

An Interview with Brian Ferneyhough¹

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Felipe Ribeiro: Many composers and scholars refer to your music as being part of the New Complexity School. We know through several interviews that you are not comfortable with this term, as Grisey felt on being labeled a spectral composer. How do you respond to current composers that not only are extremely influenced by your music but also treat you as a principal figure of this school?

Brian Ferneyhough: You cannot really avoid it for one thing: you can say you don't like it, as Grisey quite rightly did. He might have pointed to a much more differentiated picture of his origins, in particular his approach to Stockhausen's fractal global forms, which many of his works illustrate, particularly the very large orchestral pieces. So, it's very unfair to see him only from the standpoint of Spectralism. Some of his late pieces, such as *Vortex temporum*, have extremely complex rhythmic and spectral pitch structures; so it seems to me that you cannot describe people by putting them in a certain drawer: you open it up, put them back in, and you forget them again. It's good to remember that people are very complex beings; whilst the general historical attitude, exemplified by Spectralism or Complexicism or whatever people call them these days, may not be entirely unjust, we are all individuals. So someone from my generation gets irritated when he is called a New Complexity composer, because he was there before "New Complexity" appeared. If you have a group of young composers five or six generations distant from me, I think it's important, naturally, that they know they don't come from nowhere. We all have our initial influences. I think what I don't like so much is this sort of clannish-group feeling. It's much more interesting to me to see the differences between people rather than their similarities. I try not to teach people who are clearly attached, in their own minds, to that particular tendency. They don't need me; they can find someone else to teach them; I prefer to be challenged by many other things.

I think the situation of contemporary music at the moment is, indeed, in quotation marks, very complex, not because it has got a lot of technical innovation in the notational-sonic interface, but because we live in a very complex time. It's not like, as post-modern theorists would have us believe, everything has been reduced to some sort of indifferent gruel. We are all very different, but people tend not to focus on the dissonant potential of the differences. It's perhaps diplomatic that we all try to get along, and it's most unusual that you find, these days, a great deal of dissident expression around particular sorts of style. I think there is one thing I do like about the so-called "New Complexity": it irritates people. As a consequence, you find them losing control, sometimes in a modest way, about their dislike of, or the skepticism with respect to that particular tendency. So I think that serves a function. Nobody is going to see Spectralism today as a politically or socially relevant, problematic, stylistic domain. What is

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problematic about it is the young composer who accepts it without question, accepts the premises which that sort of music seems to bring with it. It's much more interesting to look what distinguishes composers. Besides, it takes a while for young composers to realize that the safety of the clan, the feeling that the clan is accepting you and building you up in some way so that you can perhaps break free later on, is important when you start out—you do not like to start from a totally isolated position as I did.

I discoursed mainly with dead or soon to be dead people. I was faced with an incredible breadth of stylistic source material, one piece from each area: one by Varèse, one or two by Stockhausen, one by Webern. I had to glue together some sort of *bricolage*; something that represented a possible path forward with respect to the music of the immediate past that I did encounter. Nevertheless, it was a very incoherent, very passionate sort of approach. I think young composers today miss this sense of danger: "Will the bridge collapse as I pass over it?" So, many of the technical advances that young composers end up undertaking in one or other of these particular directions don't seem to me to be using the increased and articulative complexity towards a provocative end. It seems that the whole thing is gradually evening itself out again and becoming once more this thin gruel.

So, of course that is true in any style; you find that it's a living entity if we assume and take seriously the idea that there is a sort of organicist life force in artistic production. Then it's very clear that things live, grow, and die; there is nothing wrong with that. It's only a crisis for people who find themselves at the dying end before they have reached middle age. So, it's a historical issue, by and large.

I think at the present time there are many young composers who are doing all sorts of extraordinary music which doesn't have specifically to do with the notational sonic interface of the sort of symbolic critical discourse type which I represent; I have a different background to many young people. It seems to me that what they are doing now is trying to break apart those aspects of received convention which have not been investigated to any great degree, such as the large-scale formal structure, for instance. How may processuality be subverted or magnified? How do we move from one level of formal discourse to a different one? How, in other words, do we see our position *vis-à-vis* the material? What is our perspective or vanishing point in the image that we are facing musically? These things are very important and many of these composers are notably uncaring, it seems to be in a positive way, about this surface polish of their music. The so-called New Complexity composers are known to be hypersensitive with regard to the detail of their works. I think that some of the young composers, now in their twenties or thirties, who are producing new material really don't worry too much about that. You have to first adopt the thing that you want to break, and they don't. It's almost a house of ruins, which nevertheless has some energy in it. Since it isn't ruins that we find if we undertake an archeological dig, the actual ruins as they were in the process of been ruined, that to me gives a certain degree of creative stimulus to that particular group of people. It would have been difficult to imagine that music without passing through a particular phase of critiquing history via notational practice, that particular semiotic approach towards the relationship to what we get from a sonic image, from the musical figure. This is something that we have to go through, and I think now they have come out on the other side with a much more playful approach towards what they do.

FR: *To what extent do you feel that your music may be a strong influence on young composers?*

BF: I have supported and I support still many composers who have studied with me back in the seventies and eighties. They were pretty much people who were reinventing a wheel that never existed, a very interesting group of people, some of whom have reached quite successful positions, some of whom not. Nonetheless, I respected very much the honesty of their critical approach. Whereas, in later times, several generations down the road, you find a sort of *Frankenstein* attitude: you plug an electric current in here [the heart] and then it moves; if you turn it off, it stops. That sort of lifelessness, or desanguinated form of life, disturbs me. That is true of almost any musical style; you find that there are very late manifestations of classical styles, romantic styles, and sort of neo-modernist, post-Hindemithian styles where these things survive without having any particular rationale for survival. So, I think it's perfectly okay for things to come about and disappear again. It's also okay for us to watch them disappearing, because then they may find ways of opening up to other phenomena. I always felt it absurd that Spectralism and the so-called Complexicism were seen as two irreconcilable sides of the same coin. It seems to me that we all work with the sonic matter that the overtone structure reveal to us. We don't just write any arbitrary note; we write for a certain instrument, at a certain dynamic; we write so that it emphasizes a particular partial of some other sound—the whole tonal system is based upon that. Furthermore, if a composer uses absolutely no form of ordering, be it serial or otherwise, then: a) his brain is probably dying of boredom; and b) his music is not representing the full human being, he is not doing justice to the natural sensitivity of his listeners. So, I always emphasize that you shouldn't see all these tendencies as separate things, but as manifestations of a *Zeitgeist*. We, as composers, are continually forced to re-calibrate our relationships to the particular qualities of awareness which each of these tendencies draws forth.

FR: *What can you tell us about your experiences with audiences not familiar with your work?*

BF: That's a very interesting question, because it has not been put to me in that way before. Not familiar at all with my work, but familiar with a context of various sorts of contemporary music? Depending on their level of insight and knowledge of musical technique, I can sometimes talk with these people. I find it very difficult to talk with people who say: "Oh, I could have made that up just by improvising on a flute." Well, yes, there is no way of arguing with that particular frame of mind. You say: "Well, yes, but this guy spent a hundred hours learning this piece and knowing that he can't quite perfectly play it, and nevertheless puts it on for your delight. There must be some difference between you picking up a flute and making funny noises, and this guy." Surely that's true; you look at Japanese Gagaku music, at the technique of the Sho, for instance; you find there is a place for inexactitude, as if they are "not playing their instruments right."

It seems to me that the people who are criticizing my music in this particular context have misunderstood what the piece of music presents to them. I say to the listener: "You have to come a little bit in my direction. Clearly this music is not working

on one level, and you must not expect to hear all the levels working at the same time. Clearly, there's a great deal of effort and concentration going into the performance of this piece." However, it is not entirely about punishing the performer for having been ambitious enough to try to play it, even though some discomfort is there. I always use the example of Antonin Artaud when talking about the pain of the thought moving within us: every sensation that we have at the extremes of thinking is corporally painful, in a certain sort of way. Not literal pain, but discomfort, disbalance, being outside of oneself and coming back inside oneself, and so on. All these things provide an immediacy which the conventional language of expression is no longer able to provide us in an authentic way.

I sometimes say to people, "Frequently, if you listen to a Bach cantata, and the singer says *und Er weinete bitterlich* (he cried bitterly), you get a chromatic descending figure." The people of the day would have understood that, but people listening today don't necessarily understand it, so they are missing something. It's good to see what currently corresponds to, or might be seen to function in, an analogous way to the sort of image generation and transmissional mechanism that classical and romantic music had. I always point them towards the early Webern, the miniatures of his early atonal period, because he really had reduced things to a minimum. If you just listen to single notes, it means almost nothing. You have to assume a frame within which this piece resonates and upon which it nourishes itself. Thus, we no longer listen to music like the people around 1900 did; we have a different sort of "take" on what is significant.

However, I would find it difficult to communicate with people who had absolutely no knowledge of the history and development of particular sorts of stylistic and expressive tendencies. For instance, at the moment I'm in the Stanford Humanity Center, which deals with researchers from the humanities, such as history, languages, sociology, and literature; they are all critics and academics. I sit there as a composer, and they look at me in a very strange light, because I'm not commenting upon something, I'm making something that will be commented upon. Nevertheless, the works I make do comment. The fact that there is sound, rather than words on paper, doesn't mean that they don't have a cognitive potential. What is difficult in dealing with these very educated people is that they think of music as a nice experience. They all write their books with their CD players on. It rather reminds me of when I lived in Switzerland; I was once invited by a young married couple to go and have dinner in their house. They wanted to show me their culture, so the entire time we were eating and talking they were playing on their record player Beethoven late quartets. Now, if that does not demonstrate precisely what I am saying, that even very educated people have a sort of cut-off point, a threshold beyond which they cannot credit art with having its own innate sensual and logical domain, then what do I do with people who have never heard contemporary music? You can blow up some balloons and you can put a funny red nose on and do a dance, but no, I try not to.

James Corrêa: *It's quite interesting, particularly for me. Many years ago, when I was a beginner music student, I first heard your music at the same time that I was being introduced to Beethoven. Coming from a family with no musical tradition, I did not have any strong response to Beethoven, and I felt that your music provoked an experience that was much closer to me.*

BF: I had a very similar experience. Neither my parents nor any of my relatives was in

any way musical. I got my first education in music quite fortuitously by playing in a brass band. You come across all sorts of arrangements of Mozart and Meyerbeer, and you learn to play the "insides" of them. So, that was quite good. At the same time, at school we had to listen to a great deal of British music, which I found almost totally obnoxious and incomprehensible. Madrigals from the sixteenth century, Benjamin Britten, Edward Elgar, or Ralph Vaughan Williams, all seemed to me to be inhabiting some sort of pseudo-pastoral paradise somewhere behind the cricket field. It meant nothing to me whatsoever, and I was incredibly angry and frustrated with it. That was not a good way to come to terms with classical music. The same was true with the eighteenth century. I really hated eighteenth century music, because I felt it was too formalized. I mean, not formalized in a structured way, but in a repetitive way. In order to write a piece of classical music, you just need one or two new ideas, seed them somewhere in the piece, and then you've got an automatic composition. When people say, "Mozart was a genius, he could listen to a piece once and then go home and copy it out!" Well, yes! That's because nearly everything in the music was utterly conventional. He just needed to listen to those bits that weren't! We could all do that one way or another, but not with contemporary music, of course.

When I first encountered contemporary music, I was really looking for something that was not weighed down by the cultural authority which I perceived both in the English tradition and in terms of the blanket authority of the past. The first works of contemporary music that I heard which really shocked and influenced me were pieces I perceived to be very honest, devoid of any sense of false sentimentality, such as Varèse's *Octandre*, one of the first pieces of classical music I ever heard. I must have listened to that old record, which only had the second and third movements on it, a hundred times! I thought: "this is clean, pure, unsentimental; it says what it wants to say and stops." What he wants to say is jubilatory; it's a sort of ceremonial *jouissance*, which to me was absolutely innovative and shocking. Of course, new music should shock us, should move us, but a lot of people I've taught here in America don't come to it the same way as I did. They come through popular music; they have a garage band somewhere and they play their bass guitar and sing. Nevertheless, when they come to study with us, they are very open towards all forms of non-traditional sound making. A European is loaded down with a tremendous weight of legitimation anxiety, which emanates from his knowledge of the classical tradition. In a way, there is a positive side in that we all react in one way or another to historical context. However, the downside is that we are all somewhat self-conscious. We can hardly write a note without thinking: where does it come from and why?

FR: *Have you ever introduced a piece in the way Boulez does in some concerts at the Cité de la Musique, or felt the desire to do so?*

BF: Oh yes, of course! Any sort of pedagogical activity requires you to translate the kernel of what it is that you want to say into a different sort of vernacular. If I'm going to talk to a highly educated, but not necessarily musical, audience in the *Cité de la Musique*, I'm going to say one set of things, evoke images, talk about how this music relates with other art forms. The title of the piece might well indicate concerns that are not strictly musical, such as my piece *Carceri d'Invenzioni*, in which I'm dealing with Giambattista

Piranesi and the whole idea of multiple contradictory perspectives. The term *perspective* is not one that we use a great deal in music. At that time, I really felt it was an important thing, as we were replacing tonality or presenting as a counter-proposal to the layered hierarchy which tonal music mobilizes. If you can produce a music that has a number of different perspectival layers, rather like a series of overlapping transparencies, you can move through them as if moving through a lattice-work, a skeleton, or supportive scaffolding, where you can move from one layer to the other. While it starts off not being as formally obvious and clear as tonal music, nevertheless there's something that makes us feel we can appropriate parts of this structure for ourselves, for our own purposes. So I try to make these analogies. When I first went to UC San Diego, in 1987, the first class I had to teach was an introduction to creative music-making course for non-music majors. I did two things, one of which was mildly successful, one of which was a failure. I asked myself what sort of situations these kids associate with modern sounds—basically horror films or detective series on television. If you close your eyes and listen to some of the stuff it's not even bad. So, twice a week we would sit and listen to the same opening music, Varese's *Octandre*, as if we were watching a detective series. At the end, we tried to talk about it, but it brought absolutely no reaction whatsoever. They heard this thing maybe twenty times in the course of a quarter, but because of the context they had not paid any real attention; they recognized it, which I suppose was something, but did they use that familiarity to enter the real emotional excitement of the piece? No, not at all.

However, the good thing was a music-making experiment we did. I said to the class, "Each of us has two musical instruments here in this room, one of which is our voice, and the other is a piece of paper." I gave them a poem, I think by e. e. cummings, and we tried to create a musical realization of this using only those two media. So we could talk a little bit about form, about onomatopoeic or representational sonorities with respect to some words in the text. Did we want to, in some way, incorporate the visual layout of the text on the page into our musical substance or not? If so, we needed to separate people in different parts of the room. That had a moderate success, but I don't think even at the end of the course they thought it was music. So, they, too, came with certain presuppositions about what music is, and that was mainly, I guess, derived in those days from the Beatles and Led Zeppelin, and other widespread stimuli.

When I first got to know my wife Stephanie, for instance, she knew very little about contemporary music, but she loves music from the sixties and seventies, particularly punk and some heavy metal. After a while, she understood quite a lot about contemporary music, because there was some crossover in her mind which enabled these two very different phenomena to find some common substrate in her, even though I find it difficult to understand how. Perhaps she is just being patient with me, I don't know.

The question is: in this business of pedagogically transmitting some sort of understanding of new music to others, do you try to do it through the experience of the music itself? Or do you try to make use of things in the external world, which may have some relationship on some level to the sort of experience you are trying to evoke? I've tried both; sometimes they work and sometimes they don't. What you don't need to do, I think, is what is done a lot in France, which is what I've said before—the clowns and balloons, *le spectacle*. You know, "Let's make new music enjoyable! We will play ten minutes of some improvisational new music piece and then we will have a festival with beer, wine, balloons, and pop-stars!" That never worked, but they kept on trying to do it,

they still try to do it today! I have no idea why—it must be in the national character! They really do try to say. "Yes, we can bring ordinary citizens into some sort of tactile, comprehensible relationship to this sound world." Well, IRCAM tries to do it by building environments in which people walk up and down, come in, stamp their foot on the floor, and the sound comes up over here; scratch your stomach and the sound comes up from over there. Well, it is good, this interactive thing, maybe with visuals as well; that's one of the things one tries to do, of course. This cross-media strategy has become incredibly important. I am not quite sure what it portends for us as musicians, but in any case, not everyone finds him- or herself comfortable with the trend.

FR: *Have you ever considered writing a work for beginners, like Lachenmann or Kurtág have done?*

BF: Oh, I think I could. There was a tradition in Britain in the sixties and seventies, in which publishers actually brought out a large number of experimental pieces by major composers such as Peter Maxwell-Davies, Alexander Goehr, and others. These were in part graphic, but nevertheless required a certain discipline from the people playing them. As you got into the conservative late seventies and early eighties, this sort of thing disappeared completely. All the things the schools are now doing in music lessons is letting people sing pop songs. That is a different sort of participation, I suppose. I believe I could sit down, for instance, with a group of six year-old violin players and produce a piece of reasonable music just using open strings.

JC: *Do you think this is an interesting approach to introduce contemporary music to young audiences?*

BF: In my view, there has got to be some sense of personal participation and reward involved in entering into contemporary music. You can't make contemporary music taste better. It is like going to the dentist, and the stuff they inject into you has a kind of tutti-frutti flavor. It doesn't make you feel better; it makes you feel worse, because every time you smell that again in the future, you think of the syringe. It works the opposite way around. Yes, I do believe it is possible to engage young people into what you may call a socio-artistic venture, and that needn't just be music: I think this applies to everything. It's getting harder and harder, because the capitalist world is intent upon selling us idiotic products, and telling us we are free to choose. Now, freedom isn't like that. You bang a man on the head ten times, and say "Shall I hit you again?" There is not really much freedom to answer.

I think the problem is really one of socio-cultural ideals of individuality, and the way individuality may be expressed in a cultural environment—a BIG LIE! It sickens me. Well, everybody has to be diplomatic and bureaucratic to some extent; all of us do things that we don't want to do in the university—fill out forms, make silly speeches—but they don't matter, they are forgotten immediately. In the wide world there is almost no room left available for independent thinking, because the whole time our culture is mouthing freedom of the individual to choose, there's a big stick coming out from behind the back, bashing you on the head all the time—and you don't even notice it.

So, the problem is: how do you lead young people into understanding this

disbalance between ideal and reality, without involving the political dimension? I think many people have failed either because they could not reconcile in themselves what message they were trying to put across or because they were oppressed by the authorities, thought to be subversives who were not educating our youth to be good consumers. A good example would be Cornelius Cardew in England. He was a very intelligent composer, who late in life had great difficulty reconciling his more extreme political views with the type of communication that an artwork demands for itself.

Let me tell you this little story: my wife and I sat in the car one day; she turned the music on and said: "This is a terrible song!" I said: "Yes!" And then that song finished, another one started, and she said: "Oh, this is a great song!" I said: "How is this song different from the one before it?" She said: "It tells us about saving the whales." Deep inside for me that day (and I never forgot what it was), I realized it has got to do with what the song is about, not with what the music is about. The music doesn't really matter, and that was the problem with Cornelius Cardew. At first, the music was a sort of feeder of aesthetic and social theory, and so you have works that in some way require some complex realization of social principles. *The Great Learning* was one, for instance, where each of the participants had to do quite simple things individually, but putting it together was very hard. Later in life, as he went into his Maoist social period, he started writing pop songs. How can anybody who writes bad pop music have a good social theory to recommend to us? Perhaps that's the precise point at which art asserts its independence.

Musical language is a manifestation, in part, of social principles—is it not there as a vehicle to express social principles to us? You see, Kant and Hegel were an interesting pair, because one of them said: "Philosophy is higher than art, because it deals with pure abstract principles." And the other said: "No! Art is superior to philosophy, because it addresses the same issues in an actual physical and sensual involvement." Well, I've tried both, and I definitely prefer the artistic version.

Today, with all the media available to us, we can actually motivate children to go through a town and take photos of this, that, and the other, and bring them all together and do something with the results. How artistic that is I don't know, but it's an incipient form of artistic sensibility. Just taking one step off to the side, and looking at these things in a slightly different context, we begin to understand what art does...that art provides openings to look at *what is* in a different way. That can, sometimes, be artistically very exciting; it can be very direct and political, but at the same time, it can also be extremely withdrawn or devious.

Many people say to me: "Oh, you live in an ivory tower." I say: "No, I don't. People who live in an ivory tower are the ones who consume and think they are consuming something that they actually want to consume. I, rather, consume something I don't want to consume; at least I can take a distant approach to it." When I worked at the University of Chicago in 1986, I had to teach a class with people who were not composers, but we had to put on a concert at the end of the semester. So, we did an eating concert. We wrote percussion pieces that contained the sound of eating. We discovered that particular sorts of things, like celery or carrots, have quite distinct sound envelopes. And so, we made a concert entirely based on those sounds—it was quite a good concert! I was told afterwards that people carried on working together for four years after I had left, because they were so excited that things they were intimately related with, like food, could also be part of a distancing and re-calibrating experience.

FR: *Morton Feldman once said that "composers make plans, and music laughs". On the other hand, you stated in an interview with Richard Toop, "If the artist isn't faced with a certain limited situation, he usually doesn't create." Some could interpret these statements as contrasting and yet complementary ideas. In a certain way, you and Feldman point to the crucial question of intuition and control in the creative process. How do you deal with the balance between those two forces in your work?*

BF: Well, in some respect that is self-contradictory. The older I get, the less I worry about that. Do I contradict myself?—Yes. It's like saying: Do I believe in God?—No! However, there is a certain area of my life, which I can only explain through using a similar sort of vocabulary. So, is that contradictory?—Yes. Do I live by it?—Yes! What many people don't understand about Morton Feldman is that he had a wonderful Jewish Brooklyn sense of humor. When you read the German translations of his speeches, they are hilarious, because German is a sort of very exact controlled language, and the people who are inspired by him read his writings like a bible. If you hear them speaking these things out loud or you read the original American, it's nothing like that at all. So, there is a transliterational divide between what Germans and Americans get from Morton Feldman's thinking, which is quite different. So, both statements are true. It is true, however, that as he got older, Feldman spent more and more time thinking about large-scale form, maybe because the pieces got longer, such as the five-hour string quartet [*String Quartet II*, 1983]. That is really based on cyclic structures, which I don't find terribly interesting; but there are pieces of his, slightly more informal, *The Turfan Fragments*, or the *Flute Concerto*, which are really wonderful textural inventions. This re-using, re-thinking, unrolling the scroll and holding up the other end is very Talmudic somehow. I frequently talk about the *will* or the *volition* to create being a sort of vast quantum of energy or drive which has to be pushed against through some sort of set of matrixes or obstacle courses in order to come out as art on the other side. I spend a lot of my time working out these particular matrixes which will, then, allow me to use this unformed energy to make specific artistic objects. Unlike serial music, they are not reflections of these matrixes—they are not transcriptions of these matrixes into sound. I use these matrixes in order to create environments in which I may meaningfully choose. For instance, if the matrix gives me ten possibilities at this moment, I will use one of them, so I make a decision on a certain basis. If, however, the matrix only gives me one possibility, I have to use it, and that has consequences for the things that came before and after. You have a sort of qualitative re-thinking of quantitative devices. So we are not so far apart on that.

FR: *When asked about form, Helmut Lachenmann once said that people usually disapprove a piece of music because of its form: "this is a good piece, but, its form is bad..." or, 'this piece is too long.' I say, 'Well, I am also too long. What should I cut off?' How do you approach formal structures in your works? Can you give us an example?*

BF: The interesting thing about a lot of Lachenmann's music is that he does not really think about form in that particular sense. Helmut deals with the intense engenderment of situations from a very small kernel. He will set a certain sort of excitation in motion, such

as a vibration or a scratching sound (the sound of a match being lit in *Little Match Girl*, for example), and he will spread it over the whole orchestra as a form of sonic metaphor, continually expanding to accommodate differing construals of historical materiality. This technique he uses many times, and it's not one that is primarily form-dependent—in the first instance it's local context-dependent. He has this timeline, which, by various serial procedures, he subdivides, and then there are points where something has to start and to finish—nothing is said about what starts and finishes. Subsequently, various instrumental combinations and various types of textures are entered into the sketch which conspire to "flesh out," perhaps react against, the timeline. So, that sort of form is one of the less prominent facets of his music, appearing largely through various levels of "negative ambiguity." I myself always tend to begin with large-scale form in that I will set up a number of measures, I will decide the length of each measure with respect to the others according to certain principles. I always liken this to someone running an obstacle race: it is okay if you've got a barrier here, and a barrier there: you run six steps and you jump, you run six steps and you jump. But what happens if you do this in nighttime, with a blindfold on, and where the hurdles are of different heights and different distances apart? It is much more touchy-feely sort of progress, and that is really what I rather like. I like formal ideas which interfere with each other, like barbed-wire fences: if you try to get over them, they will hold on to you. I like that sort of "gluey" feel about form. I try to set up situations in which different formal layers, which may or may not be coherent in terms of the global tendencies themselves nevertheless come together in a way that sometimes is destructive, sometimes amplificatory; sometimes they confirm each other, but they are coming at that situation from different directions, at different speeds. So, I think of form very much as a sort of coherent set of laser beams of energy, which can be seen independently, but which take on a completely different structural potential when you project them through each other onto a screen. There is a wonderful phrase by Gilles Deleuze: "*en peinture, comme dans l'art, il ne s'agit pas de créer des formes mais de libérer de l'énergie.*" It is not a question of fixing form, but setting free the energies which form provides us with. And that is definitely the way I would see form; I see form always as a provisional transformative process – any given moment is moving in multiple directions.

JC: *Do you approach form more as a web of relationships than as a fixed object?*

BF: Well, I think objects are very important. The important thing about figures and textures is that figures tend to have beginnings and ends, so they can't be too long or too short, depending on what is in them, whereas textures can be off at an arbitrary length, and that does not spoil them. If you think of Ligeti's *Atmosphères*, for instance, in large part there are no internal motions to cause us to think of it as being either too long or too short.

I like to think of figures and objects as being things that have inner coherence, which has to do with two things: 1) the time in which they unfold (is that an adequate time for us to perceive and appreciate this element? Maybe it's too fast, so we don't really know what is going on; maybe it's too slow, and we get bored.) 2) their degree of cohesion (coherent objects can be damaged by forces applied to them). Again, I come back to the idea of the laser beam: you apply it to the object, you bend, dent, crack, twist

it, and through the degree of damage which this object now presents us with, we can begin to judge the type and quantity of energy applied to it. So, we create a bridge between thingness and forcefulness—things that are concretely what they are, and things that tend innately to unpredictably change because of the force being applied to them. I usually call it torque; it's the resistance which the torquing process applies to the object that tells us the sort of, and the quantity of, energy particles that were in the game at that moment.

FR: *Yesterday, Hilda Paredes said in a master class, "whatever you write has some sort of inner life; you need to understand what material you are starting with." Can that project a time line?*

BF: I wouldn't disagree with Hilda at all. We draw different consequences from it, though. She would pursue that organicist timeline, the adequation of time and material, but I don't do that. I see time as a potentially separate element in the game. I don't want to create the ideal container for this musical thing; I want to show that time is always involved, sometimes as negative and sometimes as positive counterpart to the musical material.

If you think of Webern, everybody always says: "Oh, yes, the first composer to use sound and silence equally," but we don't talk about what that silence does. In any case, I don't think of it as silence; I think of it in terms of the degree of information it embodies. If we have a glissando in an otherwise normal texture, we don't know how long this glissando will be. It is there, we can recognize it, it fills a certain space, but it has otherwise no internal information properties for us. It might as well be silence. It points to the absence of syntactically significant devices at that moment.

I try to set up music in which it is very clear that the amount of time a certain thing occupies is not the ideal amount of time for that thing. *Chronos-Aion*, a piece for large ensemble, deals exactly with this. The piece has many short sections, and some of them are frustrating, because something starts and develops and is then replaced by something else, and the large-scale form of the piece is not cumulative in that way. Another example is a big orchestral piece called *Plötzlichkeit*, which works very much in the same way. I built the form by deciding in advance, according to random procedures, how long a given section would be. Using different random procedures I decided what material would be present in it, and by other random procedures I decided which instruments, and in what priorities, would be present in it. So, all these things are coming from outside; they are not coming from the materials. I have to play with these givens, and decide what degree of local time and material coherence I can work with. This is one thing I am very concerned with at the moment: large- and small-scale formal perception allied to certain sorts of information flow.

FR: *You have used two expressions: "random procedures" and "you decide." How do you work with both of these?*

BF: The random procedures are like the matrices I was talking about before. Those matrices I did by hand, but there is a certain objectification procedure involved in them, otherwise I might as well have just written a diary. It's very important to me that I learn

enough about the desires of the things in themselves, that I can bend to their wishes or that I can subvert them in my own way. So, it's a certain way of creating alter egos, which I can converse with on a local level. Whether I treat them according to some large-scale symbolic procedures or whether I do this entirely by random procedures really doesn't matter, as long as I take seriously that particular constellation of contingencies. Of course, some of the things are quite logically ordered, such as rhythmic structure. I don't have to use twenty-four rows of material—I can use one, two, or seven of them—but I have to use some of them.

FR: *We know through several interviews and articles that you have used Ircam's PatchWork and OpenMusic to generate several musical parameters for your pieces, especially concerning rhythm. Is it something that is part of your routine as a composer or do you use it for specific projects? If so, what is the relationship with your compositional approach?*

BF: I do use it for almost everything, but if I don't use it, I invent procedures that I can work out informally. The whole danger about using various forms of software is that, if you are not careful, the software dictates to you what it wants to do. I didn't want that. It's nice to have this program, but I just wanted it to reproduce some ways of working that I've used already. As time passed, I branched out while using this software. I could actually extend some of the associational vectors much further than I could have done by hand, simply because the time isn't available to work all these things out. If I spend two weeks working out one process by hand, I can do a hundred a day with the computer, and that means I get to know the material much closer. In this way, I get a really intimate feeling for the order in which the computer manipulates situations, and the sort of result that comes out. That was something that I really couldn't afford to do when I was doing everything by hand. So, it's a very positive thing. It's true that I've used this mostly with rhythm, and I've developed a very large number of rhythmic processes, particularly with the old version of PatchWork. My thinking has also expanded; certainly, some of these things wouldn't have occurred to me if I had continued working entirely in a sort of artisanal, manual basis.

Yes, I do regard this software as something important to my work. I don't, however, use it always in relationship to everything that happens in the piece, but I do tend to use it in terms of the rhythmic structure—how the size of a measure reacts to the sort of material that was placed in it. *If-then* procedures are very important. For instance, if you have a certain measure length, it can only be followed by one of three other measure lengths; the next measure reads that and decides one of two measure lengths. So, on the large-scale, you see a certain evolution of consistencies, of tendencies, but on the local scale, it's very much a sort of mechanistic procedure.

FR: *Let's say there is a difference between your compositions with and without the computer. Would the major difference be the amount of time you spent working with the material? For instance, Etudes Transcendantales...*

BF: That piece was done entirely by hand. The basic work that I did there later developed into a large number of generalized practices, which I extended through other pieces. I

think the first piece I used multiple algorithmically-generated rhythmic structure was written in 1990, the first version of a piece called *Allgebrach* for oboe and strings. I had three-times-four lines of rhythmic material whose development and degree of variability was based upon the same series of values that were expressed in three different textural ways. I had a book, which had all the possible rhythms of the piece in it. They were worked out in advance in a quite rigorous way, but how these were then used from measure to measure was a completely different issue. All the pieces I did after that, to some extent, use this sort of structure. I think back to my *Second String Quartet* in 1979, in which I was already using abstract lines of rhythmic material, which were cut up and reordered in different ways. The principles were already there, so from about 1992/93 I've always used some version either of PatchWork or OpenMusic, or more lately PWGL, the new software still in development.

FR: *Can you describe how you work with density?*

BF: Well, density is one issue that has to do with time management. If you can find some way of suggesting to the listener the size of the space within which this material is being evolved—let's say, some number of beats—then you can suggest within that number of beats the motion towards or away from certain degrees of density. This may be related to regular pulse structure, for example increasing the number of pulses per beat or not, in which case it becomes slightly more statistical. What I like to do is this: if I work out ten measures in which the density varies from the beginning to the end of a measure in a non-predictable way, I will then go back into that series of ten measures and use another subset of the software to show me the absolute density change in any given measure. If I have a short measure and the first beat is one pulse and the second beat is two pulses, clearly I am getting denser as the piece goes on, but since it's a short measure it's a very low value of change. If for instance, another measure is five beats long and starts out with a two-pulse structure, and at the end it has fifteen pulses per beat, that is a very big change. So, I would reorder these measures according to the magnitude of the degree of change from empty to full, or full to empty. I might say: the first four measures I will reorder in this way, the next three measures I will reorder in that way, and the next three measures I will reorder in some other way. So you will get waves: you get a four-measure wave of increasing average density, a three-measure wave, and another three-measure wave. I like to use material that has been generated in one way in order to put it in a piece in a way that predisposes us to listen to a different aspect of its potential.

FR: *In your sketches, do you draw graphics for the evolution of musical parameters in the way Lachenmann does?*

BF: No, I always work directly into music notation. I like to have something on the paper in front of me with notes. I have two large screens at the moment; one has the PatchWork programs on it, and the other has my score. I don't compose the score and then transcribe it into Finale; I'm actually working back and forth the whole time, a sort of collage process.

JC: *What is your work routine? Are you a composer who works regularly every day, or*

do you work on a project basis?

BF: Well, that does happen; it happened last year when I had to write a big ensemble piece in a very short period of time. Then you work fifteen hours a day; you don't have any choice. Normally, I work about six hours every day, but not on the days I teach, because I can't empty my mind of teaching. Even before I go to teach I can't compose; but once I go to sleep, I wake up in the next morning and I can start again. Yes, I'm a very regular worker.

JC: How do you organize your compositional processes?

BF: Very often the first thing I work out is the overall time span. Then I will work out the measure structure, because it has a great deal of significance for the actual rhythmic structures that they contain. There is a sort of fractal relation process between the relative lengths of two measures and the relative lengths of the rhythms which appear on those measures. So, I can't make those rhythms until I've made the measures. This might be done section by section, but usually it's for a whole composition. I notice that I've become more improvisatory in recent years; that I will create structures in this manner, but I will not treat them as a kind of law. I will treat them as a flexible sort of membrane, which I can pass through to other things. Sometimes I allow myself to be surprised by what actually enters into a piece. Perhaps that came from my opera *Shadowtime*, because in opera one naturally is subject to compromise of various sorts. I felt I could allow myself to play much more in a serious way. So, there are quotations from other music, there are various techniques involved with historical forms, like recitative and aria, which I wouldn't have thought of doing at an earlier stage. Although I don't do this anymore, I think it's true that I approach the problematic nature of the situations in which I may find myself with a much lighter hand than I would have done at an earlier age. I don't care very much to legitimate myself in that way anymore.

FR: You have mentioned your opera. Is this the first work in which the text appears in the foreground?

BF: I suppose it is, but at the end of *Etudes Transcendantales* there is, in the ninth song, a spoken poem near the end of the work. It is true that I tend to problematize the setting of texts, and *Etudes Transcendantales* is really a series of nine songs attempting to locate the meaning of textual expression and the exegeses, at different distances from musical techniques. In *Shadow Time* it's a bit different. I asked the poet Charles Bernstein to produce a text that would be highly permutable, and which would exhibit certain rules—largely to do with prime numbers—concerning the number of syllables per line and the number of lines in a poem. He did that, but he used anagrammatic structures and so on. In most cases, the texts were not flowery; they were not texts that had multi-syllable words, but usually very simple words. I had a lot of trouble sitting and reading these things before starting to work on them. Once I could accept that simple nature, then I could actually allow direct contact, a perceivable identity of words, to pass through the music to the listener.

FR: *Did you also request it to be on a specific theme?*

BF: No, I'd worked out the theme. It was going to be about the possible guilt of the so-called intellectual in the 1920's and 30's on the basis of the holocaust and on the basis of Walter Benjamin's perceptions about allegory and the idea of representation. Yes, I knew I was going to do that. I knew the scenes, I knew how many scenes there would be, and I knew how the structure of the scenes would be. The only other constraint I laid on him was that he should be able to publish these texts as a book of poetry; I hate opera libretti that are really of no artistic value in themselves. I was thinking much more on the model of some of the Monteverdi and Mozart operas, which have beautiful texts that can sound perfectly well by themselves. So, that was the idea I had, and, indeed, he did publish it as a book.

FR: *Would you agree that this piece presents ideological issues?*

BF: Ideological in the wider sense clearly, but not a particular ideology. I support the theses of Theodore Adorno much more than those of Marxist-Leninist cultural theoreticians. The most political act in which artists can really involve themselves, and which they can identify with on a continuous basis, is a positive re-thinking of the nature of communication. In other words, you are using the language in which you write to criticize the language in which you write, as an exemplar of language in the cultural context in which you find yourself. I don't represent any particular political ideology; I am resolutely non-political. I have never voted in my entire life; I haven't lived in a country where I've been qualified to vote. I don't know if this is symptomatic or not. Perhaps it is. I don't apologize for it, because it enables me to put my concerns—in this respect in transformed terms—into a work of art. It is what T.S. Eliot, who is unfortunately now a little bit out of fashion, used to call "purifying the language of the tribe." Purification sounds bad now, but what he meant, strictly speaking, was that we have to renew the language on the basis of our ongoing experience of the language, and that is what I try to do.

JC: *And don't you think this is a political act?*

BF: Yes, in a very broad sense. Much as I don't accept the easy get out of some artists who say everything is politics. What does that mean? Why do we need the word? If everything is red, you don't need the word red.

JC: *How has the collaboration with the Arditti String Quartet had an impact on your creative process and on the reception of your music?*

BF: Not so much the creative process, but certainly the reception! I have always considered myself a musician first and foremost, so every chance I get to jump into the center of a learning process—especially in the case of such intelligent and undiplomatic individuals—is one I grab with both hands. I like to do that every now and again, four or five times a year, to get into a situation where you are working with real musicians, making decisions about what they are doing, and showing your commitment to the

commitment they made to you. I think you have got to become part of the archive of that particular communal mentality, you've got to be part of their life world, and that takes some work. Clearly, the wide traveling and recording undertaken by the quartet has spread my music to a number of pretty unlikely places. Also not to be underestimated is the fact that the Ardittis are great intermediaries with radio producers, festival directors and so on. Not all composers are their own best ambassadors. But, finally, it's the human interaction that I value most of all.

FR: *How different do you think your works for flute are from the rest of your music? For instance, Carceri di Invenzione IIb and Bone Alphabet.*

BF: Actually, you picked two pieces that are quite similar. *Bone Alphabet* uses 13 algorithmically generated zones of material, which are further broken up and redistributed according to different rules. *Carceri di Invenzione IIb* uses 48 invariant measure contents which are spread throughout the entire work in a sort of spiral-galaxy formation, but attached to different measure lengths. So, they are actually both quite mechanistic in that particular approach.

FR: *But to me, they seem two distinct poetics...*

BF: I would be very surprised if that were the case. Perhaps you only heard bad performances of my music. Wasn't it Schoenberg who said "my music isn't difficult, it's just badly played?" In Darmstadt this year, the Arditti quartet performed all of my string quartets in two concerts, straight through, in the order in which they were written. That was wonderful! It was a revelation even to me to see where the line can be drawn between them. That is absolutely comparable to the flute thing. In fact, that is better than the flute thing. The five quartets really do make a meaningful unity; whereas if you try, as some people do, to perform all the flute pieces in one concert, you tend to end up eradicating the differences between them because one performer's color is placed over all of them, and that becomes an obstacle course. You know, "will his energy last to the last note?" So, I don't like people playing all my flute music together.

FR: *So, there is at least one difference between your flute music and your string quartet music?*

BF: Apparently this is the case. I have not thought about it previously to the Darmstadt concert, but in fact, the history of my string quartets from 1967 through 2008 does offer a very convincing cumulative experience, whereas I think the flute music does not. Well, one instrument is one instrument. The possibilities available to it, in terms of large-scale differentiation, are rather limited. So, I am not sure I would see them as equivalent possibilities. I have done a lot of pieces for solo instrument and ensemble, and I don't see those as forming a group. I wouldn't want them all played together.

JC: *How do you view yourself today as a composer?*

BF: In a much freer place than I was in the past. I think you have to work your way

through order to allow that order to shed light on what your own inner dispositions are. Sometimes you re-order your dispositions according to the color of that light. I think over the years there were a lot of things which, in earlier times I would be forced to reflect upon quite seriously, which now I say "I've been there, done that; I thought about this one, I know what I think about it, I know how it moves me." I don't need to sit down for a week and think about it again before I write music. Very frequently, I trust myself as an artist, by definition, as being *de facto* in a situation that, even if I don't discern what is happening at the time, that something meaningful will emerge from my activities. I guess it's just a sort of superior delegation: I delegate a lot more of my serious decision making to areas of my mind to which I don't really have direct access.

FR: *Mário de Andrade, a Brazilian poet and pianist, once said "the people of Brazil need to realize that culture is as important as bread." What would be your advice to young composers in developing nations hoping to reach new audiences and foment their cultural environment, considering that financial resources are usually meager or non-existent?*

BF: Well, I could only predicate any advice I would pretentiously give to such people on the basis of my experience with contemporary music in Europe and America. I would say, at the moment, the important thing is to emphasize the interpersonal aspect. In the sixties, seventies, and eighties, contemporary music in Europe was always thought of as a big deal: the Bundeskanzler of Germany attending concerts containing examples of very tough écriture. He never said what he thought about it, but they did this because such works were exemplars of a certain sort of a *Kulturprodukt*. When the Berlin Wall fell, all these artists suddenly found that nobody in those echelons cared any more. Once the political and cultural weaponry of the cold war was put aside, so was the supposed importance of the influence of these artists on world events. Now, this did not worry me, since I have never accepted that thesis anyway; I always thought these composers were being manipulated. The situation in the moment is quite an interesting one in that what keeps contemporary music going now is not governments giving people lots of money to produce pieces which the government doesn't want, but rather ensembles. It is the ensembles and the enthusiasm of the people in the ensembles, their almost monk-like devotion to their own community, which keeps contemporary music alive. In addition, the creation in the last 15 years of a network between different countries of these ensembles is maintaining contemporary music on a strong basis. Ensemble Recherche, Surplus, Aventure Ensemble, IRCAM, Ensemble Modern, London Sinfonietta, Elision: these are all communities of concerned people, and they are what keeps us composers going. Therefore I would infer that in countries where there has been no infrastructure, this would be the way to go about creating it. Set up your local group of committed, personally involved musicians, and see what you can do with them, first of all. It is a bit like in the Middle Ages: the wandering minstrels, traveling from town to town, doing their thing; a lot of people do this now with two singers and a computer. This seems to me an excellent way of going about it: set up your own means, look to see what music can be written with the group of people you've got, people who are committed to staying together for 20 years, no matter what. That is what I would offer as a suggestion.