

## A Clear Appearance<sup>1</sup>

### People in the UK whose music I like at the moment - (a personal view) by Tim Parkinson

I like this quote from Feldman which I found in Michael Nyman's *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*;

Anybody who was around in the early fifties with the painters saw that these men had started to explore their own sensibilities, their own plastic language...with that complete independence from other art, that complete inner security to work with what was unknown to them.

To me, this characterises the music I'm experiencing by various composers I know working in Britain at the moment. Independence of mind. Independence from schools or academies. And certainly an inner security to be individual, a confidence to pursue one's own interests, follow one's own nose.

I don't like categories. I'm not happy to call this music anything. Any category breaks down under closer scrutiny. Post-Cage? Experimental? Post-experimental? Applies more to some than others. Ultimately I prefer to leave that to someone else. No name seems all-encompassing and satisfying.

So I'm going to describe the work of six composers in Britain at the moment whose music I like. To me it's just that: music that I like. And why I like it is a question for self-analysis, rather than joining the stylistic or aesthetic dots. And only six because it's impossible to be comprehensive. How can I be? There's so much good music out there, and of course there are always things I don't know. So this is a personal view.

I like to hear new music, or music I haven't heard before. Not purely novelty for its own sake, but that which tells me something new about myself. Life is exploration and discovery. I'm alive now and the world is huge. I'm not so interested in any dishonest music which seems to wish it were another art form. We've had all that in the 19th century and before. The music I'm going to describe seems more comfortable with its own medium, more self-reliant. It begins with its own elements, rather than adopting an extra-musical crutch. Music can still bring about extra-musical associations, but it doesn't need to start with them. This is one aspect that seems to me still new and still being explored, starting with the indefinable unknown. And therefore it's fresh and naked and fragile. It could all be wrong, but that's part of the excitement.

#### Matteo Fargion (1961)

I moved to London in 1997 and I met Matteo Fargion who had also been a student of Kevin Volans. I had heard his *Sensa Titolo*; (*50 Pieces for Violin and Piano*) (1993) on a tape and was excited to think that someone who lived in London wrote this music, this strange mix of Schubertianisms with modernist punctuations and sensual abstractions. He's Italian, brought up in South Africa, got tangled up in knots studying with Kevin then just relaxed and wrote some songs in 1982 which later caused Feldman to call him a genius. I heard some tapes of his pieces around this time. The String Quartet No.2 *Ten Frugal Pieces* (1987) and *Pinkelpause* (1990) for piano trio, another rich mix of fragments in the same mould as *50 Pieces*, and the serene and crystalline *11 Notturmi* (1991) for piano. He moved to London in 1985, studied with Howard Skempton occasionally, and played bass in Chris Newman's punk band Janet Smith. (Getting hold of those records was and still is impossible. Newman doesn't even have any. Matteo lent me one. John Lely found one in a vinyl shop in Japan.)

There's an opera *Le Bellezze d'Hortensia* from 1998 which spawned a period of satellite high speed virtuoso pieces like the *Opera Studies* for piano, and *Janet Topp* for violin and piano. There's been other work in theatre, but he's mostly known for his work with choreographers; occasionally Siobhan Davies, but primarily Jonathan Burrows. They've worked together since the late 80s I think, many dance works where generally speaking Matteo would write the music and Jonathan would choreograph the dance. The level of collaboration intensified in their current and most popular thread of work for themselves as a performing duo. This started in 2002 with *Both Sitting Duet*, dance pieces which live somewhere so incredibly in between dance/movement and music/composition, so very clearly a kind of visual music. I think their most recent *Cow Piece* (2009) is a masterpiece. The discernible systematic thinking in their work probably has more connection to Feldman and Tom Johnson than it does to the systems music of the British experimentalists John White, Chris Hobbs, or Michael Parsons. But there's a lightness of material, economy of means, a humour, a kind of existential despair of material which is often looked for in pre-existing music, or other found objects, like obvious everyday gestures, for example. Here again there's a distant affinity with the old English experimentalists like Hobbs or White, in this use of pre-existing music, and possibly in the generally optimistic open-eared disposition of the music. Whether it's conscious or not. There must be something in the air. An awareness of systems mixed with a deliberate self consciousness. To me there's a similarity to Stan Laurel's incredible inventiveness in finding multiple ways of trying to walk through a door. An economy of means again. It is refreshing in its humour of self awareness. Matteo is not trying to avoid the fact that he is not a trained dancer. In *Both Sitting Duet*, he said he would only perform if he didn't have to use his legs, and didn't have to remember it all. Thus they were seated, both with a score, and this became the constraint within which to make the piece. He's well known in the dance world, but less so in the music scene here.

#### Laurence Crane (1961)

In 1997 I also did my first gig in London with a flute player called Annie Parker. We programmed the concert together, and she had some music by Laurence Crane, and that's when I first met him. In the late 80s he used to work at the Wigmore Hall as a part-time caretaker, and, after official concerts on Mondays, used to let friends in the back door for secret invite-only concerts at night which he called the Wigmore Alternative Series. There were nine concerts between July 1986 and December 1988. Between 1986-90 he was also in an ironic pop duo called Great Big Penis with the art critic Andrew Renton. They wrote their own songs, did covers, played gigs at the ICA and LMC and various pubs, and made some cassette albums.

This was all before I moved to London, so I got to know Laurence's music purely through playing it myself or hearing it in concerts. I programmed many pieces; *Erki Nool* (1999), *Jurgen Hip* (1989), *Piano Duets* (1991) and various piano pieces. I gave the premiere of

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<sup>1</sup> "appearance" - that which is apparent. Apparentness.

*20th Century Music* (1999), and in 2001 I commissioned a quartet, *Estonia*. This is all chamber music of course. I used to do concerts with various other willing friends, all very low budget, in venues as inexpensive and as close to the centre of London as possible.

Laurence's music is that of a clear obviousness, most often using extremely familiar and well-used musical building blocks, like tonic triads for example, divorced from any functional harmony, but used again like found objects; triads, the sound of which have been dulled by familiarity, now being placed in simple, clear, reiterating structures, to be heard afresh. In fact, the triad has become one instantly recognisable feature of his music. Encapsulated within that sound is the elementary world of childhood wonder and clarity. Music of great warmth and humility, which is always smiling. I think of it in primary colours. Clearly defined and articulated structures and architecture. Always slow and carefully placed.

How has his music changed? Perhaps here and there it's become more abstract. Also an infiltration of non-instrumental sound into recent pieces, like for example *Come back to the old specimen cabinet, John Vigani John Vigani (Part 3)* (2007) for cello and a chorus of instrumentalists playing stones, plastic bags, kazoos, tin cans, and newspapers. The irony found in the song cycle *Weirdi* (1992) is a less overt presence. Pieces have also got longer. Most of his output can be described as miniatures, but less so in recent pieces like the 15 minutes of *Movement for 10 Musicians* (2003) written for the Ives Ensemble, or the 20 minute slow accelerando of *Piano Piece No. 23 'Ethiopian Distance Runners'* (2009) written for Philip Thomas. There's also an orchestra piece, *West Sussex Folk Material* (2006), written for the Netherlands Radio Kamer Filharmonie, which does not make use of any folk material from West Sussex at all. His titles can also be thought of as found objects, in many cases being a name that seemed somehow applicable, without having any direct reference to the music, or vice versa.

### **Bryn Harrison (1969)**

Through an interesting occurrence of life's chance procedures I found myself in the same room as Bryn Harrison in 1997. We discovered a mutual love of Feldman, and have been friends ever since. His music is most often a single image, a colour field, a plane of sound which remains constant, but very varied in the detail, and changes slowly over time. He's always had a close affinity with the work of abstract painters such as Mike Walker and Bridget Riley. In spite of this sumptuous cloud of instrumental sound though, the music remains challenging to audiences because there are no immediate changes from the basic image, the changes happening very slowly, like a sunset. When listening to his music one is not so much aware of moment change, but more aware of change only in memory perhaps of what the music was like five minutes ago. Pieces like *"Four Cycles"* (2002-5) demand attention and concentration from the audience, and can inevitably frustrate people expecting or wanting music to be full of rhetoric or dramatic argument. One of my favourite pieces *Six Symmetries* (2004), (which is exactly that, six symmetries of almost fractal delicacy), was recently played in London and got some ignorant reviews.

Immediately on first listening you can hear that the surface is very detailed and intricate, like a rock covered in barnacles. His notation is meticulous, in the world of complexity notation, which has an attraction to certain ensembles. The changes which happen are genetic, within the music itself, weaved by cascading pitch cycles with a glittering intricacy of playing techniques, (flutters, tremolos, vibratos, precisely timed crescendi and so on). *Surface Forms (repeating)* (2010) represents an extreme of this busy surface. It sounds a bit like the beautiful snowstorm opening of Alban Berg's *Altenberglieder*, except extended out to ten minutes.

Some of the pieces have abstract almost analytical titles as well, like *Repetitions in Extended Time* (2008), which also denies an audience a ready extra-musical image with which to prepare themselves. However, others titles are more poetic, like *Shifting Light* (2006). He lives in a village in West Yorkshire. I sometimes think of him as a landscape composer.

### **James Saunders (1972)**

Through Bryn somehow I met James Saunders. At the time (around 1998) he was writing extremely short pieces, exploring the notion of a piece of music which lasts few seconds. There's an orchestral piece from this period called *Like Wool* (1998) which lasts around 20 seconds.

He has ended up working in series. An early series was *compatibility hides itself* (1998-9), the title deriving from a quote by John Cage. It consisted of small pieces of music, each consisting of a few seconds, which could be recombined into longer various combinations for each performance. He developed this idea into what became a modular approach in a larger series called *#[unassigned]* (2000-9). This consisted of a huge file of around 500 modules which could be recombined for unique singular and unrepeatable performances, the title for each consisting of the date of the performance, e.g. #051000 was a piece performed on the 5th of October 2000 by Apartment House. He made 175 versions of the piece over the nine years he worked on it. I don't think he intended it to be such a large body of work. At one stage this open-ended way of working seemed to offer limitless possibilities that it could have occupied him permanently. He said "I was not seeking to write another modular piece, but to develop a modular approach to composition."

In the early *compatibility* series, his notation was precise and meticulous. The music was pointillistic in origin, with sometimes extremes of dynamic, and a rhythmic complexity and precision. During the *#[unassigned]* series, this tendency seems to have relaxed, and, partly through the use of extended techniques and preparing of instruments, pitch has become shrouded or lost altogether, and a preference for sound has emerged, as well as turning away from gestural material towards drone or textural sounds, even turning away from instruments altogether in certain pieces, focusing on the materiality of the objects used. So I feel his music now crosses interdisciplinary worlds, being close to a performance art, or living sounding sculptural performance of actions. Also the notation has relaxed, and the ease of this coupled with the non-specialised technique of making these sometimes everyday sounds, makes it approachable to anyone who wishes to reproduce and experience them, musicians or non-musicians alike. When one is moving a cardboard coffee cup across a surface, traditional music notation is no longer necessary. Sound can be represented by a line, moving right to left, like the movement of the cup itself. It seems to me his music these days is more about the nature of the sounds themselves, presented clearly in an uncomplicated structure.

His recent series of pieces has returned to the use of a quotation as a title, some which prompts ideas for certain pieces, or some which fit pieces already conceived, such as *components derive their value solely through their assigned context* (2009), quoted from Jack Burnham's essay *System Esthetics, or opposition between the two spaces and their common mediation* (2011), quoted from Dan Graham's *Three Projects for Architecture and Video*. His music now is extremely quiet, but also I would describe it as small. Micro

sounds, unsuited to large concert halls, and perhaps more readily appreciated by the performers themselves and their immediate surrounding intimate audience. This quietness, and framing with silence, and his choice of sonic material allies it with some aspects of Wandelweiser music, and similar tendencies towards reductionism in improvisation around the same time. Although James doesn't notate the department of the performers, this is something that one becomes extremely aware of for a good realisation of the music. One has to be careful, precise, delicate, concentrated, focused, to sit still and be attentive.

In 2003 we had the idea to do a concert with no instruments at all, just sitting at tables like newsreaders with a selection of objects to make sounds with. We played prose scores and indeterminate scores for any sounds. For the first performance James wrote *#171203* for organ pipes, 2 voices, 4 dictaphones, radios, and 2 walkie talkies, and I wrote my piece *two cardboard boxes* (2003). We called ourselves Parkinson Saunders and since then we've played about twenty gigs.

### **John Lely (1976)**

John Lely's music also has a clear appearance, a simplicity of intent, a wonder at how the elemental can sometimes produce a complex reaction. His music has an affinity with systems, or constraints. There's a series of pieces called symphonies. Each one presents a singular elemental system for a group of any number of people, with any sound producing means. Like the sixth symphony, called *Symphony in e* (2009) in which the instruction is to make a sound either the same as the previous one, or different, or a choice of either same or different. Again, this simple procedure leads to rich and complex results. Or the *Symphony No.3* (2008) for a group of musicians using pitched instruments, which uses the "Parsons Code for Melodic Contour" found in an article in Wikipedia, as a similar process of moving either up or down in pitch, or staying the same. Extraordinary, unforeseen rich harmonies arise, in a slow, deadpan, straightforward, plodding regularity. In performing the symphonies, each player has a high degree of individual responsibility, concerned with their own sound, yet working within a mass of other sound. Since each player chooses their own sound, the results vary between each performance. But it's always a collective of individuals.

Another piece which is often played is *The Harmonics of Real Strings* (2006), for any string instrument, in which a performer, while continuously bowing one string, lightly stops the string with the other hand which very slowly moves up the string from the scroll towards the bridge, over the duration of fifteen minutes or more. This simple process makes a piece which makes us listen to the ultimate complexity of the resulting sound, as the dancing noisy bow and string sound slowly forms or settles into a natural harmonic, then destabilises and scatters as the finger approaches and moves away from a nodal point. There are clear affinities with the simplicity of presentation in the music of Alvin Lucier, or James Tenney, for example. I also feel John has a strong connection with the previous experimental tradition in Britain. He is close friends with John White and Michael Parsons.

There is no willful cleverness here. No fancy design, or prettiness of presentation for a listener, no beginning-middle-end, no arguments, conclusions, denouements. Just the facts. You either get it or you don't. Like someone who shows up with an egg, looking in wonder at its simple clear and elegant perfection. We may smile or laugh, or be insulted that this is nothing new, what did we pay for this for, "I could do that." But as adults we lose this childhood fascination and simple observation of the world around us. For some this is not enough, but for others it is of paramount importance.

### **Markus Trunk (1962)**

And what can I say about Markus Trunk's music? He's a German composer who came to the UK in 1994, previously studied with Alvin Lucier from 1991-93, and before that with Walter Zimmermann, and before that with Mathias Spahlinger. I met him at some kind of concert. He has described himself as the least experimental of us. He's certainly concerned with composition, rather than system or process, but he also harks after a seeming artlessness. His music is very lean, stripped to the essentials, clear of unnecessary clutter. However, I think of his work as quite varied, from the delicacy of something like *Parhelion* (1999) to the hard edges of *Spagat* (1997) or the riotous piano piece *ah, he likes to write, likes to get writing done, likes to get things on paper* (2009). He works slowly and deliberately, by honing material into elegant forms. The sound is very reduced. Again there is no ornamentation. The orchestral piece *On A Clear Day* (2000), for example, is almost a literal transcription of painting of Agnes Martin. The string quartet *twin/double* (2007) which has a sinuous sensuality, where the quartet is treated as a series of duos, never playing tutti. He describes his starting point as phenomenological, beginning with the sound of the instruments, and carving the music out of this given restraint. His material is courageous in its modesty. Certainly there are no dramas. Again an interest in purity. The delicate, confident, luminous, ethereal panels of *On a Clear Day*. The exquisiteness of the piano pieces *Böotische Riten* (2005), which are like artefacts of music, like fragments of sculpture from the ancient world, a hand or piece of a face, or a segment of a parchment, where beginnings or endings have been lost, and bleached white by time.

John and Markus and I all live in London, and we all used to organise individual concerts here and there. So in 2005 we decided to link them up and give it a name, which simply became *Music We'd Like to Hear*. Three concerts of music we'd each been wanting to hear, to share our fascination with others. The music was either very new, or forgotten works seldom played by others. In spite of the low budgets, we've managed to continue it for six years.

### **Pan Out and Acknowledgements**

There are many others in the UK whose work I like and follow, which has a similar clear and strong individual distinction from anything else I know. There are too many to discuss at length, so instead, in no particular order, I just point my enthusiastic finger at Paul Whitty, Paul Newland, Richard Emsley, Catherine Kontz, Claudia Molitor, Joanna Bailie, Matthew Shlomowitz, James Weeks, Jennifer Walshe (who just moved here), Stephen Chase, Joseph Kudirka, and younger people like Matthew Lee Knowles, Neil Luck and Adam Delacour. From the previous generation there's Michael Finnissy, Christopher Fox and Richard Ayres. And the mighty Chris Newman living in Berlin. I see John White and Howard Skempton occasionally, when their work permits them time. Chris Hobbs I've only met once. Michael Parsons I see quite a lot. He regularly shows up to gigs, still has an interest and curiosity undiminished, and is still very present and involved.

But as for the composers I've described, how do we categorise them and their music, for those who wish to do so? Post-Cage/Feldman/Wolff? Post-70s British Experimental? Laurence Crane's music fits most easily into a model of prior BritEx music. His and Matteo Fargion's music has such an obvious, clear, readily understandable quality, friendly and open, using material familiar to anyone. There's

an element of this in John Lely's music. James Saunders' music can seem more esoteric and rarefied, but gently so. Markus Trunk's possibly too. The music simply states itself. As does Bryn Harrison's warmth of sound world.

Yes, they are definitely individuals. The description "maverick" is a patronising word sometimes produced in the press, or even by arts organisations themselves, which effectively describes an inability to categorise it in any other way. (The word implies there's an orthodoxy. What orthodoxy? I don't accept that.) Music of a clear appearance probably describes it best. A deadpan factuality. Simply stating the bald fact. The blatancy of this can be so refreshing as to sometimes provoke laughter, or equally to others can be frustrating and irritating. The naked truth. No ornamentation to sweeten the pill. A down to earth honesty. Take it or leave it. So if you like what I'm describing, please go and hear it, and if you don't, then steer clear.

Tim Parkinson, October 2011

#### **Some selected books to read.**

James Saunders writes about his modular approach recently in *Perspectives of New Music* and the book *Blocks of Sound and the Unbroken Continuum*. See James Saunders, 'Modular Music', *Perspectives of New Music*, Vol46/1 (Winter 2008): 152-93; and James Saunders, 'What are you doing with your music?', in Brian Marley and Mark Wastell (eds), *Blocks of Consciousness and the Unbroken Continuum*, (London: Sound 323 Press, 2006), 254-63

For a description of Laurence Crane's Wigmore Alternative Series, see Michael Bracewell - "The Nineties. When surface was depth", pp.33-35

Jonathan Burrows "A Choreographers Handbook" covers much of his and Matteo Fargion's shared thoughts about composition.

Interviews with Laurence Crane and Bryn Harrison and many more can be found in "*The Ashgate Research Companion to Experimental Music*", ed. James Saunders (Ashgate, 2009)

Interviews with Matteo Fargion, Laurence Crane, Markus Trunk and Richard Emsley can be found on my website.  
[www.untitledwebsite.com](http://www.untitledwebsite.com)

#### **Some selected youtube clips**

Of course, there's a great deal on YouTube at the moment. For starters, check out Laurence Crane <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SaNYtatzFbw>, and Matteo Fargion <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8FVMb2m9sjQ>. Of course once you start, the links will present themselves to things from all of the composers listed above.

My interviews with Michael Parsons, Richard Emsley, John White and Chris Newman, and much more may be seen here <http://www.youtube.com/user/untitledparkinson>

#### **A few websites**

<http://www.jonathanburrows.info>  
<http://www.brynharrison.com>  
<http://www.james-saunders.com>  
<http://www.johnlely.co.uk>  
<http://www.untitledwebsite.com>  
<http://www.experimentalmusic.co.uk>  
<http://www.musicwedliketohear.com>

#### **Some recent recordings I've been enjoying.**

Laurence Crane - *20th Century Music*, solo piano pieces 1985-1999. Michael Finnissy, piano (Metier msv28506)

James Saunders - *divisions that could be autonomous but that comprise the whole* (Another Timbre at44) A selection of six recent works, played by the Edges Ensemble, Philip Thomas, Rhodri Davies, Stephen Chase, Angharad Davies, Tim Parkinson & James Saunders.

James Saunders - *#[unassigned]* (confront 15). A double cd, designed to be played simultaneously, Anton Lukoszevieve cello, Andrew Sparling clarinet.

Bryn Harrison's music can be heard on various releases. See composer's website for details. Two substantial works though, *surface forms (repeating)* is on *ELISION: transference* (HCR02), and *Listenings I* is on *Darragh Morgan: Opera* (NMC D108).

Chris Newman - *Cusped Truth*. John McAlpine, piano (telos TLS112) Recent release of four substantial piano works.

Chris Newman - *Piano Sonatas Nos. 1, 4, 6, 10*. Michael Finnissy, piano (mode 201)

Paul Whitty - *thirty-nine pages*. Darragh Morgan violin, Mary Dullea piano. (Metier msv28509)

Michael Parsons - *piano music 1993-2007*. John Tilbury piano. (MPCD0208)

John Lely - *Launch of the Red Bird* (Home released cd of electronic pieces which needs to be included here.)

Richard Emsley - *Flowforms*. A selection of pieces performed by Topologies. (Metier MSV CD92044)

Tim Parkinson - *piano piece piano piece*. Philip Thomas, piano (EWR 1005)

Tim Parkinson - *cello piece*. Stefan Thut, cello (EWR 0603)