MUSIC AND SPIRITUALITY

THEOLOGICAL APPROACHES, EMPIRICAL METHODS, AND CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

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12. The Impetus to Compose: Where is Fantasy Bred?

Richard E. McGregor

I have spent the last thirty years or more trying to understand the decisions composers make during the process of composition. One might understand this as an analytical concern for what 'happens' during the composition of a musical work, and particularly how the first ideas take shape, where they come from and how they evolve, and also the largely unconscious decision-making processes that occur through the whole course of a work's composition. Sometimes this element is referred to as inspiration, a word which shares a common root with spirituality.[1] From quite early on I realised that there is, in most composers, a conflict between what is intuitive, and what is a product of processes which probably have their origin in early experiences, in study, and in personal understandings of musical shapes and forms. In this chapter, I first describe three personal experiences of composing—over a twenty-five year timespan—which have profoundly influenced my own view of musical composition. Second, I turn to Peter Maxwell Davies' eclectic approach to composition, an approach that has fascinated me, as a musicologist, for many years. Third, I widen my discussion to consider the compositional processes of a series of canonical and more contemporary composers, including James MacMillan and Wolfgang Rihm. Finally, I return to my own experiences again in light

1 Richard E. McGregor, '"Songs That Seem to Come from Nowhere": Composition: Inspiration and Spirituality May Share a Common Root, but Can We Talk about Them in the Same Breath?' (unpublished keynote lecture, Music and Spirituality conference, Middlesex University, 20 May 2022).

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of my analysis of the differences, and points of similarity, between the compositional approaches of Davies, MacMillan, and Rihm.

I. Personal Context

I began composing in the early 1970s by trying to express the musical ideas which I had in my head in a coherent and communicative manner. For me, this was not the best time to start composing, however, as I felt caught between two polarities. Younger composers who had come to the fore in the 1960s had moved away from the strict serial music of the 1950s, and towards a more expressive form of writing (towards, indeed, a new post-expressionism, which was nonetheless typically technique-based, flowing from their previous engagement with serial orthodoxy). But then there were other composers who seemed to allow chance to determine the flow of musical ideas. The essence of my problem was that, on the one hand, I felt that music should have a structure and a logic behind it, while at the same time being capable of direct and free expression. For me, this came to a head in 1982 as the only non-Italian left in the Franco Donatoni composition summer school at Siena. I spent five weeks writing a piece for solo flute in which I could explain all the compositional decisions, choice of pitches, dynamics, form, and structure—sweating over every single pitch's relation to the whole. Having completed it, I then wrote, in an hour, completely freely, and with no planning ahead, a piece for solo oboe, which lasted almost the same length of time as the flute piece. This piece came straight out of my head. I called the former '...too much I' the sun' and the latter *Pietà.* This experience provoked questions for me that were profound and far-reaching. If I used my whole intellect, I could order and control every aspect of composition, but was that enough? And yet, I could also write down an oboe piece, as if automatically, with no conscious planning or forethought. How does one resolve the apparent tension between controlled order and spontaneous inspiration?

About twelve years later, I tried the same process using an early Atari computer with essentially the same result. This new piece, now transcribed as *Sarajevo 583* for strings, had an audible unity imposed by my brain, but I couldn't explain it. Finally, another decade or so on, I composed a fanfare for the newly created University of Cumbria.

I wrote several possible beginnings, and nothing was quite right, so I took it to one of my classes and explained my problem. A member of the class responded with the suggestion that I should not try and think of models but just let my brain be free to respond—in other words, use mindfulness. I sat down there and then, and composed an opening idea out of my head and, of course, that was the right one. There was twenty-five-year gap between the first and last of these incidents and something changed in the meantime. Quite simply, by that time it had become obvious to me that some underlying 'inspiration' and/or 'spirituality' was key to any understanding of musical processes, whether these were controlled by the conscious mind or not.

II. The Application of Musicology

In an attempt to answer some of these questions, I turned to the music of one composer whose eclectic approach had always intrigued me. My interest in the music of Peter Maxwell Davies had been sparked by the first performance of Davies' highly evocative work for soprano and orchestra *Stone Litany* at Musica Nova Festival in Glasgow in 1973, and through subsequently studying Davies' *Second Fantasia on John Taverner's 'In Nomine'* at Glasgow University, as a student of Stephen Arnold. Arnold had, in turn, been a pupil of Davies at Cirencester Grammar School when he taught there between 1959 and 1962, and Davies' influence on Arnold had been quite profound. Davies gave him copies of the sketches with the generating charts for the *Fantasia* (sketches which had been rescued from the fire that took place in his cottage in Dorset in 1969). The significance of these sketches and charts only became obvious to me somewhat later. On the face of it the musical content was quite simply what is known as transformation sets, where one musical idea or thematic entity is mutated into another, which could be, for example, the idea's own inversion. These charts do not give any indication, however, of how to deploy the generated material in a developing musical context, much less how the form and structure of the work is affected by them. On reflection, the process of thematic metamorphosis which is embedded within this compositional activity could be thought of as a process of transfiguration—thematic material undergoing a process of change, development, and progression.

However, that spiritual aspect of the work is effectively hidden from the listener as it operates as a structural framework underpinning the work rather than occurring overtly on the surface.

Looking back on Davies' career, one could suggest that these transformation processes were almost a musical metaphor of the changes that were happening within his own personality. The *Fantasia* was written during what he himself described in his later journals as 'the terrible years' when he had to confront the 'Antichrist' within himself.[2] There are no journals for the decade from 1962 but his statements suggest that at least part of it was to do with an acceptance of his sexuality. Certainly, the music of this period displays many psychological peculiarities, being both introvert and extrovert, showing extreme order on the one hand in some places, such as *Worldes Blis* for orchestra, and being freely extrovert and neo-expressionistic, as in *Eight Songs for a Mad King* on the other. This duality was only obvious to me much later.

Davies never felt comfortable, to put it mildly, with some of the aspects of formal religious practices within 'the church', but certainly his early conception of God was firmly tied to an understanding of his creativity. In a journal entry written in 1955 at the age of twenty-two, he declared, probably to himself at this time, 'I [write], because I am created anew in each work, & such renewal is satisfactory when one has hopes of ambition to eventually being created *perfect'. The '*perfect' is elaborated by a note in brackets presumably added a little later '*(in God's likeness?)'.[3] In 1974, and almost by way of explaining to himself, he wrote:

> I realise that my being alone, first in Princeton, then in Tollard Royal in Wiltshire, between '62 & '64 enabled me to come to living terms with the shattering upheaval which broke through the veneer of my attempts to interpret sound-images in terms of Christ, the Virgin Mary &c, & forced me to take into account the Antichrist in myself resulting [in] years of darkness, from which Hymnos [1967], Rev &Fall [1965–66], L'homme armé [1968] and probably (though late) Worldes Blis [1966–69] were the eventual surface manifestations, as well as the opera… Here, in Rackwick,

2 Peter Maxwell Davies, *Journal 2010–11*. Davies' private journals, which are housed at the British Library, are currently under embargo. I thank the Trustees of the Peter Maxwell Davies Trust for granting me permission to quote from them.

3 Peter Maxwell Davies, *Journal 21* [in fact, it is 23, apparently renumbered by composer] (1955–56).

> I feel I can better attempt to cope with what I can only describe in visual/sensual terms as a burning of whitening light, though this is inadequate; again, it has to do with a typus of sound-images.[4]

Of course, one must recognise that composers can, and do, create their own personal (and sometimes private) mythologies. At this stage in his life, Davies was not at all confident in his abilities and significance as a composer, and that, in truth, lasted most of his life. When writing in his later journals, he was perhaps conscious that they would be read at some time by others. At the age of forty, however, he was probably still writing for himself as a record, and the journal that he kept from 1976–78 was entirely in the personal 'invented script' which he developed at about the age of fourteen (and which I am now able to transliterate). He did later show this (but did not translate it) to Gerard McBurney in 1991, by which time he must have realised that it would eventually be read.[5] Rodney Lister, who was also shown this journal, reported that Davies said that 'some of his diaries [are] in his personal writing language, which, at least as I recall, he said he'd developed because he'd realized he was gay, and he didn't want anybody to be able to read his diaries and see that…'.[6]

Davies' reference to 'whitening light', a phrase which recurs as the title of his work *A Mirror of Whitening Light* (1977), gives a clue to two of his obsessions: an interest in alchemical associations, and superstition—aspects of his 'personality' which surface in some of his works—not primarily for the listeners' benefit but as compositional imperatives. Sometime in Autumn 1974 he wrote in his journal:

> … every journey … is part of this quest, which is a search for the CRUX whereby all these experiences will be able to be not only related—but transformed—each and every one—*caudâ pavonis**—ignious [sic] to gold. If it is to do with the recurrence of archetypal principles—generating principles—and recurrent forms—forms in movement, faces, cycles, number—images or constellations (probably based on natural forms, groped for slowly & painfully & dubiously with unsatisfactory results in the music)—unified in a relationship—sealing principle (called

4 Peter Maxwell Davies, *Journal 35* [the journal is incorrectly labelled 1966–71] (1974)

5 Peter Maxwell Davies, 'Letters to Gerard McBurney', Ms Mus 1779, October 1991, p. 6f (British Library, London), and personal communication with the author from McBurney, 17 March 1995.

6 Rodney Lister, email to the author, 23 November 2021. Permission granted.

> Mercurius?) but which exists, not in time or space, which would mean that at one moment one could say it's achieved and at the next build up on the achievement, whereas in fact this MEANS is not perceived at any given moment or at any given place—but the principle exists behind both of these, &- enormous mechanical & spiritual effort is reqd to make it manifest behind any moment or spot of place, whereby moments in places can be illuminated by its presence, which is outside them.[7]

'Mercurius' hints at the magic square processes which would come to dominate his larger scale works from 1976 onwards. It has never been absolutely clear when Davies actually saw the work written by Gillian Whitehead, then his student, in which she used magic squares as pitch generators. That circumstance caused him to tell her that 'you've even made me think' because, apart from the patterns which can be created when substituting pitches for the number, there are both alchemical and, for Davies, personal associations attached.[8] As an example of such associations, when writing to Gerard McBurney in 1991, the composer refers to the four elements as symbolic: 'there are "cyphers" for the 4 elements (obviously!) & for polarities of states of mind, all entirely personal, but I hope their "meaning" comes over in the abstractions of the music'.[9] As to the exact mathematical abstractions into sound, however, there was usually a degree of circumspection:

> The forces generated during the composition of *The Lighthouse* [1979] and *Resurrection* [1986–87] on the other hand were such that I felt they had to be 'spiked'—I therefore introduce specific 'wrong' notes into various sequences including magic squares, to neutralize any Nekuomanteia (evocation of shades) ....

Even twenty years earlier, Davies had introduced 'superstitious deviations, something done first in *Prolation,* [1957/1958] where I broke absolutely perfect arithmetical symmetry out of a conviction that it was presumptuous—possibly even dangerous! —to attempt any exact imitation of higher natural perfection'.[10]

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7 Davies, *Journal 35*, possibly 18 September 1974.

8 Gillian Whitehead (New Zealand composer), email to the author, 31 May 2016.

9 'Letters to Gerard McBurney', Ms Mus 1779, Davies to McBurney, 5.

10 Peter Maxwell Davies, 'A Composer's Point of View (I): On Music, Mathematics and Magic Squares', in *Peter Maxwell Davies, Selected Writings*, ed by Nicholas Jones (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 215 and 217.

What becomes apparent when one tries to interpret any spiritual impetus behind, or underpinning, Davies' work is that it is both complex and loaded with symbolism that provides a generating source for the musical expression. One such example of symbolism driving the genesis of a work is found in *Ave Maris Stella* [1975], seemingly the first composition in which Davies used a magic square to generate thematic and harmonic material for the work. This was not just any magic square but the square of the Moon (the 9 x 9 square) into which an adapted plainchant is woven. *Ave Maris Stella* is one of the plainchants (LU1259) from the *Liber Usualis* that Davies mined for sources, but it is also a direct link with the Virgin Mary through the *Catena Legionis* antiphon 'Who is she that comes forth as the morning rising, fair as the moon, bright as the sun', and Mary's liturgical birthday falls on September 8, Davies' birthday.

It is possible that the spiritual influence of these connections was a crucial personal point of origin for Davies' creativity and might have translated at times into more abstract conceptions—such as into 'Whitening Light' and the symbol-infused poetry of George Mackay Brown, a Roman Catholic convert. Davies wrote to Roderic Dunnett in 1974, presumably while actually composing *Ave Maris Stella* and his First Symphony, requesting a 'motto to go on an *ex-libris* sticker for the books here… make something poetic & concise to do with book but meaning (spiritual) water of life…'[11]

Intermedio

The above background illustrates how the process of coming to begin composing can be seen and understood, not analytically, but symbolically as a journey, which invokes spiritual elements of different types to allow work to proceed. Analysis of compositions by Maxwell Davies reveals that the formal structures he uses are not particularly unusual. To a degree his music works with recognisable sections, and in his scores, he even writes, albeit in his personal script, the words 'middle eight', 'reprise', 'durchführung' [development] for sections into which the pitch and

11 Peter Maxwell Davies, 'Correspondence with Roderic Dunnett', currently uncatalogued, acquired 2021 (British Library, London); Peter Maxwell Davies, 'Davies to Dunnett', 16 August 1974 (British Library, London).

rhythm processes from the magic square are placed. Such strict processes were only applied to the more formal works such as symphonies and concertos since, once he was sure of his technique, he allowed himself to express other ideas in a freer and less rigidly defined way.

III. Development

Working so intently and intensely on the music of Maxwell Davies suggested to me that whether consciously or unconsciously, the generating ideas for a composition need to be in place to allow the actual composition to proceed. I did not, at that stage, link such processes directly to some aspect or understanding of spirituality. However, at a certain point some twenty years ago, I took the decision to broaden my exploration of composers' works beyond that of Davies. The reasons for this decision are quite obvious: one cannot make any form of case for musical development based simply on one composer's work, but equally, and importantly, I had become interested in not just the creative process, not just inspiration, but what spiritual understandings contributed to the work of different composers. I began by considering composers' expressions of their spirituality, starting with the most obvious ones, such as Johann Sebastian Bach and Joseph Haydn, but also considering more contemporary composers such as Arvo Pärt, Francis Poulenc, and James MacMillan.[12]

At that time, the music of Pärt, along with that of others such as Henryk Górecki and John Taverner, was receiving some publicity and analytical discussion, although not always of a favourable kind, as when they were designated 'holy minimalists'. They followed, in a way, the example set by Olivier Messiaen whose music I knew well and, importantly, had also performed. However, at the time, no one had written anything of substance about the music that James MacMillan was composing. One understood that MacMillan was motivated by a strong Catholic faith which could not but be reflected in his music, and, one might expect to observe—as indeed is the case—that his personal spirituality would be quite obvious. In addition, I judged that to focus on just one composer again was not going to answer some of

12 Richard McGregor, '"Laus Deo?" On Composers' Expression of their Spirituality', *Spirituality and Health International* 6.4 (2005), 238–45.

the questions that had been raised by my studies of Maxwell Davies. I had the opportunity to go to the Paul Sacher Stiftung in Basel for an extended period, so I began looking at the sketches made by several composers from the collections held there.

I initially considered three composers: Harrison Birtwistle, Sofia Gubaidulina, and Wolfgang Rihm. Birtwistle's music was attracting a lot of analytical attention, particularly in the United Kingdom, but his work came out of the same artistic milieu as Davies'. Despite the very different personalities involved there was therefore a substantial degree of crossover, particularly in their first two creative decades, and, I felt, it might be difficult to find sufficient areas of difference to build upon. In addition, there were always elements of Davies' personality and writing which suggested at least some kind of spiritual understanding: an aspect of his personality which has been confirmed, though complexified, by study of his journals. I was less sure that I would find something comparable for Birtwistle.

Gubaidulina, on the other hand, undoubtedly exhibited clearly defined spiritual elements in her work and her compositional processes, and would have provided an interesting point of comparison with MacMillan's work, since the works of both composers seem more concerned with forms of expression which draw on a deeper spiritual core than appears to be the case with the 'holy minimalists' (but that is actually only a surface understanding of those composers' works). However, to really understand Gubaidulina one must understand not only Russian but her Russian temperament and motivation, and this latter can easily be misunderstood, as witness some critical reaction to Dmitri Shostakovich's work.

Rihm was a very different proposition coming out of what was, slightly disparagingly, called the *Neu-Einfachkeit* [New Simplicity] movement. This was a term coined by the German composer Aribert Reimann to categorise certain composers, whereas Rihm himself, writing in 1977, expressed a preference for the descriptors *Neue Vielfalt* [New Multiplicity] and *Neue Eindeutigkeit* [New Clarity/Uniqueness/Explicitness].[13] Rihm's compositional process is often described as

13 Wolfgang Rihm, '"Neue Einfachheit"—Aus-und Einfälle', *Hifi-Stereophonie* 16.4 (1977), 420, reprinted in *Ausgesprochen Schriften und Gespräche*, ed. by Ulrich Mosch, 2 vols (Winterthur: Schott 1997), I, 354.

'intuitive'—meaning that he writes very few sketches and composes straight onto the page. In most cases, there is little evidence of change of mind, although on occasion a whole page of writing is rejected (this happened in the Fourth Quartet for example). Rihm was brought up a Catholic, although his later relationship to his faith is not clear. This made him an interesting parallel with MacMillan even though the cultural environment of each composer was so different. Particularly in his earlier works, moreover, Rihm did not seem to be concerned with expressing anything overtly spiritual but relied on his own inspiration. Do not these share, though, as we have seen, the same root?

In the context of a comparison between the creative impulses of MacMillan and Rihm there is an interesting statement made by Rihm in an interview with Kirk Noreen and Joshua Cody regarding his early years:

> I was very religious at the time and wanted to become a priest. Whenever I could, I made my way to the church. One reason was, of course, that I was deeply attracted by the rites (I was Catholic), the incense, the singing, the music as such—above all the organ. I wanted to compose a Mass and asked my mother for large-size manuscript paper. I must have been eight or nine years old.

He then goes on to describe how he was unable to write the music, but that he would improvise on the piano (something he apparently still does) so that 'the Mass was "in my fingers", but I could not yet put it down on paper. Indeed, improvisation was for quite some time to be my "salvation"'. It was, however, a short note that Karlheinz Stockhausen sent to him in 1970 that motivated his subsequent development:

> Dear Wolfgang Rihm,
>
> Please only heed your inner voice.
>
> With kindest regards.
>
> Yours,
>
> Karlheinz Stockhausen[14]

14 'Wolfgang Rihm in Conversation with Kirk Noreen and Joshua Cody', *Sospeso*, 2006, http://web.archive.org/web/20060525100029/http://www.sospeso.com:80/contents/articles/rihm_p1.html

Although it was not obvious at first, it is now clear to me that I was drawn to understanding the creative impetus in composers who, somewhere in their background or foreground (as in MacMillan's case), had encountered religion in a positive way.

It is hard to make specific statements concerning a composer's methodology and what feeds their initial creative process if one looks at slighter works or smaller scale works, often written to commission. Rather, it is necessary to look at those works in which the composer feels that they have something to express of a more lasting, and usually more extensive and expansive nature. Religious works do not, of themselves, provide many answers. As Davies wrote when speaking about his religious works: 'As the authorities at Westminster Cathedral said to me ... they had commissioned Britten and he was not a Catholic, and they commissioned Vaughan Williams, who was an outspoken atheist' so why would they not choose him.[15] Davies is frequently characterised as an atheist but, as I have hinted, this is not really an accurate description of his spirituality.

The creative impetus can be most easily examined through the larger scale works, particularly the symphonies in the case of both Davies and MacMillan, Davies' and Rihm's string quartets, and Rihm's many large-scale orchestral works. Despite their quite different approaches and forms of musical expression, both MacMillan and Davies seem to need to locate their symphonic thought within some aspect of personal feelings or experience. In MacMillan's case, the symphonies often have an explicit religious/spiritual underpinning. As Phillip Cooke puts it in relation to his first symphony *Triduum III: Symphony* (*Vigil*) (1997): 'It is the work that relates to the Easter Vigil ... and by its very nature deals with the journey from darkness to light which the service traditionally represents', while the Fourth Symphony had a 'secret' programme which was decoded by Seán Docherty as a 'setting' of the Pauline Mass, no hint of which appeared in the composer's programme note.[16] However, in a deliberately direct message to his listeners, MacMillan's

15 Jones, ed., *Selected Writings*, p. 267.

16 Phillip A. Cooke, *The Music of James MacMillan* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2019), p. 110; Seán Doherty, 'The Mass "Transubstantiated" into Music: Quotation and Allusion in James MacMillan's Fourth Symphony', *Music and Letters* 99.4 (2018), 635–71.

programme note for his Fifth Symphony, subtitled *Le grand inconnu*, refers specifically to the third person of the Trinity which 'still feels like relatively unexplored territory, so perhaps now is the time to explore this mysterious avenue, where concepts of creativity and spirituality overlap…', the work being 'an attempt to explore the mystery discussed above in music for two choirs and orchestra'.[17]

Maxwell Davies, on the other hand, was drawn to more specifically personal resonances but some with an element of mystery or deeper spiritual significance behind them. The Fourth Movement of his Third Symphony was written at a time when his parents were ill and coming to the end of their lives. Knowing this to be the case generated a recurring dream of the:

> …blackened Victorian gothic church [of Agecroft Cemetery], now abandoned, with shrubs growing from the broken roof, and crows cawing from the tower; in my dream these become the angels of death, calling with voices of inhumanly high trumpets across the gravestones from their fastness of fathomless nightmare.[18]

However, as Nicholas Jones points out, this same exact symbolism reappears throughout Davies' compositional career, from the *St Michael Sonata* (1957) via the Sixth Symphony (1996) to *Roma Amor* (2010). In addition, the Third Symphony shares with the Sixth Symphony a reference back to *Parade*, a piano work written when the composer was fifteen. *Parade* seems to symbolise for Davies some kind of understanding of his creative impulse as well as providing him with a starting point on which to build. Other symbolic elements which are embedded in the Third Symphony include his relationship with the actor Metin Yenal who is embodied within the thematic material subjected to the magic square of the sun (whose symbolism needs no explanation).

I found these personal connections in Davies' and MacMillan's works to be highly significant in my search to understand the creative process. However, on the face of it, the music of Rihm cannot be explained in the

17 James MacMillan, *Symphony No.5: 'Le grand Inconnu'* (*The Great Unknown*) (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 2018), https://www.boosey.com/cr/music/James-MacMillan-Symphony-No-5-Le-grand-Inconnu/102048

18 Peter Maxwell Davies as quoted in Nicholas Jones, 'Analytical Perspectives on the Third Symphony of Peter Maxwell Davies' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Cardiff University, 1999), p. 156.

same way. There are, nonetheless, important, if perhaps unconscious, spiritual concepts which underlie his approach. As a composer Rihm has a specific notion of transformation. Indeed, one might say that Rihm transfigures an idea/ideas/material—that is, literally 'carries [them] across'—from one work to another, particularly when the works could be conceived as forming some kind of cycle (an idea to which I will return shortly). As I have written before: 'though starting "at the beginning", both literally and metaphorically, has a certain logic [for Rihm], even this is an open concept for much of his work, since his predilection for cycles and continuations of material already explored make his music more like a continuum [my word] and less like discrete singularities having a beginning and an end'.[19] When I interviewed him in 2000 at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, Rihm said:

> Each piece has a different way. Sometimes a piece started, and I don't know where it belongs, this is what I do, and it becomes the middle of the piece and the following week it's the end, and the next day maybe it's the beginning. Sometimes the piece is written from the beginning to the end. Sometimes I need two years and sometimes I need two hours. Pieces are individuals.[20]

The idea of a continuum where there is no beginning and no end: a piece just starts and, at a certain point, it ends, has at least a feeling of the creative impetus underpinning the process. But with Rihm the process has to do with speed. What sketches he makes (and by sketches, I mean the notation of random musical ideas rather than a fully worked out draft) are clearly not placed according to any pattern—just located in whatever space happens to exist on the sheet of manuscript. This is particularly true of his earlier works, but even when he writes a work straight in, it is about speed. The 2008 programme booklet for *Deus Passus* quotes from the answer to a question put to him by Achim Heidenreich:

> Mein Kopf, meine Imagination, meine Ideen—das sind meine Hilfsmittel. Ich schreibe meine Partituren mit der Hand, mit dem Füller. Das geht viel schneller als über Taste und Computer. Das fliegende Vorankriechen

19 The article was entitled 'On Second Thoughts ... In the Beginning' (2006) and only now do I see that I was making spiritual connections.

20 Richard McGregor, 'Hunting and Forms: An Interview with Wolfgang Rihm', in *Contemporary Music: Theoretical and Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. by Max Paddison and Irène Deliège (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2010), pp. 349–60 (at 352).

> darf ich mir nicht verlangsamen lassen. Das ist meine Vorgehensweise: kriechender Flug.[21]
>
> [My head, my imagination, my ideas—these are my tools. I write my scores by hand, with a pen. It's much faster than using a keyboard or computer. I can't let the flying (?fleeting) creep forward (?progress) slow me down. That's my approach: creeping flight.]

It is therefore interesting that the sketches for his works to religious texts from the last decade and a half are much more extensive, and especially those for his *Missa brevis*—surprising for an unaccompanied work lasting just 20 minutes. The same is true for a work, *De profundis* for choir and orchestra, written shortly after and lasting five minutes less than the *Missa brevis*. The *Universal Edition* website for the online score of *De profundis* makes an interesting comment: 'as in *Deus Passus*, Rihm talks again about finalities with a deceptively simplified musical language; waiving technical difficulties does not at all preclude profound utterance—as often, the apparent simplicity is actually the difficulty'.[22]

IV. Ensemble and Finale

In reflecting on these three composers in tandem for this chapter, the aspect of Rihm's work which does seem to create a resonance with the other two, albeit expressed by them in different ways, is the concept of cycles—where one created work becomes the 'jumping off point' for the next and the third builds on the second, and so on. This means that the continuity of the first becomes the building block for the others: a process of continuing creation and recreation. We see the same sort of idea in Maxwell Davies' works expressed in the way that a work throws off satellite works which perhaps share origination material with the main 'planet'. The process might even go the other way and an

21 Achim Heidenreich and Wolfgang Rihm, '"Größtmögliche unschörfe": Wolfgang Rihm über das komponieren, das politische in der musik und sein neues Bühnenstück Das Gehege: ein Gesprach mit Achim Heidenreich', *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 168.1 (2007), 10–13. The translation below is my own.

22 Wolfgang Rihm, 'De Profundis', *Universal Edition*, 2015, https://www.universaledition.com/wolfgang-rihm-599/works/de-profundis-16963. The sketches for both works are held at the Paul Sacher Stiftung in Basel, Switzerland.

earlier work embeds itself within a larger work.[23] A similar idea occurs in MacMillan's music, and particularly in his earlier works, where a previous composition, not necessarily written by him, is like a spiritual presence within the work as a whole. Two examples of this are Robert Carver's setting of *O bone Jesu* which underpins MacMillan's work of the same name (2002), and the hymn *Veni, Veni, Emmanuel* which is at the heart of his work with that title (1992).[24]

The aspects of all three composers' approaches to composition which I have articulated here have some affinity with my own rather limited experience that I outlined above. There is an apparent tension between the free-flowing creative impetus, which one could perhaps readily equate with the essence of spirituality, and the actuality of both the writing down of the music (not just the time it takes), and its 'perceived' constraints—what one feels one must undertake for a specific work. When the ideas, the creative urge, the spirituality, flows freely, then the unconscious is allowed to become conscious.

It is quite striking how this compositional phenomenon parallels some of the characteristics of 'peak experience'. In his chapter 'Emotions in Strong Experiences with Music', Alf Gabrielsson draws on the initial articulation of this phenomenon by Abraham Maslow, who:

> ...found several characteristics of generalised peak experience, such as total attention on the object in question, complete absorption, disorientation in time and space, transcendence of ego, and identification or even fusion of the perceiver and the perceived. Peak experience is good and desirable; there is a complete loss of fear, anxiety, inhibition, defence, and control ...The experience may occasionally be described as sacred.[25]

23 The idea of satellites around a focus work was first expressed by Peter Owens in 'Revelation and Fallacy: Observations on Compositional Technique in the Music of Peter Maxwell Davies', *Music Analysis* 13 (1994), 161–202. The opposite way around—satellite 'before' planet—would be, for example, the overture *Time and the Raven* embedded within Symphony No. 6. and *Chat Moss* in Symphony No. 5—both carry elements of autobiography.

24 I have published analyses of both these works: Richard McGregor, 'James MacMillan's *O Bone Jesu*', *Scottish Music Review* 2.1 (2011), 88–114; Richard McGregor, 'Transubstantiated into the Musical: A Critical Exegesis on James MacMillan's *Veni Veni Emmanuel*', in *A Companion to Recent Scottish Music: 1950 to the Present*, ed. by Graham Hair (Glasgow: The Musica Scotica Trust, 2007), pp. 21–42.

25 Alf Gabrielsson, 'Emotions in Strong Experiences with Music', in *Music and Emotion: Theory and Research*, ed. by Patrik N. Juslin and John A. Sloboda (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 547–604 (at 431).

I realise that any insights that I have gained into the processes of composition are insights personal to me because they illuminate long-standing questions that I harbour about the process of composition. It is one of the many paradoxes of musical composition that one can analyse, interpret, and understand, almost all the actual musical results, but the impetus for creation, the sustaining vision of the work, and intrinsic value or quality of a work are much harder, if not impossible, to define or articulate precisely in words. When, to this, one adds further elements (within the process of creation), which themselves defy verbal description—in our case, the notion of spirituality contained, implicit, or unconsciously expressed through a musical work—it becomes even more difficult.

Each of the three composers I have discussed, in their own ways, signposted for me elements of the creative impetus as an ongoing generative process. This helped me to understand the essential compositional block created for me through the opposition between order, logic, and control and creative freedom. The quality of a composer's 'inspiration' is clearly a result of intense study of other composers and the synthesising of compositional techniques—acquired through study, listening, and practice—these things then become embedded in the subconscious, and form one of the driving forces of musical composition. Perhaps the most successful composers are driven and compelled to write because of their brain's capacity to recreate ideas in new and individualistic forms while preserving resonances from the past. Re-synthesising ideas in a new and original form has been going on for centuries, even with Mozart, who wrote to his sister:

> Above us is a violinist, another one is below, next to us is a singing teacher giving lessons, in the last room across the hall is an oboist; it's all such fun for Composing! gives you lots of ideas.[26]

26 Cited in *Mozart's Letters*: *Mozart's Life*, ed. by Robert Spaethling (London: Faber & Faber 2000), p. 30.