

commentary for *bleed*  
for orchestra

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## GENERAL

This composition has its roots in Marcel Mauss' *The Gift*, a seminal book in anthropology about the culture of gifts and *potlach* in indigenous cultures around the world. Mauss emphasises often how important it is for a system of gifts to feature an obligation to *give*, an obligation to *receive* and an obligation to *reciprocate*. I was very interested in applying this to music – by receiving, giving, and reciprocating material to form a composition. I believe that receiving and reciprocating is as important as giving when it comes to creative interaction with material, whether musical or physical.

“*bleed*” consists of two kinds of material which are juxtaposed and re-contextualise each other as the piece is laid out, playing with the roles of context and content, foreground and background. The skeleton of the piece is based on Ferneyhough's *Transit*. I took the fourth bar from page 40 of *Transit*, expanded it to take a bit over five minutes (slowing it down by more than 64 times) and re-orchestrated it for the ensemble available, while reciprocating the act of receiving material by changing the material slightly and offering some of my own material.

The recurring chords on the vibraphone and harp are loosely based on the harmonic spectrum of a zen gong bell whose sound I am particularly fond of. This material keeps coming back slightly different each time, juxtaposed against the massive sonic space that the Ferneyhough material occupies, re-contextualising it and being re-contextualised by it.

The word “bleed” refers to the various meanings of the word, mainly to the idea of bleed in design, where an illustration/design or text is printed so as to run to the edge of the page or container, or the concept of colours “bleeding” into (and re-contextualising) each other. It alludes to the ideas of continuity versus discreteness, background versus foreground, static versus changing, which are central to this piece.

## CONTEXTUALISATION OF MATERIAL

I was interested in the idea of “framing” material – because framing can occur both internally and externally, depending on the frame of reference (e.g. I can examine myself compared to the world, or the world compared to myself). This piece offers a chance for the audience to perceive a performance in two different ways – either by considering the Ferneyhough material as background (because it is slow-changing and relatively static and low in dynamics) and treating the recurring chords as the foreground; or treating the recurring chords as the background (because they repeat at very regular intervals with little perceivable change in voicing) and the Ferneyhough as the foreground (because it changes, whereas the other ones don't change as obviously).

Use of conventional notation for this composition was a conscious choice, which gave me the freedom to focus on other aspects of the music, such as the exploration of relationships between form and material.

## STRUCTURE

In this piece I was interested in the internal dialogue between structure and content, how one defines and is defined by the other. Robert Hollingworth, at a pre-concert talk before a performance of Monteverdi's *Vespers of 1610*, said (with regards to using Gregorian chants or popular tunes as *canti firmi*) "*you take a well known tune –doesn't have to be sacred–, slow it down tremendously, and you have a structure.*"

*bleed* is based on that idea, as applied to taking a fragment of Ferneyhough's music and using that to provide a formal base on which to compose the rest of the music and create this composition. The idea of taking a piece of material (which in Monteverdi's time could be a Gregorian chant, or a popular tune, for example) and expanding it to generate a structure/form was a very fascinating idea – as Julian Anderson remarked at a lecture on harmony, "*once you have a prefabricated formal model, you can go off and do things in response,*" which I feel relates to my approach in this piece.

The composition follows a very regular pattern, which is that there is the material which slowly changes throughout the piece, and there are those recurring chords which are sounded once every about fifteen seconds. This is very regular, apart from a thirty-second passage about two-thirds in, where the harp and vibraphone chords are also played by some of the other instruments, and afterwards the harp and vibraphone don't play a chord for a page.

## QUARTER-TONES

My interest in quarter-tone music has its roots in a lecture that Nicola LeFanu gave in my first year at Guildhall, and my discovering of her music afterwards. A recurring comment about use of quarter-tones is that in order for the listener to make any sort of aesthetic sense of microtonal music there needs to be a framework in which we perceive the microtones as being microtones – if you had a Pierrot Lunaire-like vocal line that goes all over the place and just jumps from a normally pitched note to a microtone, it would be difficult to distinguish the quarter-tones and they would sound more like out-of-tune notes rather than intentional quarter-tones.

The Ferneyhough passage proved to be very interesting, exactly because it contains a large number of equal temperament pitches accompanied by a number of quarter-tones which are usually a second or a seventh above a pitch played somewhere else, creating very interesting sonorities.

## THE TITLE

The title refers to timbral colours bleeding into each other, much like colours bleed into each other in Rothko's paintings (as Julian Anderson put it nicely after the workshop). I feel an analogy can also be drawn between M.C. Escher's *Metamorphoses*, which start off with a particular pattern or design and slowly, subtly, and in a continuous manner, are morphed into all sorts of different patterns and designs, following a non-developmental approach to the material. (In fact, it feels that his *Metamorphosis II* and *II* could start at any one point and end at any other, much like cutting a Möbius strip in half.)

The non-developmental aspect of the composition further reflects an interest of mine in buddhist mythologies and philosophies about the nature of the world, which has been further deepened through the Mindfulness Meditation course that Rolf Hind and Chris Cullen organised throughout the second half of the year. In particular, concepts such as *anitya*, or “impermanence”, the idea of the eternally-changing world, that nothing stays the same.<sup>1</sup>

I was also intrigued by the idea of the cyclicity of nature, that things come and go, and nature (from the smallest atom to the largest galaxy nebula) is all about letting go and accepting, a giving and a receiving (and reciprocating). It feels that everything in nature bleeds into each other, that nothing is really discrete and that there can be no foreground without background, no *upside* without *downside*, but that all such distinctions are human-made conventions to aid us in everyday living. Just as something might look either upwards or downwards depending on how you look at, audience members will perceive material either as foreground or background, depending on how they listen to it.

These are ideas that have been in my mind since my encounter with Jay Griffiths' writings over the last few years, and through conversations I have had with the author after meeting her in person. Similar ideas and concepts have naturally manifested themselves in other compositions of mine, as they play an important role in defining my sociopolitical and mythological opinions and beliefs, and thus define me as a person to some degree.

## POST-WORKSHOP REFLECTIONS

The workshop was incredibly valuable in many respects and I received numerous constructive criticisms from both Aaron Holloway-Nahum (who was conducting the orchestra) and Julian Anderson (who was assessing the workshop – and who, incidentally, had to perform the harp part on the piano, as a harpist was unavailable). Overall the workshop ran very smoothly with no inconsistencies or mistakes between parts and the score, saving a lot of workshop time which was mostly focused on intonation and dynamics.

The most prominent criticism was the fact that it is incredibly difficult to play at such a soft dynamic for such a long time. The other criticism was that, although writing *de niente* and *al niente* for strings and instruments such as the clarinet, other instruments such as the oboe or brass instruments are incapable of performing such a gradual crescendo from nothing into a sound, and that should be accounted for in the piece.

Julian Anderson also made an interesting comment with regards to the structure of the piece. He commented that the piece perhaps doesn't demand a specific beginning or end, and could be notated in such a way that would allow the conductor to start at any point of the piece and cycle through the material for a duration between, say, five and fifteen minutes, thereby giving a more mobile character to the structure of the composition.

We also played around with the idea of texture, talking about whether the piece would work better if the conductor was instructed to aim at creating a uniform, blended timbral texture or let the

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1 Which also relates to Heraclitus' “*everything flows*” - interestingly Ferneyhough used some texts by Heraclitus in *Transit*.

instruments each play at their own very soft dynamic. A very intriguing idea which was put forward by Aaron was that instead of writing *ppp* for all the instruments for most of the piece I should try and engage with the Ferneyhough material in more detail: since the vertical sonorities at any one point are sounding for a long time, he said it would be very interesting if I explored these verticalities by changing the dynamics on the instruments to produce different colourings of the same chord (in a *klangfarbenmelodie* manner – perhaps one could say *klangfarbenakkord*).

I will definitely keep all of these comments and criticisms in mind for future compositions. However I felt that making such changes, especially the changes with exploring the dynamics of the instruments, was something I didn't want to add to this composition. As this is something which I hadn't been thinking about since the conception of the piece, I felt that any such alterations would be superficial and wouldn't reflect a deeper intention to explore the material in such a manner – the explorations of the Ferneyhough material wouldn't be rooted deeply in the composition but would be something added afterwards, and I feel it would be perceived as such, especially as the workshop took place less than two weeks prior to the deadline of the portfolio, and I wouldn't have the time to engage with the piece in revising it so thoroughly and deeply, given the fact that this has been a very busy time of the year with other submissions, performances, and engagements outside the school's curriculum.

Something that struck me during the workshop was how much you can do with very limited material. At some point, Aaron was working on a verticality which was difficult to tune because of the quarter-tones. The way he worked on it was by introducing the instruments one by one, making sure each entry does not alter the intonation of the notes already playing. This produced a very beautiful sound – simply one chord which is built up slowly, instruments coming in and leaving; sometimes hearing the chord complete, sometimes hearing only parts of it. I felt I could have written a five-minute orchestral piece just using one chord throughout, exploring it in such a manner.

Perhaps for my next orchestral piece I will take four bars of my orchestral piece and expand them to take up five minutes and explore that.