

THE MUSIC OF LAURENCE CRANE AND A POST-EXPERIMENTAL PERFORMANCE PRACTICE^I

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Abstract: Laurence Crane's music is often described as experimental or considered as a continuation of the English experimental tradition. In this first extended examination of Crane's music it is proposed that, instead of relying upon associations and aesthetic alignments, the music might be considered as experimental through a particularly experimental approach to performance. After a brief overview of Crane's output his position as a composer is considered within the context of the experimental music tradition. This tradition is then considered in relation to performance practice, both historical and contemporary. A selection of Crane's music is examined in the light of that practice, whilst aspects of the composer's approaches to tonality, instrumentation, form and notation are also highlighted.



Philip Thomas, photo courtesy of University of Huddersfield

Introduction

It has become commonplace to talk about Laurence Crane's music as transforming the familiar into the unfamiliar.² Triads (mostly major, but minor too), simple stepwise melodies (usually only three or four notes), tonic-dominant harmony, simple pulse-based movement – the impact is startling, even for listeners accustomed to some of the more extreme compositional tendencies of recent years as well as to the tonal epiphanies of minimalism. The stark clarity of form and content foregrounds material that may appear banal, crude or clichéd and, especially within a 'new music' context, simply shocking. We are not in the habit of isolating and exposing such familiar material uncluttered by the paraphernalia of other compositional techniques,

¹ I wish to thank Laurence Crane for patiently giving up his time whilst I probed him for information about his life and work. Thanks also to Anton Lukoszevics who first introduced me to Crane's music and has facilitated my knowledge of the work through performances with Apartment House.

² Michael Pisaro, 'Less is Normal' <http://anothertimbre.com/laurencecrane.html> (accessed 06 July 2015); Tim Parkinson 'Laurence Crane' <http://www.untitledwebsite.com/words/53> (accessed 06 July 2015); 'Laurence Crane' in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Experimental Music*, ed. James Saunders (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), p. 244.

concepts or allusions. The experience can be unsettling, as if exposing these fundamental cornerstones of (Western) music is a precarious act of daring.

After a summary of Crane's output, I want to present a brief outline of experimentalism as a context within which to view the work and then consider the relationship between the music and a post-experimental aesthetic of performance that resists familiar notions of expressivity, touch and phrasing. At the same time I hope to chart Crane's developments as a composer, highlighting some of the shifts in his musical language.

My own encounter with Crane's music has been primarily as a performer. The first works I performed were the solo piano piece *20th Century Music* (composed on 31 December 1999, and 'Dedicated to everyone involved with 20th Century Music') and the ensemble work *John White in Berlin* (2003), composed for and premiered by the ensemble Apartment House with whom I have been performing since 2001. I had earlier heard Apartment House perform *Sparling 2000*, one of a number of versions of a work named after the clarinetist Andrew Sparling, in which the clarinet plays only two notes, underpinned by a developing three-chord sequence (played in this version by string quartet); the melancholic yearning of this seemingly simple work moved me deeply, a response I find works hand in hand with the shock elements mentioned earlier. Since that time I have performed a number of solo and ensemble works by Crane, including his longest single-movement work to date, *Piano Piece No.23 'Ethiopian Distance Runners'* (2009) which I premiered. In spite of my familiarity with his work, however, each piece holds new surprises, and the close scrutiny with which I have subjected his work in preparation for this article has only increased my admiration and love for the music.

Crane's output can be roughly divided into four periods: a first period, 1985–1992, from the *Three Preludes* (1985) to *Weirdi* (1992), which is characterised by short pieces (the majority for piano solo and all featuring piano) with an emphasis on repetition and a Satie-like simplicity of melody and chordal accompaniment; a second period (1992–2000), from *Sparling* to *Twentieth Century Music*, which shifts the emphasis from melodic material to predominantly chordal (or chorale) material; a third period (2001–2007) which extends the second to include drones and noise, from *Estonia* (2001) and *John White in Berlin* (in which four e-bows in the piano, e-bowed electric guitar and extended percussion rolls create lengthy drones) to *Come back to the old specimen cabinet John Vigani, John Vigani* (2007); and the most recent series of works (2007–), from the *Chamber Symphony* (2007) and *Piano Piece 23 'Ethiopian Distance Runners'*, which has surprised many listeners familiar with Crane's earlier works by developing larger-scale works, more through-composed rather than static objects, and often abrasive sounds and stark contrasts of material and harmony.

This division is of course a simplification (a notable exception is the drone-based *Riis* (1996) which pre-dates *John White in Berlin* by seven years), although it is one with which the composer concurs. Characteristics of each period can be found in the others and Crane suggests that all the elements are in play all the time but that some are foregrounded at different times. Listeners surprised by the abrasive events in, for example, *Sound of Horse* (2009) or the Piano Quintet (2011), would find similar events in *Jurgen Hip* (1989) or the last of the Piano Duets (1991), where the pianists sing an absurd text over loud repeated chords of D and A.

An alternative overview might categorise the music according to other features, such as melodies, chorales, drones, noises; most of these categories would include works spanning all four periods. Additionally, there are a number of works which are derivatives of earlier works: for example, the movement 'Erki Nool' from *Estonia* (2001) is the latest in a chain of pieces exploring the same material, the earlier ones being *Erki Nool* (1999, a different piece, using the same material), the 'Postlude' from *Weirdi* and *Gorm Busk* (1991); other associated works include *Simon 10 Holt 50* (2007) which is derived from *20th Century Music*, and *Trio* (1996), a vastly slowed down and orchestrated version of *Birthday Piece for Michael Finnissy* written a few months earlier. There are also a number of pieces which seem to stand quite alone, distinct from any of the types and periods outlined above (I would count the third of the *Three Pieces for James Clapperton* (1989), the *Three Melodies and Two Interludes* (1994), which are in any case arrangements of very early works, and *Old Life Was Rubbish* (1998) amongst these).

Beyond the grouping of works there are a number of ideas and approaches to material that can be identified in much of Crane's music from the earliest to the most recent. These include a favouring of three-note step-wise melodic movement; a dominance of sounds occurring in the middle register; a favouring of major triads over minor or chromatic harmony; and a tendency to avoid harmonic resolution. Of the 78 pieces composed between July 1985 and July 2014, counting separate movements within works as individual pieces, 43 feature a clear ascending or descending three-note motif as the main, or sometimes (as in the longer pieces) part of the main, material for the piece. Of the remaining pieces, many feature a four- or five-note step-wise motif. One could trace this feature of Crane's music to something Michael Finnissy said to him in 1984, after seeing some of his earlier output which featured many wide leaps of sevenths and ninths: 'Just remember, notes next to each other are just as interesting'.³

Almost all pieces begin in the middle register, and one can imagine the composer sitting in front of the piano, exploring and toying with mid-register chords. A number of works go on to introduce octave displacements or to underpin the harmony with a low root (a common device, which serves to bring significant change after a period of mid-register activity). Works which begin otherwise are markedly few: the 'Prelude' and 'Get the funny police' of *Weirdi*, which begin with high clarinet lines, the second and fifth of the *Seven Short Pieces* (2004), and *Classic Stride and Glide* (2011), which begins low and dirty.

Forty-five pieces feature no minor triads at all, and those that include them tend to do so only temporarily, with the bias still toward major triads. Resolution is avoided not only harmonically but also gesturally; pieces often simply stop or deliberately cut dead a period of anticipated continuity after a recent change of harmony or material. The lack of resolution is in part a result of the minimal contrast within many pieces and the bi-tonal characteristics of other works, but also typifies the questioning nature of Crane's music, an essential trope of experimental music.

Post-Experimental?

The term 'experimental music' is undoubtedly problematic, and was so even before Michael Nyman assigned it as the title of a book. At

³ Interview with the composer, 26 August 2014.

best it most usefully suggests alignments and associations, a view of music history which favours – or simply takes seriously – the music and ideas of John Cage and the first generation of what has since been named the New York School: Earle Brown, Morton Feldman and Christian Wolff. Usually this history extends forward to include such rigorously individualistic figures as Robert Ashley, George Brecht, Philip Glass, Alison Knowles, Alvin Lucier, George Maciunas, Gordon Mumma, Max Neuhaus, Phil Niblock, Pauline Oliveros, Yoko Ono, Nam June Paik, Steve Reich, David Tudor, LaMonte Young, and many others. Likewise, the history takes a revisionist approach to earlier composers, drawing the ancestral line to Cage by asserting the other-ness of composers such as Henry Cowell, Charles Ives, Erik Satie and Edgar Varèse. Recently attempts have been made to widen the scope of the term, to be more inclusive of different generations, cultures, and most importantly to begin to break down the male dominance of the experimental music canon. The collection of essays in *Tomorrow Is The Question*, edited by Benjamin Piekut, is significant in this respect, as are a number of recent studies which challenge received assumptions and interpretations of historical experimental issues.⁴

In Britain the ‘tradition’ (for such it has been called) has another stream, albeit one which also has its roots in the music of Cage, Feldman, Wolff and Young, that of the ‘English Experimentalists’. With Cornelius Cardew as the figurehead, the list of names is by and large filled with members and close associates of the Scratch Orchestra, such as Gavin Bryars, Chris Hobbs, Michael Parsons, Hugh Shrapnel, Howard Skempton, Dave Smith and John White, as well as the pianist John Tilbury. The scene was also characterised by the cross-fertilisation of improvising musicians with those mostly involved with composed music (i.e. notated in some way, including text/graphics).⁵

There are many ways in which one could group musicians associated with experimental music, according to fairly superficial associations such as notational styles, sound (harmony, texture, rhythm), political motivations, durational concerns, improvisational elements, use of electronics, and so on. But to trace influence according to compositional technique is problematic: none of the composers listed above used chance methods to anything like the extent that Cage did; Wolff’s notations are influential but unique to him; Cardew’s indeterminacy of the late 1950s/early 1960s through to the graphic score *Treatise* and the controlled freedoms of *The Great Learning* have spawned some imitators in the decades since but only temporarily. Indeed, Tony Harris, in his recent study of Cardew, goes so far as to define ‘Cardewism’ entirely in terms of value systems, rather than musical characteristics.⁶

The legacy of the experimentalists (from, say, the mid-1940s to the mid-1970s) is far more diverse and nebulous than the minutiae of compositional technique. The frequently articulated notion that Cage provided ‘permission’ to explore anything and everything (and nothing) has been appropriated by musicians who might seem to be

⁴ Benjamin Piekut, ed., *Tomorrow Is The Question: New Directions in Experimental Music Studies* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014).

⁵ See Benjamin Piekut, ‘Indeterminacy, Free Improvisation, and the Mixed Avant-Garde: Experimental Music in London, 1965–1975’, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 67 (2014), pp. 771–825 for a fascinating recent examination of English experimental music.

⁶ Tony Harris, *The Legacy of Cornelius Cardew* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 125–48.

at polar ends of an aesthetic spectrum. John White has spoken of Cardew in similar terms, describing him as being responsible for 'a sort of waking up' rather than a direct influence upon his compositional work.⁷ Consequently lines can reasonably be drawn from both Cage and Cardew to diverse musical spheres and languages that include the sound installations of Janet Cardiff, the minimalism of David Lang, the improvisational practices of John Butcher, the field recordings of Jason Kahn, the electronic manipulations of Scanner and the reductionist aesthetics of Ryoko Akama.

Similarly, musicians today who cite the influence of the early experimentalists, or who even label themselves as 'experimental' for convenience (suggesting tribal belonging, alliances and influences), may also be influenced by the work of composers as diverse as Anthony Braxton, Michael Finnissy, Helmut Lachenmann, Evan Parker, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Iannis Xenakis and perhaps a variety of more popular and international musics. They will be aware of the contradictions and disparities such a range of musics provokes and will be entirely happy for aesthetic complexities to arise, enjoying the consequent tensions.

So, if we are to consider Laurence Crane as in some ways an 'experimental' composer, what qualities of his music and aesthetic support such a claim? John Cage's early assertion that experimental music is one for which the outcomes are unknown⁸ could not be more distinct from the way in which Crane works. His methods, which involve spending long periods of time (usually at the piano or keyboard) probing the musical elements of a piece – a chord, or registration, or melody – and carefully considering alternatives, are perhaps more in line with the alternative approach articulated recently by William Brooks,⁹ in which a hypothesis is tested until the best outcome is reached. (Typically Crane takes some small element from an earlier piece, usually fairly recent, as a starting point.) Whilst Crane is essentially an intuitive composer, the rigour and discipline that he applies his musical material is highly investigative and questioning. Michael Parsons suggested in 1974 that 'You make an experiment in order to get some new information about the situation',¹⁰ and this is a useful way of describing Crane's approach. It is this objective rigour that he shares with Cage, though his methods are more typical of Feldman's supposedly intuitive approach than the coin-tossing older composer. Despite the fixity of notation in most of his works, Crane's music is not easily understood as an object; instead, it questions what we know and how we hear sounds that through familiarity are too easily assigned to realms of comprehension rather than audition.

The most obvious link Crane has to the experimental line proposed by Nyman¹¹ is to the English experimental tradition. It is difficult to make convincing links to the music of Cardew; music-making for amateur musicians, as demonstrated through a number of Cardew's pieces from the 1960s, resonates only occasionally, in works such as *Spa Towns of Central England* (2006) for COMA or through the two

⁷ Sarah Walker, 'The New English Keyboard School: A Second "Golden Age"', *Leonardo Music Journal* 11 (2001), p. 17.

⁸ John Cage, 'Experimental Music: Doctrine', in *Silence* (London: Marion Boyars, 1978), p. 13.

⁹ William Brooks, 'In re: "Experimental Music"', *Contemporary Music Review* 31/1 (2012), pp. 37–62.

¹⁰ Michael Parsons, 'Some aspects of an Experimental Attitude', *Contact* 8 (1974), p. 21.

¹¹ Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

works composed for the *Spectrum* volumes – *Chorale for Howard Skempton* (1997) and *Postlude* (2002) – designed for younger and amateur pianists. More convincingly, Crane continues in the line of composers such as Howard Skempton, Michael Parsons, Chris Hobbs, Hugh Shrapnel, Dave Smith and John White by extending the large body of piano music composed in the post-Scratch years. John Tilbury fashioned the collective title ‘New English Piano School’ for these composers, likening the body of repertoire to that of the Elizabethan virginalists.¹²

Whilst the influence of Skempton’s music, particularly the early piano pieces, is the most obvious connection, the debt to the music of Satie, the formal rigour, clarity of sound, and tonal language are all features that Crane’s work shares variously with the music of the composers listed above. Attention might also be drawn to the gently humorous aspects of Crane’s music, in his use of titles (which he is at pains to note have no direct connection to the character or any other aspects of the sounding music), such as ‘Jacques Derrida Goes To A Massage Parlour’ (1985) and *Tour De France Statistics 1903–2003* (2004), and texts, most notably in the five vocal movements of *Weirdi*. And White’s use of cheap electronic keyboards in various pieces and ensembles perhaps informs Crane’s occasional use of electronic organ (notably in *The Swim* (1992) and *Riis*). Crane’s music is, however, far less referential to past models than is the music of earlier English experimentalists, in particular those of the so-called ‘Leicester School’,¹³ who treated examples of past music as Duchampian ‘readymades’. Michael Finnissy’s assertion that Crane’s music is ‘saturated in history’¹⁴ is more a reading of underlying currents in the music than a reference to actual historical allusions, and typifies a view of music that is perhaps more representative of the older composer than Crane himself.¹⁵

Crane’s first encounter with experimental music was as a student at the University of Nottingham in the early 1980s. He took advantage of the well-stocked library to explore the music of the experimentalists, among others, in particular the Peters Edition scores of American music from the 1950s–60s. Above all the early music of Feldman caught his eye and, with his fellow student Graham Fitkin, he arranged for concerts of Feldman’s music to be programmed. The lively student environment for new music, propagated by the staff composers Nigel Osborne and Peter Nelson, allowed Crane to enjoy and explore a wide range of approaches to composition and student performances of works by fellow students and others were frequent. It was also at Nottingham that Crane first encountered the music of Michael Finnissy, through scores and performances by the composer himself; Finnissy would later become one of Crane’s most enthusiastic champions.¹⁶

The event that Crane identifies as a turning point in his development was a concert given by a fellow student featuring Howard

¹² Walker, ‘The New English Keyboard School’, p. 17.

¹³ Gavin Bryars, Christopher Hobbs, Dave Smith and John White. See Virginia Anderson, ‘British Experimental Music after Nyman’, in *Tomorrow Is The Question*, pp. 159–79.

¹⁴ Michael Finnissy, *Laurence Crane: 20th century music* (Métier, msv28506, 2008).

¹⁵ Some recent works have suggested a shift from this claim, such as the waltz idea in *Piano Piece No.23 ‘Ethiopian Distance Runners’*, developed further in the Piano Quintet (which also includes a jolting use of *vibrato* on a few specific occasions), and an indication to ‘play like a Romantic piano concerto’ in *Classic Stride and Glide*.

¹⁶ Finnissy’s recording of the piano music, *op.cit.*, is the perfect introduction for those readers unfamiliar with Crane’s music

Skempton's piano music, drawn from the Faber collection of short pieces that pre-dates the larger Oxford University Press collections. Skempton's music, says Crane, 'suggested possibilities to me that I didn't know existed. I thought what are these pieces? What do they mean? They're completely unlike anything I'd heard before but they were using familiar things.'¹⁷ The concision and brevity, apparent simplicity, tonal elements and avoidance of rhetoric that characterise these pieces are all traits that continue, to varying degrees, in Crane's music to the present day. Skempton, rather than Cage, suggested possibilities for Crane: this was music that could lead to a musical language of his own.

Skempton's music led Crane to further explorations of the music of Cardew, Bryars, Parsons, White and co. Moving to London in the mid-1980s Crane attended the performance of Cardew's *The Great Learning* at the Union Chapel,¹⁸ featuring most of the classic line of English experimentalists. Around the same time he encountered the music of Chris Newman, first with his band 'Janet Smith' as part of the MusICA series at the ICA, London,¹⁹ and later in concerts given by Newman with Michael Finnissy at the piano. Newman's direct, honest, funny and disturbing songs had some influence upon Crane's then 'pop duo' with Andrew Renton, which in turn informed something of the character of those few sung works in the composer's output, as well as *Some Rock Music for Alan Thomas* (2008).

A Post-Experimental Performance Practice

Thus far it would appear that I am arguing for Crane as a post-experimentalist purely because of a chain of influences, many of which, on the basis of the music, are difficult to qualify as experimental. At this point I want to examine Crane's music, but from the perspective of a performer and a particular approach to performance which might be described as post-experimental. Elsewhere I have argued for an experimental performance practice which is founded on the idea of 'work' – of doing the job required.²⁰ An experimental interpretative approach might be considered non-interpretative, in that the emphasis is upon actions rather than ideas, upon sounds and their qualities rather than notions of continuity, cohesiveness and the projection of a narrative upon sequences of sounds. This way of thinking about performance is rooted in an interpretative practice from the 1950s and the work of pianist David Tudor in particular. His method of working on Cage's *Music of Changes*, which involved cancelling his 'consciousness of any previous moment, in order to be able to produce the next one',²¹ neatly encapsulates an experimental performance practice which might equally apply to the cue-based music of Christian Wolff, the investigative sonic explorations of Alvin Lucier, and the repetitive processes of early Reich and Glass as well as subsequent process-based music.

Since then a performance practice has developed through shared – but largely unspoken – interests and aesthetic concerns amongst many

¹⁷ Interview with the composer, 26 August 2014.

¹⁸ 7–8 July 1984, Union Chapel, Islington, London.

¹⁹ 19 August 1984.

²⁰ Philip Thomas, 'A Prescription for Action', in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Experimental Music*, pp. 75–96.

²¹ David Tudor and John Cage interviewed by Mogens Andersen in a broadcast of Danmarks Radio on 3 June 1963. Featured on the CD *David Tudor – Music for piano*, ed.RZ 1018–19 (2007).

of us who perform music in the experimental tradition. This practice is not concerned with superficial notions of authenticity, such as choice of instruments, or the recreation of historical events. Instead it is concerned with *how* music is played and is characterised by curiosity and investigation. It avoids rhetoric and the sentimental, is disciplined and often restrained, rejecting a gestural and over-theatricalising approach to the material (and thus the expressive characteristics and techniques of nineteenth-century music) aiming for clarity and transparency. Expressivity is found *in* the music but not loaded *onto* the music through performance. As Christian Wolff wrote in 1964, 'what do you mean by articulation – expressivity? Haven't we decided to let it follow rather than lead us? We are not exploiting sounds to serve our feelings.'²²

It is all very well to propose such a model within a context of, for example, the pointillistic non-tonal sounds of Cage's and Wolff's music of the 1950s and 1960s, or the repetitive sequences of early minimalism, which deny tonal relations their traditional expressive powers. Applied to the more tonal and referential elements of subsequent so-called experimentalists, such as the more folk-like melodies of Howard Skempton, the piano sonatas of John White, and piano concerts of Dave Smith, or the improvisatory ruminations of Americans such as Philip Corner or Alvin Curran, then the performance situation becomes more muddled. Contrarily, it is to earlier compositional and associated performance models that one might look to find shared approaches.

Laurence Crane's music is most obviously characterised by harmonic and melodic fields that derive from tonal music. However, it rarely functions as 'tonal' music; instead it draws upon tonal materials and toys with tonal expectations. Thus, parallels may be drawn between Crane's music and that of both Satie (a conventional experimental music narrative) and Stravinsky (less conventional), in other words to the neoclassicism of the first half of the twentieth century. Some of the early works, in particular, can be readily compared to what might be termed a Satie style, such as the second of two pieces grouped as *Kierkegaards: Kierkegaard His Walk Around Copenhagen* (1986). The language used to discuss both composers' music is readily interchangeable with that used to describe Crane's music: Satie's 'stripped-down music'²³ bears close similarity to the language used in almost every programme note, interview or summary pertaining to Crane; Hermann Danuser discusses neoclassicism and Stravinsky in particular for using music 'as material for its *defamiliarizing* [my italics] compositional practices', a term readily applicable to Crane's use of tonal materials.²⁴ The element of parody and referentialism central to much neoclassicism, however, is much less evident in Crane's work, whereas these elements *are* present in the music of earlier English experimentalists. I wish to argue that the qualities and elements of Crane's music itself, rather than any associations he or others might make to an experimental tradition, make his music more experimental in practice than that of many of the earlier generation of English experimentalists, locating the performer at the *beginning* of the experiment, rather than articulating a *fait accompli*.

²² Wolff in *Cues: Writings and Conversations* (Cologne, MusikTexte, 1998), p. 54.

²³ René Chalupt, cited in Hermann Danuser, 'Rewriting the past: classicisms of the inter-war period', in *The Cambridge History of Twentieth Century Music*, ed. Nicholas Cook and Anthony Pople (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 260–85.

²⁴ Danuser, 'Rewriting the past'.

For the performer, the projection of defamiliarising elements in Crane's music is achieved through a stripped-down approach, not just intentionally ridding the music and its performance of mannerisms but also being insistent upon clarity of sound and touch, consistency of pulse and repetition, and exactness of duration. These elements can make performing the music an unnerving experience. At one level the music is simple, but at another it is petrifying: the pleasures gained from the work as a listener are somewhat denied to the performer, whose attention to counting, for example, a regular, even four beats in a bar and articulating the next event clearly on the beat almost overrides the enjoyment of the event itself. Despite its visual simplicity, anyone with an uncertain technique should be warned against performing this music, in which the minutiae of technical variability are exposed and very apparent. Over the years I have come to recognise it as difficult music to play, for the simple reason that I have witnessed performances in which performers have felt the need, in the absence of other directions, to add excessive shaping and expressive gestures to the way they play, as if afraid to simply leave it alone.

Denying trained performance instincts and mannerisms is itself a technique to be learned. At the same time, Schoenberg's disdain for the 'stiff uniformity of performance style'²⁵ emerging mid-twentieth century in the wake of Stravinsky's neo-classicism – 'Why do you play the piano when you could show the same skill on a typewriter?'²⁶ – has its place in this context too. The performer's role is not to deny the music *expression*, but instead to locate the expressivity in the *sound* rather than in the way sounds are shaped through narrative. Playing Crane's music very often requires an even greater engagement with instruments as they are traditionally played, combining the unique touch, physiology and sensual engagement of each performer.

'Letting it be' is vital to performing Crane's music. In this way the music is resistant to familiarity and to 'settling down'. It remains curious and elusive, maintaining the potential for surprise. The ability to surprise – sometimes to shock – and to sustain that reaction on repeated listening is something which Crane has honed over the years and for which he has a natural and often quirky ear. Early on in *Piano Piece No.23 'Ethiopian Distance Runners'* there is a prolonged section of repeated E_b octaves ([example 1a](#)), with occasional D_b and C_b additions (forming a three-adjacent-note motif typical of many of Crane's works). When the piece first arrived in the post, I remember immediately taking it to the piano and playing from the beginning. I recall turning the page at the end of bar 35, quickly scanning ahead with my eye as I played. Noticing the entry of the left hand E_b triad in bar 43 I was disappointed – I could see it coming and in my inner ear it seemed to underpin the E_bs I was still playing. I imagined a rather crude, emphatic consolidation of the E_b tonality I had been reiterating for the previous two minutes and twenty seconds ([example 1b](#)). But then I *heard* it. It sounded nothing like what I had predicted, like no other E_b triad I had heard; it seemed to make the piano sound glow in a way that was entirely fresh and new. I jumped from the piano stool with excitement, thinking this was the most remarkable chord of all music. Returning to the piano I started the piece again, now ready for the sound I'd just heard,

²⁵ Danuser, 'Rewriting the past', p. 269.

²⁶ Arnold Schoenberg, *Style and Idea* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), pp. 320–21, as cited and discussed in Jonathan Dunsby, *Performing Music: Shared Concerns* (London: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 52–3.

♩ = 72 Always Calm and Steady. In Strict Tempo.

mp/mf

Ped. Sim. sempre

8

Example 1a:
Crane, *Piano Piece No. 23*, bars 1–14

only to find, two minutes, twenty seconds later, that it was no less remarkable on second hearing and is no less remarkable to me now, six years later, after having performed it in public many times. With hindsight I can try to explain the shock of this chord, such as the way the ambiguous E_b/C_b tonality upsets the extent to which the triad sounds as a tonic. More disruptive is the registration – the triad in the lower left hand inverting the usual rules of orchestration and piano writing, whereby the thicker chords are traditionally higher than the underpinning octaves in the bass. Then there is simply the shock of the new – after two minutes and twenty seconds of repeated bare octaves, almost any new material or event will make some impact. The daring baldness of a major triad somehow makes this event so much more shocking than new material or a more ‘interesting’ chord. The subsequent shift, in bar 61, to a G_b major triad, a third higher than the E_b , now lasting only three beats instead of four, is no less unexpected and, if not quite so shocking, still somehow mesmerising.

Crane’s output is full of moments such as this. It is not just the simplicity and daring of the harmonic writing, but his sense of timing, drama and structure, which combine to create a feeling of wonder and curiosity. The music draws us in, and just at the point where the material becomes too familiar, the composer’s sleight of hand makes a change that catches us off-guard and challenges all that we thought we knew. If the pianist were to reinforce this left hand chord, or exaggerate its attack in some way, the impact would paradoxically be less dramatic.

36

P

43

P Sim.

Example 1b:
Crane, *Piano Piece No. 23*, bars 36–49

Crane's tonal language can sometimes lure both listeners and performers into a false state of contentment. As a listener I am often captivated by the initial harmonic and sonic world of a piece and consequently relax my attentiveness, only to be caught by some sleight of hand, a trick of orchestration, pitch, registration or harmonic rhythm. Sometimes the language can appear to be overly sweet, and for some listeners Crane's music rests uneasily at the boundary between tonal clarity and sentimentality; but to my ears, at least, Crane's use of repetition works against any perceived sentimentality, or tonal resolution. The four *Derridas* (1985–86) are good examples of pieces which involve limited material, tending toward tonal models of tonic-dominant resolution but which through extensive repetition unsettle any sense of resolution. The fourth piece for example – 'Jacques Derrida Goes To The Beach' (see Example 2) – moves from an F major tonality, reinforced by an F–C drone for the first 32 bars of a 48-bar piece, with a few brief dissonant 'wobbles', to a rather sentimental whole tone bass descent, under a repeated right hand chordal and melodic sequence. After nearly two minutes rooted

JACQUES DERRIDA GOES TO THE BEACH (1985) Laurence Crane ¹¹

The musical score is written for piano in 4/4 time, with a tempo of approximately 72 beats per minute. The key signature is one flat (B-flat). The piece is characterized by a constant F-C drone in the bass line. The right hand plays a sequence of chords and a melodic line. Dynamics range from mezzo-piano (mp) to forte (f). A 'PEDAL' marking is present at the beginning. A 'x6' bracket indicates a six-measure repeat. The score is published by Stamford Hill, 6/11/85.

Example 2:
Crane, *Derridas*, No.4, 'Jacques
Derrida Goes To The Beach'

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STAMFORD HILL
6/11/85

in F, the rapid move through other harmonic areas is alarming and brief; if the pianist leaves well alone, maintaining a constant touch, the rapidity of this move is made all the more curious. When it reaches the G–D a seventh lower than its starting point, it resolves not by taking one further step downwards to the F–C but up a fifth to C–G. These last two bars are then repeated six times, creating a reiterated II–V cadence if we assume the key is F, which serves only to make the resolution that much more unnerving. An odd thing about Crane’s music is despite the apparently simple, and frequent fifth-based relationships, the ‘key’ of any given piece is rarely certain.

In contrast to the literal repetition in the four pieces of *Derridas*, a prominent technique of many pieces, especially those of the second period, is the reiteration of a theme underpinned by a shifting harmonic perspective. This is evident, for example, in *Sparling* and *Birthday Piece for Michael Finnissy*. In the former a reiterated two note motif (a crotchet G followed by an A lasting 14.5 beats) in the clarinet (this is all the clarinettist plays in the entire piece, and it is reminiscent of Cardew’s *Solo with accompaniment* (1964) in which the soloist repeats the same note a number of times, before further repeats of the same note an octave higher, whilst the ‘accompanist’ busily responds to a complex array of instructions across 24 matrices) is informed by a three-chord sequence in the piano (or guitar, or organ or string quartet, depending upon the version being performed) (see [Example 3](#)). The three chords form very different alliances with the clarinet A, at first consisting of octave Ds underneath a rising sequence of fifths (forming a typical three-note melody): E \flat /A \flat –E/A–F \sharp /B and then, for the second iteration, the final F \sharp /B is replaced by an F/B \flat dyad. Both iterations move in relation to the clarinet from dissonance to consonance to a rich and more ambiguous harmonic formation, made more complex later by the addition of a G to left hand octave Ds. Solo piano interludes continue the three-chord sequence, now moving from D through B minor to alternating Bsus4 or Bsus2 chords. These are marked at first by the lack of bass, typifying Crane’s understanding of the impact of simple reduction and addition, and drawing attention to the qualities of middle register piano sonority. Where Feldman’s deep sympathy to the qualities of piano register was usually expressed through the sevenths,²⁷ ninths and variously rich chromatics, so Crane is fully cognisant of the particular sonorities of triads and their inversions and registral placements. This sequence then underpins the clarinet motif from bar 51, adding a bass F \sharp –B–F \sharp and gradually adding further pitches to this sequence, each of which are keenly felt, until the last phrase, so that the explicitly D-centred tonality of the middle sections lead to a more rich sequence of harmonies, redolent of F \sharp minor but never clearly rooted in that or any other key.

Likewise the descending left hand three-note motif of *Birthday Piece for Michael Finnissy*, which appears in almost every bar, is transformed every four bars through a combination of transpositions, harmonic additions and registral shifts (see [Example 4](#)). The loss, at bars 21–22, of the richly textured harmonies of the previous ten bars makes for an extraordinarily tender sonority which simply cannot be comprehended by looking at the score and has to be played/heard. It is

²⁷ Tilbury referred to these as ‘displaced octaves’, in Michael Parsons and John Tilbury, ‘The Contemporary Pianist’, *The Musical Times* 110/1512 (1969), p. 150.

The musical score consists of four systems, each with a single treble clef staff and a grand staff (treble and bass clefs).
 System 20: The right hand has a descending three-note motif (C4, B3, A3). The left hand has a four-note chord (F#3, C#4, F#4, C#4).
 System 25: The right hand has a descending three-note motif (B3, A3, G3). The left hand has a four-note chord (F#3, C#4, F#4, C#4).
 System 30: The right hand has a descending three-note motif (A3, G3, F3). The left hand has a four-note chord (F#3, C#4, F#4, C#4).
 System 35: The right hand has a descending three-note motif (G3, F3, E3). The left hand has a four-note chord (F#3, C#4, F#4, C#4).
 The key signature changes from one sharp (F#) to two sharps (F# and C#) and then to one flat (Bb).

Example 3:
Crane, *Sparling*, p. 2

one of my favourite moments in all of Crane's music. The descending three-note motif changes only at the last phrase, where the third note drops a fifth from the expected C# to an F#, whilst the right hand chord also adds a third to the expected reiterated chord, forming the highest pitch of the piece. At this point the piece ends, with this simple final twist presented simply, lacking indulgence. In the *Trio*, which is a more sparse, and much slower, realisation of the same piece, bar 21 makes equal impact via different means: hitherto the three note motif has been played by either clarinet or bass flute, accompanied by a single note in the other instrument, thus reducing the harmonic character of the piano piece. At bar 21 the piano joins the wind instrument, and they now play in unison whilst the piano plays a four-note chord in the mid register, a simple textural change which makes considerable impact. In all of these examples, the musician's attention is upon issues of balance, register, control, timing, touch, consistency and sonority. The addition or removal of a pitch, or a shift in register from one chord to the next, feels as momentous an event for the performers as it does for the listener.

To Michael Finnissey on his 50th birthday

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BIRTHDAY PIECE FOR MICHAEL FINNISSEY (1996)

Laurence Crane

♩ = c. 66

PIANO

pp Smooth

Pedal

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18th June 1996

Example 4:
Crane, *Birthday Piece for Michael Finnissey*

It is often said that Crane's music is characterised by its quiet dynamics, and in this way it is likened to music by Feldman, Skempton and more recently to composers associated with the Wandelweiser collective.²⁸ However, except for some pieces from the third period, Crane's music is rarely fragile or 'extremely soft'. Most often it requires clarity of touch and sound production, within a quiet or medium-quiet dynamic, that serves to highlight the instrument's sonority and the particular character of the harmonic material. But only half of Crane's output is rooted in dynamics of *mp* and quieter, and these are particularly drawn from the works of the second and third periods. Other pieces are either loud or feature loud contrasting sections, and recent pieces have tended not only to be loud (or have loud sections) but are forcefully so.

No matter the dynamic, the emphasis for performance is upon clarity and resistance toward so-called expressive interpretation. Two contrasting examples serve to illustrate the approach to performance argued for here (see [Examples 5a](#) and [5b](#) – 20th Century Music and

²⁸ The perception arises perhaps because some performers of Crane's music also regularly perform music by composers and on record labels associated with Wandelweiser, such as Antoine Beuger, Michael Pisaro, Jürg Frey, and the label another timbre.

Example 5a:
Crane, *20th Century Music*, bars 1–16

$\text{♩} = 60$

Sim. Sempre

PEDAL

Example 5b:
Crane, *Piano Quintet*, bars 1–22

$\text{♩} = 144$ With great determination and sense of purpose. Solid and strong.
As metronomic as possible

Piano

ff sempre
with pedal

Pno

opening of *Piano Quintet*). Both pieces can throw the pianist into doubt: *20th Century Music* does so through its simplicity and the need to make each four-beat chord equal in duration and touch, including at the second line where over-preparing or emphasising the dramatic change of registral displacement and harmony might serve to lessen the impact; the opening of the *Piano Quintet*, following the impact of a fortissimo string quartet chord of C major with an additional flattened third, is like a terrifying roller coaster ride but requires absolute commitment to the pulse and to maintaining a consistently loud and firm touch; it is very easy to allow both the pulse and the touch to relax, or contrarily to allow both to get out of control.

Techniques and moments such as those described above reveal the influence of Howard Skempton's music, and the repetitive movement of the early works recalls some of the older composer's *Quavers* pieces. There is a classicism at work in Crane's music, though, which is less to the fore in Skempton's work at the content-level, and recalls the greater objectivity of approach to material found in the music of his friend, the composer Tim Parkinson. Michael Parsons once described Crane as a classicist and Skempton as a romantic, a distinction with which both Skempton and Crane agree.²⁹ Skempton suggests the difference lies in the harmonic language, with his own being 'more elusive – certainly more flexible, even unstable'.³⁰

Structurally, however, both composers emphasise clarity of form. A number of works reveal symmetries and processes of duration, some measured in units of time, others in metric divisions: the sections of *John White in Berlin* each last one minute, and the *Four Miniatures* last one minute, two minutes, one minute and two minutes respectively. More recent pieces reflect Crane exploring longer single-movement structures, and introduce metronome shifts as structural markers (*Piano Piece No.23 'Ethiopian Distance Runners'* is mostly structured in 60-bar units, with metronome changes at each of these, generally increasing incrementally, which has prompted some listeners to make associations between the title and the focus upon speed in this work). Smaller-scale patterns feature regularly, such as extending and contracting units of duration upon repetitions of material; a number of sections in *John White in Berlin* repeat phrases firstly in units of four beats, then five, then six, seven and up to nine beats in two of the sections.

Crane is rigorous in notating durations, including when a sound ends, very often midway between two beats. The stemless note-heads, without specified duration, found in notations by Feldman and Skempton are absent from Crane's work, and the scores look meticulous in their clarity of notes and barring. The simplicity of note values and the relative lack of instructions combine to present scores which look, as the pianist David Tudor once said in relation to his own copies, 'clean as a whistle'.³¹ Howard Skempton argues that 'the "clean" score is crucial. It clarifies structure and emphasises what is purely musical'.³² The frequent inclusion, at the very beginning of works, of a single instruction (a dynamic, or an indication of articulation) is an indicator of consistency, sometimes underlined by the word 'sempre'. Recent works, perhaps indicative of a wider interest in Crane's music, include more lengthy instructions at the beginning, but even then little else later in the score. Even the instruction 'Melancholic' in the recent *Slow Folk Tune: Sheringham* (2014) is read within the context of an exact metronome mark (MM = 66), characteristically minimal sounding events, few actual pitches, and the words 'Steady and even' and 'legato sempre'. The word 'Melancholy', then, perhaps informs the pianist's touch and further locates Crane within a very

²⁹ John Fallas, 'Conditions of Immediacy: Howard Skempton in Interview', *Tempo* 66/262 (October 2012), p. 24. After discussing this with Crane I returned home to find the score of Skempton's latest piano work, *Oculus*, which I was to premiere a few months later and which is the most 'classical' of all Skempton's works.

³⁰ Fallas, 'Conditions of Immediacy'.

³¹ John Holzaepfel, 'Reminiscences of a Twentieth-Century Pianist: An Interview with David Tudor', *The Musical Quarterly* 78/3 (1994), p. 633.

³² In Michael Parsons, 'Howard Skempton: Chorales, Landscapes and Melodies', *Contact* 30 (1987), p. 19.

English experimental vein.³³ The look of the scores thus further emphasise the investigative properties of the music – the lack of deterministic performance directions encourages performers not to determine what might be there but to become part of the experiment, to be curious and open to the sounding experience. The music is, in this way, *experimental*.

The limitations of this overview of Crane's music prevent more detailed analysis and the complexities, and shifts in style, of recent works such as *Piano Piece No.23 'Ethiopian Distance Runners'*, *Sound of Horse, Classic Stride and Glide* and the Piano Quintet also invite a more thorough reading. With new CD releases from *asamisimasa* and *Cikada* following last year's *Apartment House* release, international performances and airplay on BBC Radios 3 and 6, Crane's music is finding a larger and more diverse audience than ever before. Yet the music itself is becoming ever stranger, more elusive, yielding further surprises for any performer or listeners open to the kinds of investigative approaches argued for here. As the Swiss composer Jürg Frey said to me at the end of a concert of Crane's music: 'It's like open heart surgery'.

³³ The music of Gavin Bryars, in particular, has been associated with the melancholic. See Christopher Fox, 'Sharp Practice: Gavin Bryars at 60', *The Musical Times* 144/1884 (2003), pp. 15–25.