

## SOUND JUDGEMENT: PIERS HELLAWELL IN INTERVIEW

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**Abstract:** Piers Hellawell is Professor of Composition at Queen's University, Belfast and one of the United Kingdom's most interesting and thoughtful composers. In this interview he speaks about his compositional interests and preoccupations through a discussion of his works and technical features such as his 'escalator series'. He also speaks about his concerns for composition as a discipline in universities and schools.

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Piers Hellawell has what he calls a 'strange attitude to location, because I've had a life of not belonging in places'.<sup>1</sup> Born in 1956 and brought up in the Peak District in north Derbyshire, he went to boarding school, and later university, in the south of England, before moving in 1981 to Belfast, where he still lives and works. Meanwhile, he discovered his 'spiritual home' in the Western Isles of Scotland, where he has a house and spends as much time as possible. Even after 32 years, 'in Belfast I don't really feel at home'. The connection with Scotland began with childhood visits and developed into a 'gravitational pull', which means that Hellawell has spent his adult life 'minding not being in Scotland'.

Although a 'functional pianist', frustrated by his inability to play his beloved Brahms's piano parts, Hellawell was interested in composing from very early on. 'I don't remember a time when that didn't seem the thing to do', he says, and 'it was what I wanted to do long before any formal musical training', without having any idea where the creative urge came from. He began by imitating the music he was playing, first Corelli, 'then I suppose I progressed as a teenager to chromaticism, writing some very winsome Delius-esque horrors', before studying composition more seriously with James Wood at Oxford. Wood, only three years Hellawell's senior, was not on the staff of the university but was brought in specially to teach the undergraduate composers at New College. Hellawell found Wood's teaching 'tough' but influential, writing of the prevailing attitude at the time as one of 'come and have tea and we'll look at what you've written'. Wood, though, took a different, more inspiring, approach:

One of the aspects in which teaching can be incredibly empowering is that you consciously and unconsciously reflect your teachers, and in that sense it looms so hugely that I suppose a teacher who was very damaging – the opposite of

<sup>1</sup> Piers Hellawell, interview with the author, London, 20 October 2013.

James – would probably produce negative strategies. But the things he did that were wonderful I find myself doing. He was a student of Nadia Boulanger and she made them do species counterpoint and he made me do it, and I now make my first year students do it.

After three years as an undergraduate, Hellowell embarked on ‘an ill-advised further three years doing a research topic which didn’t work out’, studying cyclic unification trends in late eighteenth-century music. When the job of Composer-in-Residence at Queen’s University Belfast came up, in 1981, it was ‘a kind of airlifting out, a relief that I didn’t have to finish this thing’.

I was interested in whether the move to Belfast was purely because of the Queen’s job, but Hellowell says ‘it was definitely psychological as well. [Oxford] just felt very suffocating. I thought I needed to live in an ordinary place’. Of course, Belfast was not an ordinary place in the 1980s – a time of sectarian violence and political emergency. Hellowell went there with ‘a certain amount of trepidation’ but insists he is ‘a stout defender of Belfast’, describing it as ‘a warm place, people take you as they find you’. He adds, ‘I’d still rather be in Scotland, but that’s no secret to anybody’.

I ask Hellowell whether the separation from the mainstream of musical life in Britain has affected him at all.

Everything in life is a trade-off. I forfeit lots. You have to run far harder to keep up, people forget about you, if they ever cared; you get out of touch with people who are important in your field. The positives are that I’m better in a place where I bump into people I know, old students, someone from the symphony orchestra. I find London very intimidating because it doesn’t seem to belong to anybody whereas Belfast has a strong sense of local identity.

The critic Stephen Johnson, in liner notes for a Hellowell CD, wrote that Hellowell ‘entered the 1980s with the sense that he was facing a musical crisis’.<sup>2</sup> Hellowell says that that should really refer to the mid-1980s, but that there was certainly a crisis. ‘The crisis was a reaction against European modernism. In 1985 I stopped writing, I didn’t write anything for a year’. But he feels it was ‘a good time to have a crisis’, at a stage before he was well known, having seen other composers work through crises in full public glare. Hellowell found his way out of the crisis by reconstituting his compositional language, starting from two disparate sources: Balinese gamelan and Irish traditional music. Although these musics helped Hellowell out of his impasse, neither are particularly audible in his music of the time, and the influence was felt in unlikely ways. With Irish music, which Hellowell would go and hear in pubs, he delighted to find that ‘the instrumentation was entirely aleatoric, decided randomly by who turned up’, unlike the great attention paid to instrumentation in classical music. The result was that ‘the colour was fantastic and varied’.

The interest in gamelan – Hellowell played the Balinese instruments brought to Belfast in the 1980s by Professor John Blacking – resulted in more tangible expression in his work, albeit below the surface. ‘What interested me were the modal limitations of the five-pitch scale’. Hellowell took the pitches and made them into a grid and, in a kind of total-serial way, used the grid to provide rhythmic values as well as pitches. The pitches were ‘distorted away from any gamelan flavour’ by adding accidentals to the (almost) pentatonic Balinese original. This all resulted in the piece *Sound Carvings from Rano Raraku* (1988), for flute, percussion, piano and double bass, the first of a series of pieces

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Johnson, liner note to *Sound Carvings*. Metronome, MET CD 1029, 1998.

sharing the title 'Sound Carvings', which will soon number five. *Sound Carvings from Rano Raraku* is the most process-led piece Hellowell has composed, which he feels has 'a sort of freshness' but is also worried 'that it does sound a bit manufactured'.

Hellowell has a striking analogy for the development of his technique: that of making a pizza. 'You come up with a sort of raw pizza where you've got all these ingredients and they're fresh but they are at least separable and on the surface; you then bung it in the oven by being a composer for a few years, and what you come out with is all glued together and rounded in a new way, but has lost something in the process. That's the time you have to look around and have another crisis'. He finds the early pieces of such a process to be potentially 'formulaic' but interesting; later on the pieces are better made, 'more rounded', but lacking the freshness of the original conception. But nonetheless, 'technique can dig you out of a crisis', as long as it has room within it for intuitive decisions.

There was a second crisis, this time identified by the composer himself as 'a deep upheaval in my personal landscape', between 1998 and 2005, encompassing the composing of the orchestral works *Inside Story* for the Proms in 1999 and *Cors de Chasse* in 2003. He now feels that upheaval less; his sense is that it refers to 'the moving out of a rather padded landscape to something a little harder in edge', while qualifying that the sound worlds of the resulting pieces are 'hardly Lachenmann'. It is certainly true that *Inside Story*, for example, is almost lush in comparison with the harder-edged *Dogs and Wolves*, and Hellowell has said that since the early part of the century he has been interested in fragmenting the sound-mass of the orchestra.

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Hellowell has written amusingly in a blog about the awful experience for a composer of being asked, 'So – who are you like?'<sup>3</sup> A better question, he feels, would be 'with what is your work concerned?' The obvious question, then: with what is *his* work concerned? The two main answers are a sense of narrative line within a piece (which is why there is little if any recapitulation or return in Hellowell's music) and 'evocation, the conjuring up of an atmosphere which wouldn't exist unless you were listening to the piece'. And it all comes down to harmony: 'I've always been concerned about harmony. I sometimes wish I didn't care about harmony so much, but I do. I don't like pitched music that doesn't sound as if it cares about harmony'. He goes even further, saying that creating a 'convincing harmonic discourse remains the giant issue for the composer of pitched music'.

Another recurring preoccupation is a constructional principle Hellowell calls 'off-shore' movements, in which the relationship between smaller movements ('islands') and the main movements of a piece becomes a structural foundation. It can be seen in pieces as diverse as the delightful string quartet *The Still Dancers* (1992) and the quasi-clarinet concerto *Agricolas* (2008). When surveying his own music for a lecture recently Hellowell realised that these islands were often delineated by distinct timbral identities and frequently characterised by experimental techniques or unusual combinations, separate from those of the main movements. 'I realised this was an enormous thing of which I'd been unaware for 20 years'.

<sup>3</sup> Piers Hellowell, 'Who are you like?' – A Blog about Influence, <<http://www.piershellowell.com/writings.asp?ARTICLE=8>> accessed 25 October 2013.

In *The Still Dancers*, for example, an extremely attractive piece, immediate but elusive, each of the three movements is introduced by an 'invocation' section, of timbral novelty, in which the strings are played with chopsticks, or have paperclips attached just beyond the end of the fingerboard, making them similar in sound to the *mbira*. These lead into the main body of each movement, which is characterised by conventional playing. Similarly, a recent work, *atria* (2013) for cello and piano, has three main movements (numbers 1, 3 and 5) with conventional instrumental timbres separated by experimental interludes 'using sub-harmonics and clothes pegs and stuff on the instruments'.

I ask how these timbral innovations come about: are they the result of collaboration with performers? The answer is: not initially. 'I usually start with a string instrument at home. I remember the paper-clips thing, which I'm very proud of, because it has a sort of gamelan effect'. Hellowell was working on another idea, using multiple bows, which turned out to be fruitless. 'In frustration I looked around and saw a paperclip and picked it up and . . . eureka!'

Hellowell compares the balance achieved between the 'off-shore' and 'main' movements with the artist Mondrian's idea of equilibrium in his line-and-coloured-square paintings. Mondrian, according to Hellowell, said that 'two objects of different weight could be in equilibrium, though not in symmetry – when the slighter one is bright and the bigger one dull, for example. This struck me as massively more satisfying than the symmetry with which so many are musically obsessed'. The reference to Mondrian is surprising, since there is something 'messier' and more freewheeling about Hellowell's music than the obsessive order of Mondrian's later painting.

The off-shore islands idea is also seen in two of Hellowell's choral works, *Isabella's Banquet* (2010) and *The Hilliard Songbook* (1995). In *Isabella's Banquet*, an enterprising setting of texts taken from *Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management* (1861), the interstitial movements reduce the texture to two voices, in a note-against-note counterpoint that calls to mind the species counterpoint Hellowell studied at Oxford (Example 1). I wondered how the intervals are controlled in these passages, without the strict rules of species counterpoint. The answer is that it is done entirely intuitively, without any modal references, but 'the great thing about species is it trains you to care, albeit with someone else's rules, about intervals. Thereafter you can care with your own values'.

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In recent years, several of Hellowell's pieces have used a technical device of his own invention that he calls the 'escalator series', which he first used in *Cors de Chasse* (2003), a scintillating concertante work for solo trumpet, trombone and orchestra. It came about through Hellowell's preoccupation with harmony. 'It seems to me organising pitches is a kind of given for what I do. And once you organise pitches you must be concerned about the sequence of them because music unfolds in time'. This concern with harmonic progression and impetus goes back to the 1990 work for violin and orchestra *Quadruple Elegy*. At the time Hellowell was listening to blues musicians like Albert Collins, Robert Cray and Eric Clapton, and found that he 'envied a harmonic language which actually *needed* the next chord', in terms of standard blues progressions. *Quadruple Elegy* is built on blues-derived chords – especially the last movement, and first written, 'Jan Palač and the Flaming Skier' – but Hellowell found that he 'couldn't emulate the sense of need as soon as I chromaticised the harmonic language'.

25 ♩ = 80

Alto Solo  
Ear-ly ri-sing is the pa-rent of health To self-in-dul-gence all are

Tenor Solo  
Ear-ly ri-sing is the pa-rent of health To self-in-dul-gence all are

## Example 1:

Hellawell, Memorandum I from *Isabella's Banquet*. © Copyright by Peters Edition Limited, London. Reprinted by kind permission of Peters Edition Limited, London.

Thirteen years after *Quadruple Elegy*, composing *Cors de Chasse*, Hellawell still felt the need for harmonically necessary progressions. He describes writing a passage for bass trombone and tuba, a series of dyads that come at the end of a section.<sup>4</sup> Subsequently he looked back at these bars 'and I noticed that the last of the seven dyads sort of prepared the way for a repeat of the first, only a tone higher. And then it would all play again, and that could happen infinitely. So I later implemented it as a kind of chaconne, but whereas the traditional chaconne goes round on the same pitches, this one is repeated progressively higher'. And, like an Escher staircase, although it constantly ascends, the use of octave displacement prevents it always sounding higher.

Example 2 shows the escalator series for *Cors de Chasse* and Example 3 shows the first appearance of the series in the full score, with the note numbering added. In each repetition of the series, the note lengths are augmented, resulting in a large-scale written-out *rallentando*.

In the decade since this first appearance, Hellawell uses an escalator series in many of his pieces. But almost immediately Hellawell's intellectual restlessness led him to develop and alter the technique. In *Cors de Chasse* the series is very much on the surface of the music (as can be seen in Example 3), but in later works, such as in *Minnesang* (2011) for bass clarinet and piano, it is submerged into the texture. In *Piani Latebre* for solo piano (2010) the series is segmented, with the segments coming back in a different order in later repetitions of the series. This is also the first appearance of the series outside an orchestral texture; *Piani Latebre* deals with the problem of 'stating [the series] while the other fingers did other stuff'. The escalator series is also used in Hellawell's current piece, a PRS New Music Biennial Commission for the improvisation trio Bourne Davis Kane (BDK), a jazz trio of piano, bass and percussion. The piece, which will be the latest in the *Sound Carvings* sequence, includes a set of variations in which the chords of the series, instead of being presented in straight sequence, emerge in what Hellawell describes as 'a more "crab" fashion': 1(234), 2(345), 3(456), 4(567), etc.

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Lately, Hellawell has been publishing short online essays addressing aesthetic issues in music.<sup>5</sup> In the second essay he speaks about his music creating 'an experiential journey' that 'involves trying to

<sup>4</sup> *Cors de Chasse*, bars 161–162.

<sup>5</sup> At the time of writing there are four: 'Sound Judgement, Sound Systems' <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ly\\_o26C7KCw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ly_o26C7KCw)>, 'Seriously Popular Music' <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4F6iW5w2eqw>>, 'Whose Past is it anyway?' <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4F6iW5w2eqw>>.



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Clarinet in B $\flat$  1.2. *mf*

Horn in F 1.2. *mf* *cresc.*

Horn in F 3.4. *mf*

1st Trumpet in C *mf* *sonore*

2nd Trumpet in C *mf* *risoluto*

Trombone 1 *mf* *sonore*

Trombone 2 *mf* *sonore*

Bass Trombone *mf* *risoluto*

Tuba *mf* *risoluto*

Harp *mf* *marcato*

Violin I

Violin II

Viola *mf*

Violoncello *mf* *risoluto*

Double Bass *mf* *risoluto*

## Example 3:

Hellawell, *Cors de Chasse*, bars 172–176. © Copyright by Peters Edition Limited, London. Reprinted by kind permission of Peters Edition Limited, London.

often not used at the very beginning of the piece, ‘the initial version ending up as second or third iteration’. Does he start with pitches? ‘I sometimes use a squiggle map of blocks and circles but they never work really, and I get impatient to decide notes’. Once he is up and running ‘I get impatient to start a Sibelius document. Periodically I do return to the paper to start new sections. I always date the hand-scribbles and never get rid of them!’

He has not always worked this way. *Cors de Chasse* was a significant piece, not just in introducing the escalator series, but in changing Hellowell's working methods.

I wrote the first half of *Cors de Chasse* on the page and then transferred it [into Sibelius]. And then at one point there is a string chord and I just threw it down. I always go to the piano to verify, and actually it was okay. And I thought 'I'll go on' and from about [bar 155] I stopped going back and writing it in by hand. So if I dig out the pages, [the full pencil score] stops there. There are plenty of scribbles but the complete scoring conked out there.

Since that point, the Sibelius software has been a crucial part of Hellowell's compositional method, and he accepts that it has changed how he works. He particularly likes the ability to judge pacing through using playback, however inauthentic the actual sounds are, and the opportunity to make edits to a score: 'often I think a section is finished and I come back to it and have to put more in'. And in practical terms he enjoys the ease with which one can send music files to collaborators.

But although it is a part of his own working method, Hellowell is suspicious of Sibelius's usefulness in the hands of students, to the extent that he forbids his first and second year students to use the program, instead insisting they hand-write their scores. 'There's no way that a student, unless they are highly evolved, has the ability to hold their own in terms of their ideas, instead of being pushed around by [Sibelius]. A blank manuscript page is genuinely that, but a blank Sibelius page is loaded with assumptions: that you will be using periodic rhythms and key signatures and stuff like that'. Hellowell finds that the more experimental he wants to be, the more difficult it is to notate his ideas, citing *Maquette* (2005), written for the organisation Contemporary Music for All (COMA), which has some instruments with an underlying 3/4 pulse and others in unmetred music over the top. He also feels using software 'kills instrumentation – it's hugely damaging'. He counters this by introducing his students to real instruments, to 'feel the weight of the baritone sax, that sort of physicality'. In the Queen's composition course Hellowell says he has 'tried to produce some kind of composition journey that isn't style specific. What I want to do is provide them with tools which enable them to grapple with where we are and where they are as composers. And every year this becomes a bit harder'.

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In concluding, I wanted to know if Hellowell feels conscious of creating an *oeuvre* – whether there is any kind of structure to his career – or if it is just a series of pieces dictated by circumstances. He says he is aware of his work falling into groupings that match the decades of the 1980s ('exploratory'), the 1990s ('mellow') and the 2000s ('more astringent'). However, his career is 'probably more a single search to write a good work', something he feels he cannot say that he has succeeded in achieving fully yet. I feel that *Cors de Chasse*, besides being a significant work, is also a work that has a thrillingly engaging surface, but also a carefully weighted harmonic and temporal structure. Hellowell says that, with a broadcast forthcoming, he has revisited the work and found he was 'well pleased, I must admit, with the harmonic flow'.

Above all, Hellowell says that 'the springboard for any and every new project is collaboration with an artist'. There have certainly been a number of fruitful associations with, amongst others, the Schubert Ensemble, the Fidelio Trio and, recently, cellist and

conductor Paul Watkins. A practically minded composer, Hellowell never writes for the 'bottom drawer', and found the experience of writing the choral work *Isabella's Banquet*, without a performing group confirmed, was 'sheer hell'.<sup>8</sup>

And is there an unwritten piece for which he is awaiting the opportunity to bring to life? Hellowell says that he has 'a 25-year idea to set the Benedicite text, for a weird instrumental group and singers. I think the text, with its stupendous litany of creatures, comes closer to my pantheistic sort of belief than more abstract or doctrinal texts'. Certainly on the evidence of the excellent *Isabella's Banquet*, a new large-scale choral work by Piers Hellowell is something to be wished for.

<sup>8</sup> Composed in 2010, the piece received a partial premiere by the National Chamber Choir of Ireland, conducted by Paul Hillier, in April 2012.