
COMPOSER INTERVIEW

Not Just Wallpaper: An Interview with Michael Kieran Harvey

Ian Parsons

The career of pianist and composer Michael Kieran Harvey is notable for its diversity and wide repertoire. In addition to his more than fifty solo CDs recorded on various labels, Harvey is particularly known for his promotion of contemporary music; he has premiered many new Australian and international concertos, and more than three hundred solo Australian keyboard works, many of which are dedicated to him.

Born in Sydney in 1961, Harvey studied piano with Alan Jenkins, Gordon Watson, and at the Liszt Academy in Budapest under Sándor Falvai. In 1993 he became the first Australian to win a major international piano competition: the inaugural Ivo Pogorelich International Solo Piano Competition in Pasadena. After proving himself as an interpreter in the international arena, Harvey dedicated himself to promoting the work of his Australian colleagues and developing his own compositional language.

Harvey's compositions have been performed in Europe, the United Kingdom, North and South America, Asia, and at major Australian festivals. He concentrates on non-standard formats, often humorously questioning classical music and embracing diverse influences.

Harvey's 2021 piece for solo piano *Four Ballades* was commissioned by the Australian artist Graeme Lee. It is a striking example of the composer's adventurous approach to musical traditions, taking musical concepts that have their roots in classicism and romanticism (in this case, the Ballade), then breathing into them a new and more radical voice. As is typical of Harvey's piano music, the *Four Ballades* call for considerable virtuosity from the pianist, and display his exploratory ingenuity as a composer in the reframing of established musical tropes.

Michael, before we begin talking about the *Four Ballades*, could I ask you broadly about your life as a composer? You're known so widely both as a performer of other composers' works and as a composer yourself. But the shift in emphasis seems to have moved over the years to a greater focus on your work as a composer. What has driven that shift for you?

Well, I think age more than anything else! I do believe that the sorts of music that I was interested in is really a young person's game. The effort required to maintain that sort of standard is really like being an athlete. Performance becomes more disappointing as you age—one should always be aware of the 'offstage hook'. And there's an element of psychosis about it as well, which I think goes unmentioned about classical music particularly. A hell of a lot of people with OCD sorts of issues are selected into classical music performance because of the sometimes repetitive nature of working successfully in that repertoire. As for myself, I definitely had ADHD when I was younger, and doing something with my fingers was a therapy more than anything else, and I still find that. But I was aware that you could just keep going through the same sort of routines of learning music and trotting it out, performing it, going back, learning music and trotting it out: that sort of cycle. And after a certain period, it becomes quite repetitive. And I have never been really into that. I always like to be more spontaneous.

I guess from my earliest years I was always against any sort of institutionalised music-making, such as exams, competitions, anything like that. It used to drive me nuts because I didn't think they had anything to do with musical creativity. And they also reflected an old-world kind of white, imperialist, Victorian sort of mentality about music. I was much more interested in diverse music—particularly when I was introduced to rock and roll early on in my life, and then later, about the early '70s, to artists like Miles Davis, and wonderful improvised recordings, and so forth. There was not really a structure at that stage in Australia for third stream music. So I was always battling the hierarchy to just try to do things spontaneously to reinterpret the music I was interested in, and in a way that I found personally interesting. I was always very curious. And yet I was being sort of strait-jacketed and punished for doing that a lot of the time.

At about age 18, I got into a group called Flederman, which was an early contemporary music group in Sydney, and I noticed that this group was made up of performers who were also composers. It seemed to me that those people had much more intellectual heft as performers because of their compositional background, and the ideas that they were exploring were fascinating to me; they were exploring things that I didn't find in just being a performer. I always felt the opposite to what the 'semiotics' of performance had been, where the focus is on the brightest young interpreter or whatever, and the contents are virtually ignored. But without the content that performer is nothing. It always seemed to me that the composition and the ideas presented by the interpreter were much more important than the interpreter. So for those reasons, I always did compose. It just didn't become my mainstream activity at first because I had more success as a player. But the composition has always been part of me. I always looked at interpretation as part of the composition process—you have to get really into the mind of the composer.

But in that whole way of being brought up, the institutions are all of a certain type of middle-class ideology and flavour. I was always very uncomfortable in those settings and much more comfortable in the experimental area, or working with improvisers, because they were much more aware of the big changes going on in the '70s in Australia, culturally and multiculturally.

That compositional voice that has emerged for you—and it has been really *very* prolific—has produced such a huge range of interesting ideas and exciting pieces. Can you tell me a little bit about your recent composition, the *Four Ballades*: its story and structure?

Well, these were commissioned specifically by the artist Graeme Lee, who I've been very fortunate to know since about 1992. He has had a big influence on me. I stayed with him for a number of years in the late '90s, and have been encouraged by him through various commissions. He commissioned my Third Piano Sonata, and also the Sixth Sonata, which is based on seventeen of his prints. He also commissioned these *Ballades*. He wanted to dictate the sort of work he commissioned, so he came up with the suggestion of ballades. I think he originally had the Chopin Ballades in mind, but I automatically thought of Liszt and *his* Ballades, which I think are gutsier. But I agreed, and the work was conceived sort of as a dual gift, as he in turn wanted to gift it to his daughter, Jenny, a very senior public servant in Melbourne.

I took it on as a sort of challenge, to see if I could adapt something with a longstanding history, particularly in piano music. The ballade is a particular type of cross-domain, literary form. At that point I was working simultaneously on my Seventh Piano Sonata, which is more discontinuous, like Stockhausen's moment form. It's also based on Epicurus's maxim, which they used to put on Roman graves: 'I was not, I was, I am not, I care not.' So I was trying to capture that fleeting quality of existence in a quite cerebral, esoteric work.

In contrast, my *Ballades* are much more narrative. I wanted them to be lyrical, and yet I also wanted to use them to explore some of my own concerns and influences: particularly Liszt, John Cage, Ligeti and Kurtág, and the style of rhythmic jazz / rock fusion that I grew up with. I wanted to see if I could do a 'summing up' of all those styles, if you like.

All four of them ruminate on the BACH motif. So there's another influence! Each one starts on a transposition of these four letters, and then each Ballade is a free improvisation on those letters and what they suggest (see Example 1). The forms that I'm exploring with this work all came out of that. It's like a spiral form, that motif. I'm not unique in my use of that. There are plenty of composers like Bartók, Stockhausen, Shostakovich, and many others who have interpreted Bach's name through this sort of spiral form.

But out of that I've woven the melodic material, which is repeated in the first and last Ballade almost verbatim. In the middle Ballades this melodic material metamorphoses, after Liszt's idea of

Example 1. Michael Kieran Harvey, *Four Ballades for Solo Piano*, bb. 1–4

Stark ♩ = 80

The image shows two systems of musical notation for piano. The first system is for the first ballade, starting in 7/4 time with a piano (*pp*) dynamic. It features a melodic line in the bass clef and chords in the treble clef. The second system is for the second ballade, starting in 5/4 time with a *3* marking. It also features a melodic line in the bass clef and chords in the treble clef. Both systems include performance instructions like *pp* and *Ped.* with brackets.

the metamorphosis of themes. I'm pursuing the darker atmosphere in Liszt, rather than the almost benign salon music atmosphere of the Chopin Ballades. I'm exploring this darker, semitonal material in the Ballades. My idea was for the theme to be reinterpreted by the surrounding material, not necessarily by changing the theme. This is what I was really hanging out for.

The difficulty for me in composition is starting. Trying to work out how to start something is incredibly important in my opinion. Within that first sound is the ontology of the whole work, as far as I'm concerned. So it's not simply a case of just applying a system throughout, although I do start with systems sometimes. For instance, in my First Sonata I started out with a system based on another cryptogram, the Marquis de Sade's name. But I buggered up the row! Then I thought, well, that's great because it works in with my idea of noise in the system, which comes out of Attali's book *Noise* as a foil to hegemony.

I like using a system and seeing a breakdown (either through my own incompetence or through its lack of conviction as a device) because of this problem: 'what is the reason that you're starting to write down something?' That is at once an incredibly arrogant and quite humbling thing to do. It has a double edge to it.

You know, I don't expect anybody to listen to my music, and nobody does [*laughing*]. I write it at a particular point where I feel there's a need to do it. And in this instance, that need was generated by Graeme. I had to then come up with a whole range of reasons why to proceed and how to proceed with each Ballade. Graeme likes Bach, so I decided to look at Bach. Because it's so recognisable, I didn't want the BACH theme to come through in any of the Ballades, but it's sort of stalking in the background over the larger form. It suggests itself in the thematic material, but never resolves or develops. The development of Western music is typically goal oriented, but I try to avoid getting trapped too much by that. So the piece is very much a statement. It's quite episodic music, echoing the discontinuity of the Seventh Sonata, but with an old-fashioned narrative template.

You described how you need to have a need to compose, and how this work being a commission provided you with that need. Is there also an internal, or personal need to compose? Would you compose differently if your works had not been commissioned?

They're often not commissioned, particularly the larger works. Well, when I say they're not commissioned, they're commissioned by myself! I've done a lot of satirical works, which were generated by complete outrage. I believe that music should not be a refuge from the world. It's something that should tackle issues head on. To channel passion into those sorts of musical outcomes is really the point of a lot of artistic enterprise. So compositions suggest themselves to me because I get so passionate about a particular issue. I can trace that through a lot of my sonatas. They're not concerned with the reception; they're more concerned with getting the idea out and seeing it through. So a lot of them are very long and fairly uncompromising. I know that they're not accessible, and that's okay, because really, that's not the motivation.

Over the years, I have had a little bit of disappointment working with composers who decided that the measure of their success, and their own satisfaction, was in the reception of the works they were writing. This can become an incredible obsession for people and institutions because it is an obvious and often venal measure of success. I've always been very wary of reception as a measure of success because surely you should be aiming for satisfying your own particular goals and your own vision for what music is.

All the people that I admire as musicians—going back to Liszt or Ligeti—had this sort of attitude. They were not concerned really with palliating or upsetting audiences, or what have you. They were more concerned with: ‘What is it that I’m really trying to say? What is it that I’m trying to do?’ And they thought deeply about it. There was Bartók going and recording peasant music because he thought, ‘this is disappearing and I’m not really sure of the way forward.’ Liszt was the same. He went through long periods of depression. And this is what the Greeks call *aporia*, this situation where you don’t know what the way forward is—for yourself, not for anything else. I think this is really the state of being a composer, or artist of any description. You are always sort of bewildered when you’re working. It’s like you’re putting off that inevitable thing, but it comes back time and time again.

What you’ve described seems to be not only a kind of an authenticity in composing—because it’s music generated from an authentic self, rather than a perception of what someone else is expecting you to be—but also a kind of catharsis. You’re describing a way in which your music becomes a channel for expressing things that you feel very much need to be expressed. Does that mean that composing is also a draining and exhausting experience for you? There are a lot of notes in the *Four Ballades*, so I can see that it would be exhausting to perform. Was it also exhausting to compose?

Yes, it does take a take a lot of energy. My output is very much centred on my instrument, piano, simply because of practicalities. I think music is about the ideas, and it doesn’t really matter what the instrumentation is. And that’s what I struggle with. I look at the keyboard almost like a proto-computer. The way you work out the ideas on that computer can be orchestrated, or put in different formats, most of the time. Obviously composers like Schoenberg or Takemitsu explore tone colour for the sake of it, and there is that aspect to writing for other instruments, which I do on occasion when there is a point. But I don’t see much point in spending an awful amount of your life writing operas or symphonies if they’re not going to be performed, because in that process you lose the impetus to work on ideas.

The present situation with the extraordinary ability of electronic music to realise those ideas is such a wonderful thing, especially when you think about what Stockhausen had to deal with: inventing electronic instruments because there wasn’t anything sufficient. When Cage couldn’t afford or tenure fifteen percussionists in performances, he was forced to write for prepared piano, which was basically like a percussion section of fifteen players in the piano, and so he created a completely new universe. The history of ingenuity in keyboard composers is quite extraordinary because they have been able to use the keyboard like a computer to realise these ideas. You look at a composer like Conlon Nancarrow and his use of player pianos. Who would have thought you could create such a huge universe of works out of that? It is so inspiring for many other genres of music and the instrumentation of music.

So it really is practicalities that draw me to get my ideas out there. I don’t really care if it’s for the piano or anything else. It’s about trying to work out what I want to argue for in these ‘essays’. The *Ballades* are short essays, but they’re postmodern essays with a sort of yearning for the golden age when music was considered important. Music was at the top of the pyramid in the nineteenth century. Now it’s just wallpaper! So there is a certain amount of nostalgia for that in these pieces.

I’m hoping that there’s still something new one can say with these eighty-eight keys. To go between those and create microtonal music opens up yet another fractal. Plenty of composers

in the electronic field do that; it's really all about defining a parameter, such as this commission to write some Ballades. It narrows things down from the limitless possibilities that we have as composers, to say nothing of soundscaping or environmental music, and all those types of framing devices that can make other vibrations part of the musical world.

These Ballades are really quite conservative, and deliberately so. I run this experimental music ensemble, and the students are constantly exploring music of their own era that they discover on YouTube or wherever, and really, the bewildering array of things that are going on at the moment ... well, I feel very old fashioned [*laughs*].

I think a lot of your works almost defy categorisation into those boxes of 'old fashioned' or 'forward thinking'. You tend to transcend a lot of that by bringing concepts that we may be familiar with, but redeveloping and reimagining them in a very new voice. Could I finish by asking you what you have planned in terms of other works in the near or more distant future?

Well, things sort of ran off a cliff when COVID hit, and I actually thought—as far as music was concerned, particularly live music—it was a major existential blow. I'm halfway through a philosophy course at the moment, because I thought, I really need to take advantage of this hiatus of striving, and getting, and having, and so on. I found that very useful, and I'm continuing to do that, which has affected my output. Remarkably, over the last six months I've just been doing a lot of thinking, particularly about the question: what is the most useful thing that I can contribute? I come back to looking at the immediate community; I do a bit of community work, and also teaching. Music is not obsessing me in the same sort of way it was pre-COVID. I have a number of ideas, but I don't want to jinx it, because the moment I say I'm working on something and then I don't come up with the goods, I feel a bit, well, stupid.

Koestler described in his book *The Act of Creation* 'reculer pour mieux sauter'—stepping back to leap forward. It is one of the things I've always come back to, particularly when you're in a period of aporia—of not knowing which way forward—and I've learned to trust it, because it's outside of time, and it's outside of all the normal pressures to produce, and so forth. Often when you just embrace it and say: 'Well, this is the way it is at the moment,' you can come up with a renewed and possibly different path forward. And if it doesn't happen, that's more or less the status at the moment. If it's not a path forward, it may be at least a path.

So, yes, there are more things that I am thinking of, but again, it relates to opportunities and everything else coming together. The best thing I can do at the moment is to concentrate on helping my students and helping my immediate community as much as I can, particularly at the moment when things are pretty tough for everyone.

About the Author

Ian Parsons is a musicologist specialising in the music of Karlheinz Stockhausen. He is interested in the philosophical dimensions of music and cross-disciplinary approaches to musical interpretation. He also presents a weekly radio show on PBS FM in Melbourne, showcasing art music of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.