

## TIME, HISTORY, COMPOSING

Christopher Fox

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**Abstract:** This article is based on a lecture given on 28 April 2018 as the keynote address at the inaugural conference of [CenM@S](#), the Centre for New Music at Sheffield University. It offers a series of reflections on time and musical composition, time being considered both in the sense of history – our present sense of the past – and experiential time as we listen to music. Specific reference is made to the author's *Canti del carcere* (2012–18) and the texts by Gramsci and Dante that are set in these madrigals, each of which is also concerned with the passage of time and the ways in which ideas become consolidated. Ideas of time and history in the music of Cage, Nono and Feldman are also considered.

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In 2012 James Weeks asked me to contribute a new piece to EXAUDI's Italian madrigal collection. Madrigals need texts and Italian madrigals need Italian texts, so I turned to Antonio Gramsci's *Quaderni del Carcere*, the notebooks he composed during his incarceration as a political prisoner in Fascist Italy from 1926 until his death in 1937. Gramsci's health, never good, was in progressive decline and his prospects of release non-existent, yet in these circumstances his mind was able to range across Italian history and literature, and, in the Fourth Notebook, there is an extraordinary series of entries in which Gramsci comments on a passage in Canto X of Dante's *Inferno*.

Dante is being led through the underworld by the poet Virgil, who had himself been guided through Hades in Book VI of the *Aeneid*. Together they meet all sorts of creatures, some mythological, some historical, and in Canto X they encounter Farinata and Cavalcante. Farinata was a political leader in Florence who had died the year before Dante was born, Cavalcante the father of Dante's great friend Guido Cavalcanti. Inadvertently, Dante reveals to Cavalcante that Guido has died. Cavalcante is distraught and explains to Dante that:

Noi veggiam, come quei c'ha mala luce,  
le cose . . . che ne son lontano;  
cotanto ancor ne splende il sommo duce.  
Quando s'appressano o son, tutto è vano  
nostro intelletto; e s'altri non ci apporta,  
nulla sapem di vostro stato umano.  
Però comprender puoi che tutta morta  
fia nostra conoscenza da quel punto  
che del futuro fia chiusa la porta.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, Canto X, lines 100–110.

We see, like those who have imperfect sight, the things that are far from us; to that extent the supreme leader still shines on us. When they draw near, or are present, our intellect is completely useless, and unless others bring word, we know nothing of your human state. Thus you can understand that our knowledge will be wholly dead from the moment when the door of the future is closed.

Gramsci compares this to a news story about a young girl 'who went blind after she had foreseen that the war would end in 1918'. He goes on to say that 'that is why seers, like Cassandra, are not believed. If they were believed, their predictions would not come true, since people, having been warned, would act differently'.

Gramsci, following Dante, is telling us about time and history. Farinata and Cavalcante are dead, part of the historical archive that is the afterlife, but they have been brought back into the present by the visit of Dante and his guide Virgil. The present in which Dante exists was once Cavalcante's future and Cavalcante is shocked that his son Guido has died much sooner than he had expected: the reality of the present is at odds with his past aspirations for the future. Gramsci asks, 'What is his torment?' and answers that it is that 'he sees into the past and into the future, but does not see the present'.<sup>2</sup>

These texts became the basis of my EXAUDI madrigal, *suo tormento*, and I tried to find a musical structure that would reflect these ideas about time. In the end I decided to set the passage I had chosen from the *Inferno* by working out from its centre – 'e s'altri' ('and unless others') – as if I was reading both back in time, to the beginning of the passage, and forward, to its end. (See [Example 1](#).)

This is a compositional conceit, of course, because the time of this music is inexorably flowing onwards, but this is also how I composed

Example 1: Christopher Fox, *Canti del carcere* (3): *suo tormento*, bars 1–3

<sup>2</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, Quaderno 4, §78; English translation by Joseph A. Buttigeig, *Antonio Gramsci: Prison Notebooks*, Vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 247.

25 *mf* *mp*

a [sapem] unvoiced *p* *ff* *mf*

s [son] *p* *mf* *p* sa [sapem]

m [sapem] sa [sapem]

unvoiced *f* unvoiced *f*

t [tutto] t n [son] *mf*

l [nulla] a [sapem] c [sapem]

unvoiced *f* *mp* *p* *f* *p*

tu a [sapem] di [d]

con vibrato *f* *mf* *f* *p* *mp* *mf* *p*

s [son] n [d]

o u [tutto] con vibrato *f* *mf* *f* *p* *mp* *mf* *p*

Qual il su-o tor men

m [sapem] i [d] n [son]

Example 2:  
Christopher Fox, *Canti del carcere (3): suo tormento*, bars 23–33

each phrase of the music, beginning in the middle and working backwards and forwards through a handful of words. This Dante-music is fragmentary, the words split up between the voices, and as a contrast I set Gramsci's commentary on the Dante text as a series of continuous melodic lines which interrupt the Dante-music; two different sorts of musical time, yet within a single musical space (See [Example 2](#).)

As I said earlier, Gramsci is an extraordinary writer, not just because of the clarity of his analysis but also because of what he was doing and where he was doing it. He thinks theoretically and analytically but constantly tests his insights against the lived reality of humanity; he is as much concerned with Cavalcante's distress at the death of his son as he is with the philosophical conundrum of how to understand time past, present and future. I decided to add two more madrigals, *suo tormento* becoming the last of a set of three *Canti del carcere*. The middle madrigal, *senso comune*, came next, a setting of probably the most famous passage from the First Notebook, in which Gramsci reflects on common sense – the way that political, cultural and philosophical ideas congeal in popular understanding into something 'rigid'.

Ogni strato sociale ha il suo 'senso comune' che è in fondo la concezione della vita e la morale più diffusa. Ogni corrente filosofica lascia una sedimentazione di 'senso comune': è questo il documento della sua effettualità storica. Il senso comune non è qualcosa di irrigidito e immobile, ma si trasforma continuamente, arricchendosi di nozioni scientifiche e opinioni filosofiche entrate nel costume. Il 'senso comune' è il folklore della 'filosofia' e sta di mezzo tra il 'folklore' vero e proprio (cioè come è inteso) e la filosofia, la scienza, l'economia degli scienziati. Il 'senso comune' crea il futuro folklore, cioè una fase più o meno irrigidita di un certo tempo e luogo.<sup>3</sup>

Every social stratum has its own 'common sense' which is ultimately the most widespread conception of life and morals. Every philosophical current leaves a sedimentation of 'common sense': this is the document of its historical reality. Common sense is not something rigid and static; rather it changes continuously, enriched by scientific notions and philosophical opinions which have entered into common usage. 'Common sense' is the folklore of 'philosophy' and stands midway between real 'folklore' (that is, as it is understood) and the philosophy, the science, the economics of the scholars. 'Common sense' creates the folklore of the future, that is a more or less rigidified phase of a certain time and place.

Just as *suo tormento* had been an opportunity to make music about time and how we experience it, *senso comune* became a piece about understanding. The singers independently intone the text at a conversational pace but sound only the vowels: to put it more bluntly, Gramsci's text becomes incomprehensible, with only the words 'senso comune' emerging at the end of each period of intonation. (See Example 3.)

Perhaps this is some sort of commentary on common sense itself: we imagine common sense as a shared understanding of how the world works and expect to rely on it to help us decide how to act, but it is often much less reliable than we imagine. In reality, as Gramsci tells us, 'common sense' is a 'sedimentation', it is always past its sell-by date. It's 'rigid' and, as we seem to discover every day in contemporary political life, it is rigid thinking that leads to catastrophe. To make this point a little more forcefully, the madrigal ends with a unison, syllabic setting, consonants and vowels all properly sounded, of another Dante text that Gramsci refers to in the

Example 3 shows a musical score for 'senso comune' by Christopher Fox. The score is written for five voices: Soprano 1 (S1), Soprano 2 (S2), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B). The lyrics are fragmented and difficult to hear, with only the words 'senso comune' clearly audible at the end of each phrase. The score includes tempo markings (35, 40, 45, 50, 55, 60) and a 'normale' marking. The lyrics are: S1: 'effetualita storica il se co'; S2: 'e inteso e la filosofia la scienza degli scienziati il se ne'; A: 'e luogo ogni strato sociale ha il suo sen - so co - mu - ne'; T: 'corrente filosofica lascia una sedimentazione di sen - so'; B: 'continuamente arricchendosi di nozione scientifiche e opinioni filosofiche entrate costume il se mu'.

Example 3:  
Christopher Fox, *Canti del carcere* (2):  
*senso comune*, second system, p.3

<sup>3</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, Quaderno 1, §65.

First Notebook, immediately before his thoughts on common sense, one of the *Rime Petrose*:

Così nel mio parlar voglio esser aspro  
com'è ne li atti questa bella petra<sup>4</sup>

I want to charge my words with as much harshness as this beautiful stone has in her actions

The third of these madrigals is *fantasma* and although it was the last to be written it will come first in performance because it offers a caveat about how any work of art should be received. In the Sixth Notebook Gramsci returns to Dante and the extent to which his writings offer some sort of political analysis, perhaps, Gramsci suggests, even anticipating a political theorist like Machiavelli:

in realtà si tratta non di una dottrina politica, ma di un'utopia politica, che si colora di riflessi del passato, e più di tutto si tratta del tentativo di organizzare come dottrina ciò che era solo materiale poetico in formazione, in ebullizione, fantasma poetico.<sup>5</sup>

This was not a political theory but a political utopia coloured by reflections of the past; it was, more than anything else, an effort to synthesize as a doctrine what was only poetic material taking shape, in a state of effervescence, an incipient poetic phantasm.

Wise words for any artist who imagines that their work might somehow coalesce into a doctrine: our work is no more than a 'utopia coloured by reflections of the past', an 'ebullizione', a 'bubbling up', a 'poetic phantasm'.

In *suo tormento* and, especially, *fantasma*, I felt very close to the spirits of Luigi Dallapiccola and Luigi Nono. Dallapiccola is present in the fragmentary melodic writing, both are present in an informal sort of twelve-note harmony (although contra Nono I tried very hard to avoid tritones), and Nono is present in the fragmentary text-setting. I also found myself remembering – or, rather, trying to remember, because I hadn't used notes or a script – a lecture I gave in the 1997 Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival.

That year's festival centred on a retrospective of Nono's music and I compared his long late works with those of Cage and Feldman. I speculated on what happens in the silences of these composers' music – what are we waiting for and what did each of these composers imagine that we would be doing as we wait? I remember – or at least, I've got into the habit of remembering – that I said something along the lines that in Feldman we wait for the next thing that he wants to hear. We're listening to a musical imagination at work, figures being extended, recast, juxtaposed, until, as Feldman said of his Second String Quartet, the music 'dies of old age'. As I have said elsewhere, it is easy to make the mistake of imagining that 'late-Feldman' is more consistent than it actually is. *For John Cage*, for example, is very different from *Crippled Symmetry*.<sup>6</sup> But, different as they may be, they are ultimately defined by the limitations of what Feldman felt was tasteful, the types of intervals between notes and groups of notes that he was prepared to allow into his music.

Cage is very different. He would like us to remember nothing, to be permanently locked into the present moment. Like a sound in the

<sup>4</sup> Dante Alighieri, 'Così nel mio parlar voglio esser aspro', one of his 4 *Rime petrose*.

<sup>5</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, Quaderno 6, §85.

<sup>6</sup> *Crippled Symmetry* was performed by Richard Craig, Philip Thomas and Damien Harron as the opening event of the Sheffield conference.

anechoic chamber, Cage wants us to listen as if this music has no resonance, so that we remember nothing and also anticipate nothing. The occasional consonant triads in *Music of Changes* are not major chords but just another form of three-note aggregate, the recurring notes not a pitch centre but just a demonstration of how random selection works. Does anyone listen like that? I doubt it, but great teacher that he was, Cage constantly tried to teach himself, and therefore us too, to listen ahistorically. The ceaseless quest in all his work after 1950 is for a listening mind that is both open and silent.

So in Cage we wait for the next . . . whatever it is, something to be encountered in a state of unknowing. For Luigi Nono, giving his lecture 'Presenza storica nella musica oggi'<sup>7</sup> in Darmstadt in 1959, this condition was 'spiritual suicide' because, for Nono, it is our presence in history, both personal and collective, that defines us. To push this analysis to its extreme, Cage's music is, at best, a holiday from consciousness, at worst, an abnegation of our responsibility as human beings. In the silences that punctuate Nono's late works, however, as we wait for each new event, Nono expects that we will not only remember what has already happened in this music but also try to relate these immediate memories to our memories of all the other music we know.

Our listening, and our waiting to listen, is profoundly different in these three composers' work. In Feldman we are in a world limited by his sense of what was appropriate in a piece of music, in Cage we are in the anechoic chamber; Nono, as a Marxist, locates us in the midst of history. My *Canti del carcere* may be, as Gramsci says, 'no more than poetic material taking shape', an 'effervescence', a 'phantasm'. But, like Nono, I too believe that they do take shape, shapes in time and history, and it is with some thoughts about history that I want to move on, perhaps even edging towards some sort of conclusion.

As Gramsci made clear in his analysis of common sense, our ideas are predicated on our understanding of history. Think, for example, of the way in which we ascribe value to music. What sort of value is it? Social value? Aesthetic value? Material value? Musicians whose work centres on notated music for the concert hall have for many years had the advantage that the societies in which most of us live have attributed an additional value to the work we do. Because our music is a sort of 'classical' music it has been deemed more valuable than other types of musical production. Until 2003 this was even a literal financial value: UK royalties to composers used to be enhanced by the so-called 'classical music subsidy', a minute of composition worth more money than a minute of song-writing. Classical music has also been worth more in the academy. Composed music has dominated school, college and university curricula.

These ideas of value are tied up with ideas about art and craft too. The UK has both an Arts Council and a Craft Council, so art and craft must be different. On the other hand, the Craft Council is funded by the Arts Council, so perhaps they're not so different after all. To avoid wasting time on definitions let's say that art is a term that allows us to assign value to what something is, craft a way of assigning value to how it has been made. Many years ago I took a group of art students

<sup>7</sup> First published in Helmut Lachenmann's translation as 'Geschichte und Gegenwart in der Musik von heute', *Darmstädter Beiträge zur neuen Musik* 3 (1960), 41–7. The reference to 'geistige Selbstmord' is on p. 47.

from Bradford College to the Yorkshire Sculpture Park. We were looking at a big, bright blue steel sculpture by, as I remember, Phillip King, when we were joined by a group of older men. It quickly became clear that they were former steel-workers because they were less interested in the monumental abstraction of the sculpture, more interested in the thickness of the steel itself and, particularly, in the quality of the welds holding the different elements of the sculpture together. 'Very poor', was their collective view.

This is a recurrent theme in much popular discussion of visual art – Picasso couldn't get a likeness, Carl Andre's *Equivalent VIII* is just a couple of layers of bricks, Tracey Emin can't draw, and so on – but there are many musical equivalents too. 'It's such fun to play', say performers when what they really mean is, 'There is nothing in this music that requires me to do anything I don't already know'. Of course they also mean, 'This composer not only understands how my instrument works but is also familiar with ways of writing for it that have been gratefully received by previous generations of musicians': there's a comfortable security in assigning value to a skill well learned and practised.

I am in two minds. I wish that the welds on that sculpture had been less messy; they were at odds with the clean lines of the work's overall design and they distracted those men from Sheffield, making it impossible for them even to begin to take the sculpture seriously as a work of art. But if we follow Gramsci again it is easy to see that craft is the common sense of art and, consequently, it is always in danger of becoming the 'folklore of the future', 'sedimentary' and 'rigid'. History tends to suggest that artists work best when they interrogate their craft, going back to first principles when they work with familiar materials, or fashioning a new craft for new situations. Think of the elegance of Éliane Radigue's use of the new analogue synthesizers of the 1970s, or Carola Bauckholt's transformation of everyday objects into instruments. So craft, like value, is a construct, bound by time and history; not just history in the Alan Bennett sense of 'one fucking thing after another'<sup>8</sup> but also history as an evolving understanding of how and why things happened and how they might be relevant to us today.

For a musical example, let's think about the clarinet. It's a column of air in a tube, activated by the interaction of its player's lungs, lips, tongue and teeth with a reed. The length of the column of air is varied by opening and closing holes along the tube. So music for the clarinet can be made by creating patterns of change for any or all of these elements: breath, lips, fingers. But the clarinet is also an instrument with a past: it's the instrument of Benny Goodman, Michel Portal, William O. Smith. Their playing can define our understanding of the instrument's possibilities. It is also an instrument admitted relatively late into the pantheon of classical music, its associations there only with Classical, Romantic and modern works. So music for the clarinet can be made by creating patterns of association with some (probably not all) of the instrument's past: Mozart, Weber, Brahms, Mahler, Varèse, Messiaen, Birtwistle, Lachenmann. We are confronted by a bewildering array of possibilities: new clarinet music might relate to the performers who have played the instrument, the people who have written music for those performers, the physical, acoustic reality

<sup>8</sup> Rudge in Alan Bennett's play *The History Boys*, Act 2.



of the instrument itself, or the ideas that each of these categories represent.

I am not suggesting that we think about all of this every time we hear, play or compose clarinet music; on the other hand, not thinking about something doesn't mean that other people won't think about it. Above all, we need to remember that the clarinet has a very specific set of historical coordinates. Like all the orchestral wind instruments it was homogenised during the nineteenth century; it became less distinctly clarinet-ish so that it could blend better with other instruments in the orchestra. That's more or less the instrument we have today, a relic from the age of gaslight, corsets and Morse Code.

Each time we create music, whether as performers, listeners or composers, we are bound by time: the time through which that music passes as we listen to it, the time of our individual memories within and beyond the immediate musical experience, and the time of our collective memories, of history. I said earlier that I am fascinated by history and that's one reason why I find composing music to be such a totally absorbing art-form. I love the sensation of sound but, above all, I am in love with the way that composing allows me to place sounds in time – in love with an art that is both in time and about time.

In the passage about Cavalcante from the Fourth Notebook Gramsci describes the present as 'a zone determined by the past and the future'. This an elusive territory to inhabit because, even though it's all we've got, we constantly recall things that have happened before or plan what we might do next. One thing is certain, however: the only time when we do know what's going to happen next is in composed music, or in drama for the stage and screen, where we inhabit a present whose future has already been determined.

This is a very special sort of time. The actors have learnt their lines and rehearsed, but if they are doing their work well there will be moments when we believe that things could go differently. Confronted by Cordelia's request for 'nothing, my lord', perhaps this time King Lear will change his mind about dividing the kingdom. Perhaps he will give everything to her and send the play in a new direction. Or perhaps, this time, Beethoven will find a way of concluding the Ninth Symphony that doesn't involve blowing apart the conventions of the classical symphony – disappointing for the choir, of course, but, as Berio has the tenor say in his *Sinfonia*, 'we must believe it's true'.

In all time-based media we are constantly trying to achieve a present in which the future will not only be a revelation as it happens but also satisfactory as soon as it becomes the past. It's a temporal paradox but only one of many: it doesn't matter how long it takes to create a second or two of music – a minute, an hour, weeks, months – in performance it will pass in just a second or two. Sometimes I wonder how many performances to how many people there will need to be before the amount of time I have spent in creating a piece of music will be matched by an equivalent amount of listening. But there is no equivalence: composing time is not like listening time, because in composing I can go backwards and forwards, as in *suo tormento*. Or, as in *Topophony* (2015), for orchestra and improvising soloists, I can combine the composed time of the orchestra – a sort of musical history made through months of careful planning, layering and editing – with improvised time – the spontaneous



exchange between the soloists within the sonic landscape of the orchestral music.

In this 'zone determined by the past and the future' it is all too easy to slip backwards into what we think we know, into 'the folklore of "philosophy"'. If the experience of music teaches us anything it is surely, to echo Gramsci again, that our place in time and history 'changes continuously': not 'rigid and static' but rather an 'ebullizione', perhaps even a 'fantasma'.

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