

Research Report:

Roger Smalley: A Case-Study of Post -50s Western Music

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When I gave a seminar on Roger Smalley's Concerto for Piano and Orchestra at the University of Melbourne in April 1992, a number of people asked me 'Why Smalley?' I'm still not sure quite how to take this. The general reaction to the work, and to my presentation, was positive (at least, that was the impression I gained), and I don't think the question was of the 'why are you spending your time on this drivel' variety. I think it arose because very few people in the audience of staff and graduate students had heard the work—which is remarkable given its high prominence as winner of the Paris Rostrum, its relatively healthy number of broadcasts and its wide availability on an Australian Music Centre CD (Vox Australis, VAST 003-2, 1988)—and were puzzled as to how I had heard of him. My answer, which I suspect they may have found naïve, was simply that I had known of Smalley when he was still in the UK, and had heard a few of the early Australian pieces (such as the Symphony and the *Konzertstück* for solo violin and orchestra) when they were broadcast on BBC radio. I had liked the music and wanted to get to know it better.

I still hold that this is the most important impulse for the academic study of music. It drives all my research. And with Smalley I can be very precise about what drew me to his scores: the expressive range of both the Concerto and the other work on the CD I have mentioned, the Symphony, and the sense that every note has been fully considered. The end of the Symphony particularly impressed me. Written as a threnody for an acquaintance who died in her early thirties, it packs a big emotional punch, the technical basis of which is the apotheosis of an argument spanning the work's unbroken thirty minutes' length (the work ends with the crystallising of F sharp as pitch centre; the final, poignant sound is F sharp being sustained by a wine glass). Such an expressive range, plus Smalley's determination to find ways of maximizing communication whilst offering the audience genuinely new musical experiences (he does not write down to his audiences), seems to me rare amongst contemporary composers, especially within Australia's shores.

Smalley's music is in fact an analyst's dream. He is a constructionist, enabling the analyst who can 'crack the code' of individual works to 'account for' most of the notes. But of course this is only the first step: the real fascination lies in determining why the music is more than the sum of its parts. The pleasure of analysing the Concerto for Piano and Orchestra (work which was subsequently extended and published in *Poles Apart: the Music of Roger Smalley*, ed. Judy Thönnell (Perth: EVOS and CIRCME, 1994)) led me to think of writing a more extended piece, and a proposal for a book treating Smalley as a case-study of post-1950 composition was accepted by Harwood Academic Publishers for their Contemporary Music Studies series of monographs.

The book will have two basic aims. One will be to give a critical account of Smalley's development as a composer. This will entail analytical commentary, but will also draw on sketches (to which the composer has kindly allowed me access) as well as biographical

information—his contacts with other composers; his performances of twentieth-century (and particularly new) works; the impact on his career of the founding of the various new-music institutions in the UK during the '60s; and the effect of his migration to Australia. It will also draw on his numerous reviews and articles. The basic 'thrust,' however, will be to provide a case study of post-'50s composition. More than any other composer of his generation, Smalley has addressed the key post-World War II compositional developments: serialism, 'moment form', the use of medieval/renaissance techniques, music theatre, the derivation of techniques from non-Western music, and aspects of minimalism. His recent use of Chopin's music as the basis for his own compositions also invites discussion of his relationship with neo-romanticism, and his use of electronic equipment which is now obsolete in his compositions for Intermodulation will prompt consideration of the issue of 'authenticity' in twentieth-century music.

A provisional outline by chapter follows:

Preface

- Ch. 1 Juvenilia and earliest published pieces; early influences (incl. influence of teachers: John White; Peter Racine Fricker; Alexander Goehr).
Key works: *Septet, Sextet, Variations for Strings, Five Piano Pieces*
- Ch. 2 Bliethman-derived works; influence of Peter Maxwell Davies.
Key works: *Gloria tibi trinitas I and II, Missa brevis, Missa parodia I and II*
- Ch. 3 Works for Intermodulation; other Stockhausen-influenced works; role of moment form.
Key works: *Transformation I, Melody Studies I and II, The Song of the Highest Tower, Monody, Pulses for 5x4 Players, Beat Music, Strata, etc.*
- Ch. 4 First visit to Perth; migration to Perth.
Key works: *Dijeridu, Accord*
- Ch. 5 Adapting to a new climate: effect of new environment on style, etc.
Key works: *William Derrincourt, Symphony, Konzertstück, String Quartet, Echo II, III and IV*
- Ch. 6 Consolidation.
Key works: *Movement for Flute and Piano, Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, Ceremony I, II and III, Strung Out*
- Ch. 7 Chopin-based works
Key works: *Variations on a Theme of Chopin, Piano Trio, Poles Apart*
- Ch. 8 Current concerns
Key works: *Diptych, Close to the Edge, Concertos for Oboe, Cello, and Double Bassoon*

Smalley's role as an evangelist for contemporary music as both a performer and writer will form a constant backdrop in the discussion of his compositional development—particularly in the early chapters, but also in connection with his impact on the musical climate of Perth.

Interestingly, no-one in the UK who knows of my Smalley project has posed the 'Why Smalley?' question. Many who remember him from the '60s and early '70s are curious about what he has been doing during the last ten or so years since a performance of one of his major works was given in that country. Meanwhile Australians know very little of the music he wrote before moving to Perth. So I hope the book will be intriguing for both readerships.