

Philip Grange (photo: M. L. Field)



MUSIC AS TRANSITION¹: AN INTERVIEW WITH PHILIP GRANGE

Camden Reeves

Philip Grange celebrates his fiftieth birthday this year. Camden Reeves talked to the composer about the ideas, influences and sources of inspiration behind his music.



CR: *Your first major commission, Cimmerian Nocturne,² was premièred by The Fires of London in 1980 and remains one of your most frequently performed works. 26 years on do you still recognize yourself as the composer of that piece?*

PG: Oh, absolutely. *Cimmerian Nocturne*, which was written just at the end of my third year as an undergraduate going into my time as a doctoral student at York University, arose directly out of working with the Fires at Dartington³. The piece brought together a lot of things that I had been working towards in what, I feel in retrospect, was my first significant musical statement.

CR: *In what sense was Cimmerian Nocturne a technical breakthrough?*

PG: One of the things that had been very important to me as a student was form. I wanted to create a music in which everything in a piece was justified by its structure. I think I managed to do that coherently in *Cimmerian Nocturne*, in its working towards a central drum break and then moving away from it.

CR: *In that piece, one gets a sense of music that is in a continual state of transition. This seems to be the hallmark of many of the works you've written since; I am thinking of pieces like Focus and Fade⁴ and the more recent Eclipsing.⁵ Would you say that your music is more concerned with journeys than destinations?*

PG: I think it is. One of the influences that resulted from Dartington was the work of Elliott Carter. In fact, the very first year I went to Dartington Carter was there. One of the things that he was into in the mid to late 70s was the idea that a piece might have a point of arrival that would also immediately become a point of departure. That was something that made a great impact on me and so I think there is a great deal of that type of approach in my own work. One of the reasons I was interested in this is that when you are dealing with a sophisticated discordant musical language – you have to find ways of keeping the listener engaged...

¹ A reference to Jim Samson's *Music in Transition: A Study of Tonal Expansion and Early Atonality 1900–1920* (London and New York, 1977). Samson was a colleague of Grange's at the University of Exeter from 1989 to 1994.

² Six players, Maecenas (1979).

³ Grange attended the Dartington Summer School of Music between 1975 and 1981, where he became a composition student of Sir Peter Maxwell Davies.

⁴ BBC Symphony Orchestra commission, Maecenas (1992).

⁵ BBC Philharmonic Orchestra commission, Maecenas (2004).

- CR:** *You mean, because there is not a tonal journey as such, other parameters need to fulfill that role?*
- PG:** Yes, and in *Cimmerian Nocturne* the journey is as much one of timbre and the progression from pitch to non-pitch and back again. In some ways those sorts of journeys might have strong analogies with what might go on in electro-acoustic music. One of the pieces that I studied before writing *Cimmerian Nocturne* was *Kontakte* by Stockhausen. From this work I took the idea of sounds that overlap - a sound that sounds like something else which you overlap with that something else, and then leave the original sound so that the something else emerges.
- CR:** *Rhythm is another parameter that, from Cimmerian Nocturne onwards, holds a particular fascination for you. That piece uses a pulse labyrinth: a very sophisticated employment of metric modulation (a technique borrowed from Carter⁶) and something that appears again in The Dark Labyrinth,⁷ The Kingdom of Bones,⁸ Variations⁹ and many other works.*
- PG:** Yes, in *Cimmerian Nocturne* I hadn't yet formalized the technique of pulse labyrinth, but you are right that this technique comes directly from Carter. One of the things that attracted me to metric modulation and other rhythmical devices that Carter used, particularly in his First Quartet, is that they have a real physical impact. It's not some mathematical, intellectual idea: you can actually feel a metric modulation!
- CR:** *How does your use of metric modulation fit in with the formal concerns we were just discussing?*
- PG:** In *Cimmerian Nocturne* and a work like *The Kingdom of Bones*, which was written a few years later in 1983, one has large structures lasting 20 minutes or so where either key transitions between one section and the next are articulated by metric modulations that change the tempo (they therefore change the pacing ... the way the music feels) or there are whole sections that are dominated by changes between tempi on an almost bar by bar basis, thereby creating passages of complete instability. In *The Kingdom of Bones* this is designed to reflect emotional instability in the main protagonist as she discovers that her child has died. The swapping of different tempi, not allowing any one tempo to settle for more than a bar or so, reflects that aspect of her trauma.
- CR:** *Also characteristic of your approach to form is the changing relationship of musical ideas to one another in terms of foreground and background. One thinks of a work like Focus and Fade in that respect.*
- PG:** My work during the 1980s tended to deal with journeys in a more monothematic way, where there would be one journey to a point and then back again. Then around 1990 I started to want to have different journeys in counterpoint with one another happening at different rates, which was a new challenge. There had been hints of that in the second piece I wrote for *The Fires of London*, called *Variations*, and also in *The Dark Labyrinth*, but I wanted to tackle it

⁶ For a discussion of this technique see David Schiff, *The Music of Elliott Carter* (New York: Eulenburg, 1983), pp. 23–51.

⁷ Cello and 5 Players, Maecenas (1987).

⁸ Mezzo-soprano and 15 players, words by Kim Ballard (in Russian), Maecenas (1983); the original BBC recording of Linda Hirst and Northern Music Theatre conducted by Graham Treacher (1984) is a forthcoming release on Campion.

⁹ Six players, Maecenas (1986).

on a much larger scale and the opportunity came with a BBC Symphony Orchestra commission, which I completed in 1992. This was called *Focus and Fade* and deals with the idea of whole movements starting at the beginning of a piece, but not coming into proper focus until it is their turn at a later stage. The movement that has been dominating so far starts to fade out while the next movement comes into focus. It was a contrapuntal extension of the sort of thing I had done in *Cimmerian Nocturne* all those years earlier.

CR: *Do you mean it is similar to the way that Cimmerian Nocturne counterpoints a binary scheme against a ternary scheme?*¹⁰

PG: Yes, but that was less sophisticated than what I tried to achieve in *Focus and Fade*, where all three major movements (a fast allegro, a romantic movement and a slow processional one) are present right from the beginning of the piece and through the explosive introduction, with the fast one then coming to the fore and then fading as the romantic one comes to the fore, which then fades as the processional one comes to the fore. So there are no longer single journeys.

CR: *What influenced this approach?*

PG: I think crucial influences certainly include Carter – there’s a certain aspect of Carter’s working in his Concerto for Orchestra which this reflects – but the other composer behind this approach is Sibelius. He was a composer I had been really interested in when I was a student at York. It took me a long time to understand why Sibelius appealed to me. I think it’s those large-scale designs with different points of arrival that influenced the issues I began to deal with myself in a work like *Focus and Fade*.

CR: *Sibelius is also a composer who seems more interested in journeys than in destinations. One thinks of the Seventh Symphony¹¹ which, like Focus and Fade, is compressed into one movement, and is not so much about the individual movements as getting from one to the other.*

PG: In getting from one to the other there’s a sense of exhilaration because of the ‘gear changes’, and these are fabulous in the Seventh Symphony. (Actually I studied this work with Maxwell Davies when I first attended Dartington in 1975.) All that ties in with the use of metric modulation in helping to articulate those sorts of structures.

CR: *The Piano Trio: Homage to Chagall,¹² written in 1995, extends this concept of having a series of ideas that are presented in slightly different degrees of focus.*

PG: That arose out of looking at Chagall’s work and wanting to reflect on his paintings as a whole, rather than just writing movements that were informed by individual canvases. I noticed that Chagall used a large, but nonetheless limited number of images which keep recurring from one canvas to the next – the one of the fiddler for instance – but in some paintings the fiddler would be very much the focus of attention, while in others he might appear as peripheral, or there might be just a fiddle without a player stuck in one corner of a

¹⁰ See Clive Williamson, ‘Philip Grange’, *Tempo* no. 146 (September 1983), pp. 25–30.

¹¹ See for example Tim Howell, *Jean Sibelius: Progressive Techniques in the Symphonies and Tone Poems* (New York and London: Garland, 1989), pp. 64–72.

¹² Maecenas (1995).

painting. I liked the idea of redefining something's importance as the music proceeds. I therefore constructed an approach to form that would reflect this and also the fact that for Chagall those images didn't have to be painted realistically. For example, in one painting the fiddler and his fiddle might be red, in another they might be quite naturalistic, in yet another they might be yellow. So what I came up with for the first movement was a scheme that involves a number of musical ideas or images and a different number of harmonic colours. There are five ideas and four harmonic colours, and I cycle these against each other in a way that is comparable to isorhythm [see Figure 1]. Although it doesn't complete its isorhythmic cycle by the end of the movement, it continues long enough for ideas to be repeated and coloured differently. Also I do not keep the lengths of the ideas the same when they are repeated, so sometimes they are fully-fledged sections and sometimes they are very short.

CR: *So your engagement with Chagall as an extra-musical influence is not so much to do with the pictorial or expressive content of the paintings themselves, but is essentially more abstract in nature: taking the underlying concept and then redefining what that could be in music?*

PG: I think that's actually quite a fair point, in the sense that I tend to plunder my sources and then make them into what I need them to be. But I think in that piece as a whole there are aspects of Chagall's work that do come through in a more surface-orientated fashion. For example, the second movement is a fast muted scherzo which has quite a light colour (unusual for me), and that was deliberately designed to reflect those pastel-coloured pictures of angels etc that Chagall often did – so that reflects something of Chagall in a more surface manner, although the movement is continuing some of the more generic processes in the work as well.

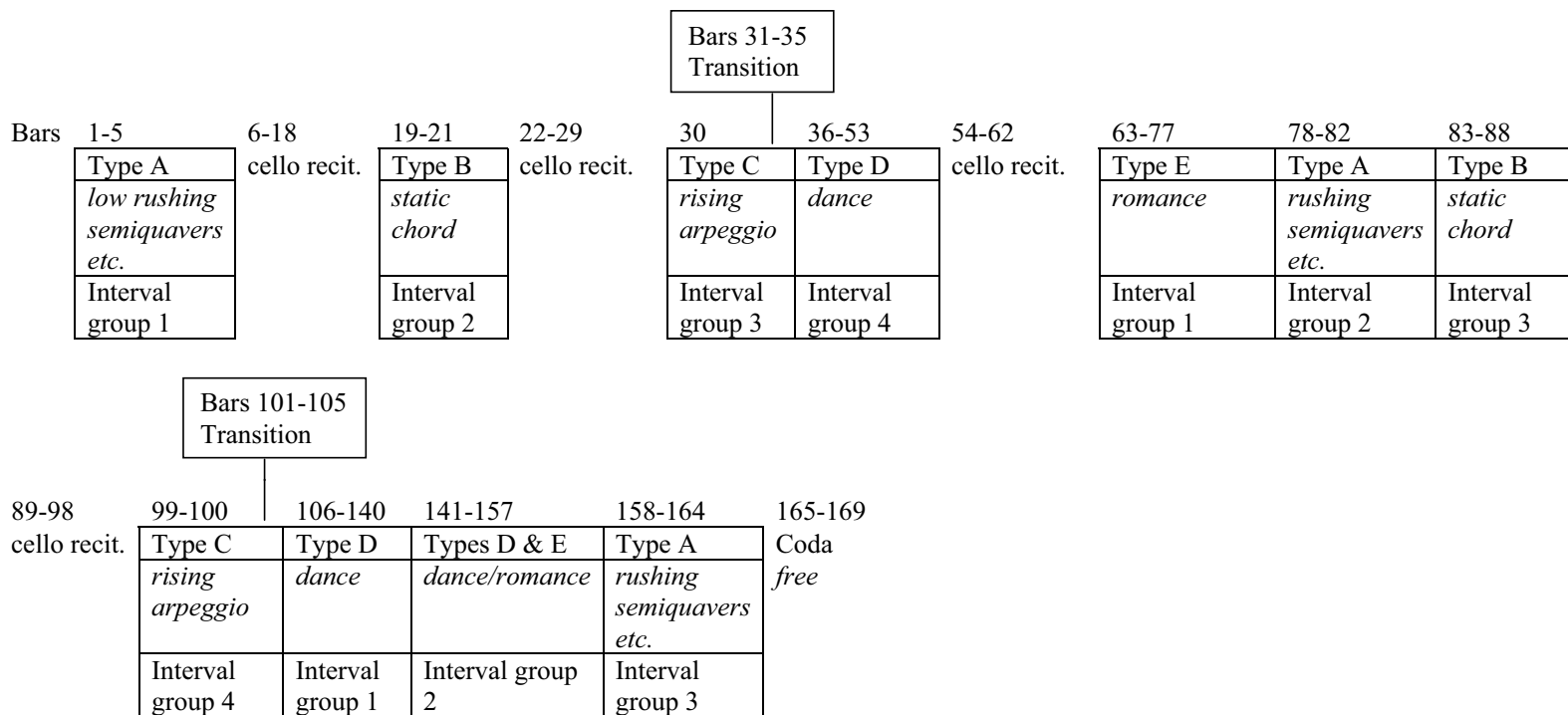
CR: *Literature has also been an important creative stimulus for you.*

PG: Literature and my understanding of novels, poems etc made an impact on me at very much the same time that my involvement in contemporary music began. Somehow the two got fused in my mind, so that when I read a novella like *Heart of Darkness*, it had the same impact on me as certain pieces of music would have, and I could read it like it was a piece of music, with a certain sort of emotional core and sound world. When reading novels I'm often thinking of how I might abstract their structures and also how I might reflect aspects of the emotional world that their structure suggests.

CR: *The Dark Labyrinth takes its title from a novel by Lawrence Durrell. How does that novel inform the structure and musical ideas of the work?*

PG: It primarily relates to the large central section of this tri-partite piece, which is also a sort of cello concerto. The outer sections were really inspired by a novel by William Golding called *Pincher Martin*, which is about a man drowning. In those outer sections the solo cellist has to compete against being drowned out by very fast scurrying material in the other instruments. Then for the central section the music is basically slower, and the image I took from Lawrence Durrell's novel was the idea of finding different pathways through a labyrinth. Here the cello goes through a pulse labyrinth, in which the pulses come in and out of focus. (It was as if I was already working towards *Focus and Fade*.) The cello passes through sections in which these pulses dominate until it arrives at

Figure 1: Piano Trio *Homage to Chagall* – formal outline of Movement 1



Five Musical Types

- A) Low rushing semiquavers with middle register repeated notes
- B) Static chord
- C) Rising arpeggio
- D) Dance
- E) Romance

Four Interval Groups

- 1) m6, m3, tri, m2, M2
- 2) M6, M7, (tri), m2, M2
- 3) m7, M6, 4, m2, M2
- 4) 5, tri, M3, m2, M2

a musical area, and then once it has done this it re-enters the pulse labyrinth to emerge somewhere else. There's a part in the Durrell novel where people are stuck in a labyrinth of caves, and the various parties in this group take different routes out of this labyrinth and arrive at different places. With my own piece, the final route through the labyrinth leads the cello back to the scurrying material with which the work opened, and it has to compete again with all the other instruments. Just at the end, there's a direct analogy with the Golding novel, in that the music stops and there is the 'death chord' from Maxwell Davies's opera *Taverner* (in a rather wide-spaced version). The whole piece seems to be subverted and it ends on a 'wrong note'. This is directly analogous to *Pincher Martin* where in the final chapter it transpires that everything the book has been about never happened, and in fact the man had drowned on the very first page.

CR: *Variations was also inspired by a William Golding novel, I believe?*

PG: Yes, it was the second piece of mine written for *The Fires of London* and was inspired by Golding's novel *Darkness Visible*.¹³ Unlike *Cimmerian Nocturne* and *The Dark Labyrinth*, *Variations* doesn't reflect the content of the novel, but it does reflect its structure, which I found fascinating. It starts by telling one story, then stops. Then it starts telling another, seemingly unrelated story, then stops. It then starts a third story which one begins to realize is the other two stories intermingled. I found that idea of two different things that are then gradually brought together very appealing. In my own work, which is in three movements, I have one set of variations start in the first movement and then stop. Then a different set of variations starts in the second movement. Then in the third movement the first set of variations starts but is continually intermingled with the second set of variations. In fact, there is also a third set of variations, a series of canons at ever increasing intervals (a direct reference to Bach's *Goldberg Variations*), and these occur across all three movements. Initially they are just articulating crucial points in the structure, but gradually they control the drama, particularly once the other two variation cycles start to collide.

CR: *Eclipsing is perhaps the most sophisticated realization of this idea of having multiple threads interacting with one another. This work takes as its basis The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, but the title Eclipsing seems to have very little to do with that, so again I presume we are talking about a very abstract level of relationship between the extra-musical source and your work.*

PG: What interested me was the idea of two parts of the human psyche in competition with one another, and from this I abstracted the idea of two musical worlds that would try to eclipse one another, and hence the title. However, they never resolve their conflict.

Eclipsing happens in several ways in the piece. There's quite a long slow introduction in which very wide-spaced, rather rootless (unusual for me) string harmony is eclipsed from time to time by stronger brass chords. Another way this happens is that there is an instrumental version of the battle between the flügelhorn, which plays predominantly slow but demanding music, and the trum-

¹³ This became the title of the composer's 2005 CD release that includes this work (see Discography).

pets, which provide a faster and brighter counterpart to the flügel. Finally, there is this general battle between fast music, which takes on several guises and engages with genre types like march, capriccio and scherzo, which I've become increasingly interested in, and slow music, which has often got a mechanistic aspect to it.

CR: *So when you're deciding what sort of material or characters to pit against one another, what informs the choices?*

PG: Well, I have found that a certain amount of extremeness is one of the best things, because one of the great banes of contemporary music can be a certain kind of middleliness – mezzo-forte, crotchet equals 60, a magnolia approach to colour, particularly now – and I think if one is going to write music that relies on the pitting of one character against another it works best when it is extreme. Then having made those extreme choices, these are broken down into a set of sub-characters. For example, in *Eclipsing* a process underlies the way the fast music develops. It begins in a quite capricious manner, but this becomes increasingly distorted as the music progresses. This then breaks down into a march, which is more regular (and slightly pompous) and sometimes pitted against the capricious material. Eventually these two types merge to become the scherzo material, which is the fastest version of the fast music, and this becomes increasingly aggressive and distorted. So there's a continuum just like there was with *Cimmerian Nocturne*, but this time that's only one continuum and it is put in counterpoint with another which is provided by the slow music and how that develops.

CR: *Okay, last question: Michael Hall suggested that there are two types of composer; the fox like Peter Maxwell Davies who knows many things and the hedgehog like Harrison Birtwistle who knows one big thing.¹⁴ I know that this is a quote you are particularly fond of, so which one are you?*

PG: Ironically despite the fact I studied with Max I'm more like Birtwistle in this regard. It's funny that our discussion began with *Cimmerian Nocturne*, a piece I wrote nearly 30 years ago. Okay, I've done more sophisticated things since, but in a way everything was there in that piece. I don't worry about that as that just happens to be who I am. Perhaps that's why, as a teacher,¹⁵ I think it is good for someone to do composition even if they do not become a composer: it helps them discover who they are, and that sort of self-awareness is very important.

CR: *Like your compositions themselves, it's the journey, not the destination*

...

PG: Absolutely!

¹⁴ Michael Hall, *Harrison Birtwistle* (London: Robson, 1984), p. 12. This phrase has a long history, first appearing in a fragment of an Epode of Archilochus [probably 7th century BC]. It was already used of Birtwistle by Meirion Bowen in *British Music Now* ed. Lewis Foreman (London: Paul Elek; 1975) - Ed.

¹⁵ Grange is currently Professor of Composition at the University of Manchester.

DISCOGRAPHY

'Hacker Ilk'2, Alan Hacker and Karen Evans: nato CD 1180 (1987)

Includes: *La Ville Entière*

Dark Labyrinths, Gemini with Alison Wells, Nicholas Sears and Tim Gill, conducted by Tim Jones: BBM1038 (1999)

Comprises: *Des fins sont des commencements*, *On This Bleak Hut*, *As It Was*, *In Spectre Search*, *A Puzzle of Shadows*, and *The Dark Labyrinth*

Horizons, Okeanos: ASC CS CD51 (2002)

Includes: *Diptych* and *The Knell of Parting Day*

Borderlands, Chagall Trio: Cameo 2053 (2005)

Includes: Piano Trio: *Homage to Chagall*

Darkness Visible, Gemini, conducted by Ian Mitchell: MSV CD92083 (2005)

Comprises: *Cimmerian Nocturne*, *Lament of the Bow*, and *Variations*

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