and was inspired by poetry. That was not enough, of course, but my passion for poetry has remained and is one of the reasons I now write so much vocal and choral music.

Wordsworth, a stentorian figure by any standards, but also much teased in critical circles for his occasionally infelicitous phrases, was as liberating a hero for me as Cage became. Wordsworth was a radical in demanding a simpler, more comprehensible style of utterance. His poetry seemed itself a force of nature. It was capable of transcendental power. This was poetry as I needed it. It was indispensable. And it was by this criterion – indispensability – that I judged the music I listened to, which, thanks to the BBC's Third Programme of the mid-1960s, was Schoenberg, Webern, Roberto Gerhard, Peter Maxwell Davies and even (in 1966) Morton Feldman and Cornelius Cardew.

I was becoming a composer, but not in a conventional way. I was a composer by default, perhaps, but also '… by other means'. I have put those three words, 'by other means', in quotation marks, and they could well serve as an alternative title to this talk.

The difficult, frustrating years at school, when I was lucky to have great support from both the music teacher and my piano tutor, prompted me to find my own path to composing: not only Webern's 'path to the new music', but also Feldman's and Cardew's.

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Through Cardew, I discovered the elegance of text pieces. Here was composition in the guise of poetry: so, composition… by other means. Inspired merely by a spoken description of the score of Cardew's *Treatise*, I took to making graphic scores. Here again was composition by other means: composition in the guise of drawing. Cardew was interested in Wittgenstein, and the title of his graphic masterpiece, *Treatise*, comes from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. I sense that Cardew, for all his doubts about post-war serialism, had a flair for mathematics. Given his commitment to fantasy and intuition, I would not have questioned him about this, though he might not have been surprised by my enquiry. I amuse myself by remembering his remark, in a pub following a Morley College class, 'Howard's a serialist'. So that is my third means of escape: music can be mathematics by other means, offering new forms of formulae and sharing mathematics' timeless concern with pattern and shape.

Experimental music, as promoted and practised by Cornelius Cardew, seemed irresistibly adventurous. Intuition was favoured, and both means and ends were mysterious, even if frustratingly so. Being lost was part of the process.

Which brings us back to 'risk', mentioned in the opening quotation from Christopher Fox's email. I am delighted to have discovered, within the last week, the poetry of Caroline Bird, who has just been awarded the Forward Prize for her latest book, *The Air Year*. I am not a poet. I would need to be deeply immersed in poetry – as I always have been in music – to be a poet. There is something of a shock of recognition, however, when I read her description of the way she works. This is taken from a recent interview:

> With each draft, no matter how long or short the finished draft would end up becoming, I deliberately wrote and wrote until the poem 'got lost'. I wanted to truly write into the nothingness: if I reached what felt like the conclusion I deliberately carried on, overshooting the finale to find the 'unexpected clearing', the dark untamed place where the poem stops obeying the poet and instead starts speaking back.[4]

This reminds me of the main point I was trying to make in a short essay, 'Feldman's B Flat', published in the first (and perhaps only) edition of *KunstMUSIK* in 2003. In a 1967 essay, 'Some Elementary Questions', Feldman wrote, 'The composer works in a pre-existent medium. In painting if you hesitate, you become immortal. In music if you hesitate, you are lost'. I argue that Feldman's medium, given his view of it, was not so cut-and-dried, and end with what seems like wry contradiction: 'Feldman strayed from "the straight and narrow" for good reason. He proved that it pays to be lost. In music, if you are lost, you become immortal'.

Which seems nonsense when one thinks of Bach. If Bach digs a hole, it is only to demonstrate his ability to climb out of it. I am devoted to Bach's music, as I am devoted to Feldman's, because it deals with pitch, and keeps it fresh. My *24 Preludes and Fugues* obviously owe something to Bach's 'Forty-Eight'. They are extraordinarily concise (see Examples 2 and 3); but, first, here's part of my note for the CD that came out early this year:

> The form and scale of the work was decided at the outset. A gap in my composing schedule allowed just enough time to complete the cycle, though

[4] Caroline Bird, 'In Conversation with Forward Arts Foundation': www.forwardartsfoundation.org/forward-prizes-for-poetry/caroline-bird/forward-arts-foundation-in-conversation-with-caroline-bird/ (accessed 28 February 2021).

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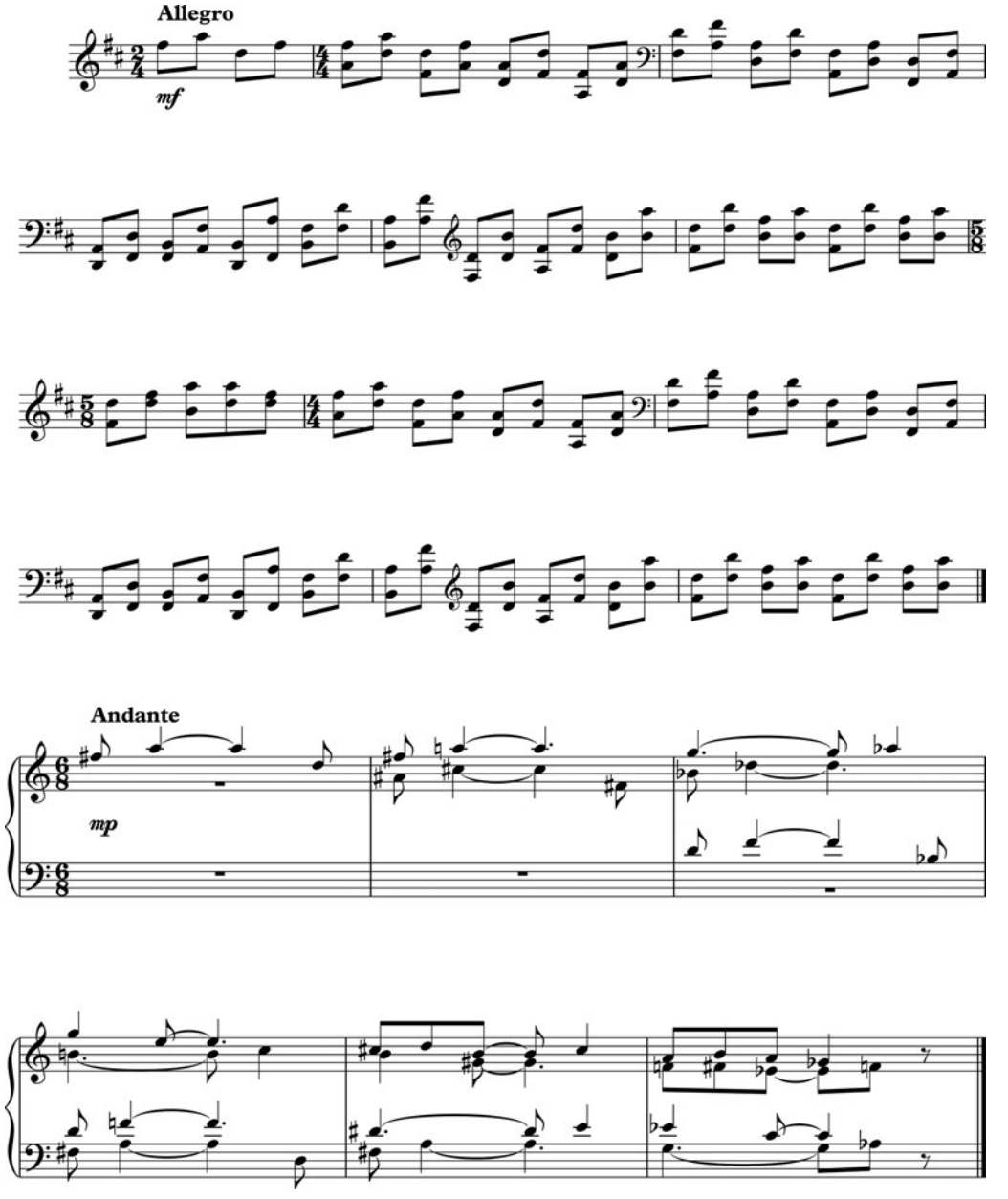

Example 2:
Howard Skempton, *24 Preludes and Fugues*, No. 3. © Oxford University Press 2020. Extracts reproduced by permission. All rights reserved.

requiring the setting of tight limits. Each Prelude and Fugue would be confined to an A4 page. The Preludes would be relatively quick and strictly canonic; and accommodated on a single stave, though changes of clef would allow for freedom of movement within a four-octave range. The Fugues would be slower. Each Fugue would take its theme from the preceding Prelude, but in a form that allowed for rapid modulation to a point within striking distance of the 'tonality' of the succeeding Prelude. The aim was to effect a seamless progression through the keys, the modally chromatic language taking the music from C major to C sharp minor; and then to D major and E flat minor; and so on. The design for the last twelve Preludes and Fugues would be the reverse of that for the first twelve: C minor to C sharp major; to D minor; and so on.

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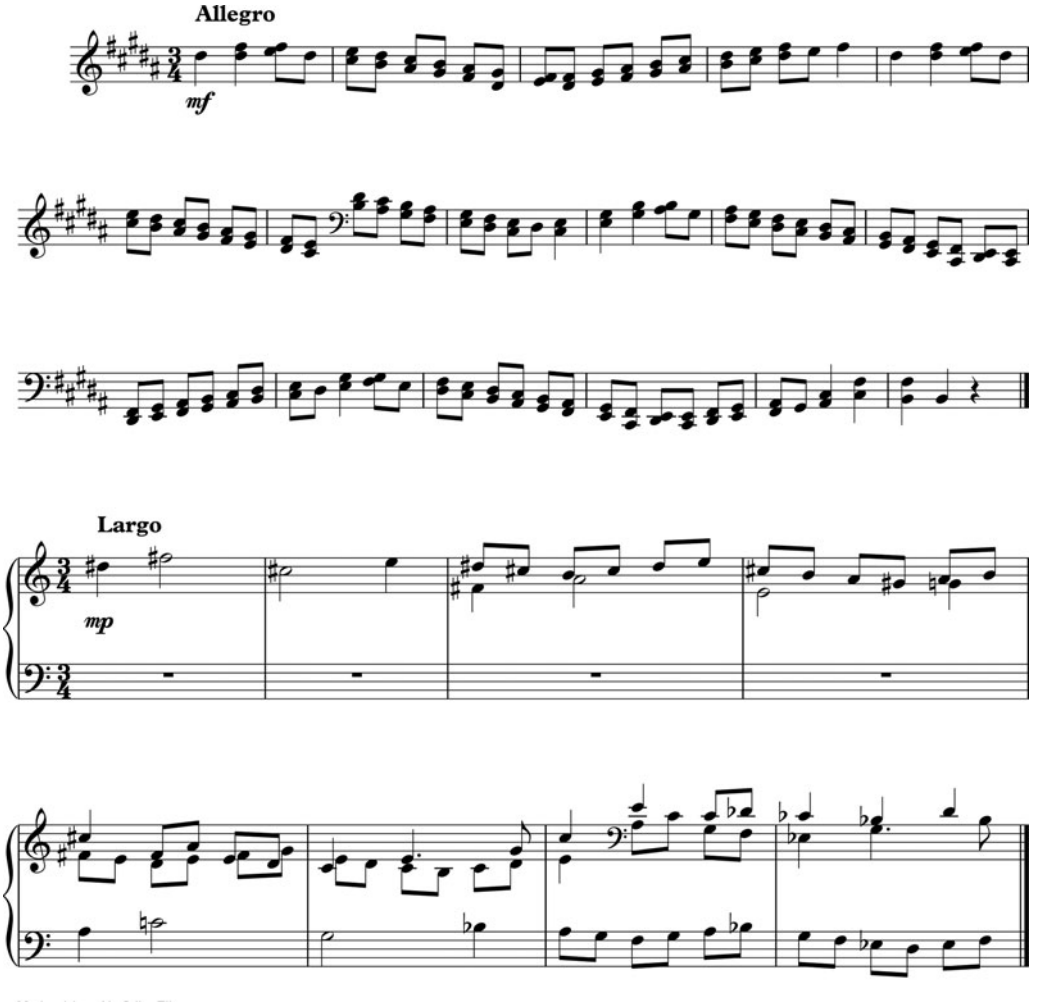

Example 3:
Howard Skempton, *24 Preludes and Fugues*, No. 24. © Oxford University Press 2020. Extracts reproduced by permission. All rights reserved.

In practice, these guidelines proved to be playful rather than restrictive. They were introduced to facilitate the process and to secure the delight of both composer and pianist in something like an unfolding narrative. A new Prelude and Fugue was delivered each week, though with increasing urgency as the date of the first performance (27th May 2019, in Hay-on-Wye) approached. Delivering the pieces one by one or, latterly, two at a time, made possible an extended period of familiarisation and consolidation. If the earlier pieces seemed to benefit most from this, seeming, in due course, like old friends, the later ones could be approached with sufficient understanding of the lie of the land.[5]

A favourite poet of mine, the Irish writer James Stephens, wrote in the Preface to his *Collected Poems*, published by MacMillan in 1926:

> A whole series of modes belong to lyrical poetry: they compose the infinity which art requires, and within which the lyrical poet may consider that there is nothing whatever which he cannot do. Lacking the feeling of power which this infinity provides, an artist is helpless. It may be said that the lyrical poet is undisputed master of all the *extremes* that can be expressed in terms of time or speed or tempo. No pen but his can hold excessive velocity or excessive

[5] Howard Skempton, 'Sleeve Notes', *The Piano Music of Howard Skempton* (Orchid Classics, ORC100116, 2020).

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> slowness. A swift lyrical line is as quick as lightning; a slow one can be slower than a snail; and it is only in these difficult regions, distant regions, that the poet can work with ease and certainty.[6]

Working with ease and certainty is half the battle. One also needs to be brave enough to face new challenges, achieving work that is richer, stronger and more surprising than one could have imagined.

I was excited by the prospect of composing a set of 24 preludes and fugues because it was possibly the last thing I might have been expected to do. I had been interested in writing canons for decades. Canon follows naturally from melody. I was asked in 1981 to write a piece for two pianos, to be performed at Goldsmiths College in London by John Tilbury and Susan Bradshaw. John had given me just a couple of days' notice, so I wrote an extended melody with the instruction that it should be played in unison. When I arrived for the performance, John told me that they had accidentally failed to synchronise in rehearsal, and that they were so charmed by the result that they planned to perform it as a canon. It was very beautiful. Cornelius Cardew was there and he sat next to me after the piece had been played. After 10 years of disagreement about politics, this seemed like a sign of endorsement. It was the last time I saw him before his death later in the year.

I may have chosen to write 24 canons and fugues as a way of exploring the difference between the two. I had written fugues before, but I was still puzzled why a form which literally suggests a bid for freedom should seem so academic, so 'worthy' in the worst sense.

When I first had the idea that I should write a set of 24 preludes and fugues, and that all the preludes should be canons, a friend remarked (with a smile), 'But won't that be boring!'. Perhaps, as I have said, I was curious to discover the difference between these two forms: canon and fugue. If indeed they are forms? This is an old question: are they forms or are they textures? Another friend, a composer living in Berlin, Chris Newman, understood immediately that the difference would be one of texture.

The fugue takes up the theme of the prelude: in the same key but at a different tempo. What follows is a process of continuous modulation within the realm of modes of limited transposition. Use of a nine-note mode keeps the vertical aspect of the music – the harmony, if you like – in check. There is still room for contrapuntal freedom and tonal progression.

This balance – between vertical and horizontal, and between tonal good sense and linear freedom – has been a major preoccupation – a principal area of research, if you like – over the last two decades. The fugues may be brief, but their 'brief' (in another sense) is to explore this idea of balance carefully and expressively. In the end, they must be judged as pieces of music. Are they beautiful? Are they interesting? Are they satisfying? And, yes, are they fugues?

For me, their brevity is not a problem. Why continue once there is a sense of completion? Here is the last of the *Preludes and Fugues*, No. 24 (see Example 3). There is a twist at the end of the fugue, deflecting the music from the possibility of C major, and a repeat of the cycle.

Given as a talk at Oxford University, 2 November 2020.

[6] James Stephens, *Collected Poems* (London: MacMillan, 1926), pp. x–xi.

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