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Four essays around
Third Sonata



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1. The making of *Third Sonata*

In this essay I deal with the Sonatas in the order in which I conceived them.

Double Portrait

28th October–2nd November 2003 My first impulse was to write a short (7-8 minute) lyrical piece using the matrix from *Scafra Prelude* No 11. This consists of two intercut scafras, one a pyramid and the other a frame reverse, and I decided to compose the piece using modes based on cryptograms of your name and mine, one for each scafra. For the composition of the *Scafra Preludes* in 1995 I invented a cryptogrammatic alphabet (the scaprel alphabet) from which the current cryptograms were drawn.

I assigned to the 8 elements of the pyramid the letters a, l, i, s, on, t, r, u: putting 'on' as a single element because in your cryptogram both letters are represented by the same note, G#. In this way I arrived at 8 different pitches, A, F, B, D#, G#, E, C#, F#, which I laid out along the base of the pyramid to act as transpositions for the elements. Working upwards through the matrix, this gave me the transpositions for the entire pyramid. The cryptogram also served as an 8-note mode in which the music of the pyramid was to be written. I would transpose this mode into a different pitch for each element (the equivalent of each element being in a different key): the correct pitch for each was determined by the matrix.

But I wished the element which begins the whole piece, [ON], to contain your cryptogram at the original pitch, so that the piece would open with your musical 'signature'. The only way to effect this was to transpose the 8 notes of the cryptogram up a semitone for the entire pyramid, giving B \flat , F#, C, E, A, F, D, G. In this way [ON], the fifth element, now had a pole note of A for Alison, reproducing your cryptogram correctly. This I did.

I assigned to the 5 elements of the frame reverse the letters d, a, r, y, l, which of course give the first five notes of the scaprel row. They were to act as transpositions and modes in the same way as the 'alison' cryptogram. Also, since [d] is the final element in the matrix, my 'signature' mode ends the whole piece just as yours begins it. Thus I arrived at the overall shape of the piece and its pitch worlds.

A	f	ON	/
E A		S ON	
	b\flat f		y /
E A F		S ON T	
	c\sharp b\flat f		r y /
C E A F		I S ON T	
	a c\sharp b\flat f		a r y /
C E A F D		I S ON T R	
d a c\sharp b\flat		d a r y	
F \sharp C E A F D		L I S ON T R	
d a c\sharp		d a r	
F \sharp C E A F D G		L I S ON T R U	
d a		d a	
B\flat F \sharp C E A F D G		A L I S ON T R U	
d		d	

The pitches in the left-hand matrix correspond to the letters in the right-hand one.

I now needed to assign lengths to the elements. The system I used was a serial one: an element with pole note E was made to be four seconds long, F five seconds, F \sharp six, G seven, A eight, B \flat nine, C ten, C \sharp eleven and D twelve seconds. Three pitches do not appear in the above list: A \flat , B and E \flat : this is because they are not present in either of the cryptograms (after transposing the 'alison' letters, see above) and so do not appear in the matrix.

Having completed a detailed map of my piece (for which I already had a title: *Double Portrait*) I began the process of composition. I improvised two relatively extended passages into the sequencer, one for each mode. Then I cut the two streams arbitrarily into the required serial lengths for the elements, and filtered out unwanted notes so that the music for each element conformed to the required mode in its correct transposition.¹ I cloned and pasted the resulting passages into their appropriate places in the matrix.

At this early stage I actually reduced the mode for the 'alison' stream from its full 8 notes in the matrix to only the first 5, thinking this produced a clearer pitch world. Later, in December, I would reverse this decision and in *Third Sonata* the modes of the 'alison' stream contain the full 8 notes: though in *Cellini* (which *Double Portrait* would become) element [L] (complete)

¹ It's easier while improvising not to worry about 'wrong' notes – notes not in the current mode – the computer will get rid of them for you later.

and parts of [S] [ON] and [T] remain in their original reduced forms as remnants of this early version.

This process of improvisation, cutting, filtering and pasting would, I hoped, produce the textural and stylistic continuity within each stream and the contrast between the two I was looking for. I had loaded the dice in my own favour by deciding beforehand that the 'alison' stream would be free-flowing and lyrical, while the 'daryl' stream would consist of solitary block chords and nothing else.

I found I was not completely satisfied with the results of this exercise. The music I had improvised was perfectly usable but much too dense: the piece as it stood sounded frenetic and there was an over-richness of material for the length: this certainly wasn't the lyrical love-song I had envisaged. My solution was to stretch the material, to 'reduce the tempo' in effect, and in the process, of course, make the whole piece longer. This operation can be easily done in the computer, and after a few experiments I arrived at what I considered a satisfactory rate of flow for the music. The only problem was that I now had an eighteen minute piece: but I liked the material I had improvised and decided to take the consequences. However I became uncomfortable with my original title. The work I was producing was far weightier than I had expected: this pleased me – I always feel happy when making something big – but *Double Portrait* had been outgrown. The word *sonata* kept on in my brain and without much of a struggle I gave in to it.

Cellini

3rd–17th November 2003 Knowing now that I was engaged in the writing of a Sonata I began the process of polishing, editing and pruning. I soon saw that, although the 'alison' material worked well at the new length, the 'daryl' did not: it was overstretched, too long, it halted. So I plumped for inconsistency: I shrank the 'daryl' stream again: not to its original length but to somewhere in between. Now 'daryl's' proportions were internally consistent but no longer matched 'alison's': and the overall length of the piece was reduced to 15 minutes, which it still is.

I now began in earnest, knowing I was working on a large-scale piece. I had already made two contrasting streams of music, each internally consistent, both of which I was pleased with. But I now saw a new problem: especially within the 'alison' stream, consistency actually worked against the listener's apprehension of the form. A couple of minutes into the piece elements were occurring which were so similar to what had come before they were not noticeably new music at all: perception of the form disintegrated there and then.² What was needed was more

² Seven weeks later when I began *Boethius* I adopted an opposite attitude to the issue of contrast, positively encouraging the elements to merge into undifferentiated passages.

contrast between the internal elements of the 'alison' stream. Each new element must be perceived as different from what had come before and must be sufficiently characterised to be recognisable on its subsequent appearances. This necessitated a *second level* of contrast: the first level, already established, was between 'alison' and 'daryl', helped by the two modes in which they are written and by the starkness of 'daryl's' block chords. The second level must now emerge *within* 'alison' and must be instantly differentiable without destroying the stylistic overview uniting the whole frame, which will appear complete at the end of the work.

To this end I made many adjustments, revising most of the elements and recomposing several from scratch. This process went on and on: I composed intensively day after day until in the end I wrote myself into the ground. For the week up to 17th November (I see from my journal) I was cutting and cutting, more and more savagely, leaving emptier and emptier textures, and liking what remained less and less.

The problem that faced me was the level at which to pitch the improvisation. My original impulse was to pitch it high, though not as high as the generation from scratch of the entire texture: I wanted to provide musical ideas, but ideas which were sketchy enough to leave enormous scope for reimagining – ideas, indeed, which could hardly stand on their own without such reimagining. My cutting in the week up to November 17th was in recognition that what I had composed was *too full* for this process to work properly: there was too much music present and by cutting I was trying to reduce it to basic motifs, more like hints than fully-formed passages.

Finally I realised how tired I was and how unreliable my judgments had become. I determined to take some time off, stopped work on 18th and promptly collapsed with my worst bout of exhaustion for several months.

*The remaining seven sections of this essay are lifted, slightly revised, from **The Genesis of Third Sonata** in the appendix to the score of that work.*

Blueprint

Sabbatical: 18th November–7th December 2003 While I recuperated somewhat I took stock. Looking at why the piece wasn't working forced me to analyse its form, to search for its basic principles. It was now that it occurred to me that the skeleton I was searching for could be written down and would make a perfectly good and complete improvisation piece. Any number of further works, I realised, could be extrapolated from this blueprint. *Cellini*, sitting unfinished on my desk, constituted just one of those possible extrapolations, despite the fact that it had come first. Thus was *Blueprint* conceived.

What I had done was to derive – backwards – the parent from the child. On a journey to Wales on 27th November 2003 I came up with the word *intropolation* to describe this process (see below). On 28th I sketched in my journal how an intropolated version of my Sonata would look. Today *Blueprint* looks very similar to this maquette.

Boethius

The idea for a second extrapolation also came to me during my period of rest: *Cellini* seemed rather gestural to me now, a result of my original desire to introduce as much contrast as possible between the thirteen elements, giving each an easily recognised profile to make the structure clear to the listener. This almost Lisztian version I chose to keep, finding no objection to it on its own terms: but I saw that a more cerebral version was also possible and determined to do this also, once I finished the first. This would eventually emerge as *Boethius*.

Stillness

8th–25th December 2003 On going back to work in early December I began by making a score of *Blueprint*. This proved illuminating: the new notation, utterly different from *Cellini*, helped clarify my thinking about the whole project. I had previously drawn a matrix of *Third Sonata's* elements (see above) but *Blueprint* worked much better for me as a 'map' of the form. The very look of it stimulated new ideas in me, and immediately the vision of a third extrapolation arrived: very simple, a single chord for each element, laid out and notated like *Blueprint*, but to be played straight, not improvised. In the New Year this would become *Stillness*: my original title for *Bashô*.

I should perhaps point out here that none of the Sonatas' final titles had yet been conceived. Throughout this article I have chosen for clarity to refer to them as they are named today (except *Stillness*): but during December and January I was using very different names: *Third Sonata (first extrapolated version)* – *Cellini* – *Third Sonata (second extrapolated version)* – *Boethius* – and so on. *Blueprint* was *Third Sonata (intropolated version)*.

I now returned with new energy to what would become *Cellini*, scrapping half of what I had and rewriting a good proportion of the rest. My deliberations during my rest period had thrown up the idea of inversions and retrogrades of the most-repeated elements and these I began to implement in *Cellini* with immediate success. I straightway fed them back into *Blueprint*. Thus once again the extrapolated was the begetter of the intropolated version. This consistency between versions of *Third Sonata* has been maintained ever since.

At this point (December 2003) conceptions existed for four Sonatas: *Cellini*, *Boethius*, *Stillness* and *Blueprint* (*Blueprint* alone stood complete). As the number of extrapolations burgeoned I realised that my approach to improvisation within each would be different. The idea was dimly

in my mind, even at that time, that the set might turn out to be, among other things, a demonstration of the various 'levels'³ of improvisation available to the performer, from the complete generation of the texture (*Blueprint*) to the conventional interpretation of a through-composed score (*Boethius*) and beyond to the Feldman-like simplicity of *Stillness* (*Bashô*): a sort of manifesto, in effect.

Navratilova

This thought brought with it another: that if the Sonatas as a whole were to represent the full spectrum of improvising styles, there was at least one missing. *Blueprint* was a completely improvised piece; *Cellini* had turned out quite full of notes, leaving room for some ornamentation and melodic invention, but not as much as I originally intended; *Boethius* and *Stillness* were through-composed. To give a better spread across the improvisation continuum a part-improvised Sonata was needed to go 'between' *Blueprint* and *Cellini*. I came up with the idea for a fifth Sonata, the one which would become *Navratilova*.

Also around this time I became dissatisfied with the terminology I was employing for the various kinds of improvisation which exist – and not just in *Third Sonata*.⁴ I began to look for a single term which would embrace them all. On 10th December I came up with the word *reimagine*. Also during the second week of December 2003 *Blueprint* was put into the computer.

Minotaur

26th December 2003–9th March 2004 *Cellini* was finally completed between Christmas and the New Year, and *Stillness* was realised during January. At this time I was planning only five Sonatas: these three plus *Boethius* and *Navratilova*. Sketches for *Boethius* consisting of my musical improvisations and structural theorising were done between Christmas and the New Year but work was postponed until I had more energy (I was again feeling ill). Beginning on 3rd January 2004 I passed the time by writing an article, *The Improvisation Continuum*,⁵ a verbal expression of my new manifesto. This project grew like the Sonatas themselves into a major statement and its completion took many weeks. And – as often happens – the act of elucidating my thoughts produced new compositional ideas. On 4th February I conceived a 'thread' Sonata whose name – *Minotaur* – arrived with it. On the same day my journal shows that, warming to the idea of evocative titles, I chose names for all six Sonatas (completed or

³ as I would have said then: see *The Improvisation Continuum* below.

⁴ There are very few other composers, if any, who employ the spread of improvisatory techniques I do. Amazingly, the predecessor with the widest spread is none other than John Cage.

⁵ Dazzle Music 2004, and on my website.

not). Only one (*Stillness*) has since been changed. *Minotaur* was composed then and there, in three days.

I finished *The Improvisation Continuum* on 20th February. *Boethius* was next on my agenda and I returned to the post-Christmas sketches I had made. The musical ideas were inferior and I dumped them, but the structural ones were good and I began again from these. As with *Cellini*, two streams of music, 'alison' and 'daryl', were improvised into the computer to be edited and re-composed. The process of working up the material into its present form took some time – not as long as with *Cellini*, because in that work I had cracked several major problems relating to extended scafra structures (see **Appendix 4** in the score of *Third Sonata*) the solutions of which fed through into *Boethius* – but longer than the other three. I printed up a score of *Boethius* on 9th March.

Flail

24th March–17th June 2004 Five of the six Sonatas were now complete: all except *Navratilova* (or so I thought). On 24th March I made the improvisation from which this final Sonata was to emerge. It turned out so well that I kept it as a piece in its own right under the title *Flail*. It exists, of course, not as a score but a sequence, and as a recording.

Exhausted after *Flail* I abandoned composition for a further 2½ months. This was not a fallow period however: after a further health setback and recovery, I edited the first eleven *Scafra Preludes* for publication, I helped create a garden and I got married. On 2nd June I returned to *Flail* and began to turn it into *Navratilova*, selecting thirteen short passages from the original improvisation, editing them down to the exact elements I wanted, adapting them to the correct modes for *Third Sonata* and choosing a notational convention for the piece. As this process continued I began to employ practices more radical than mere adaptation, and I found myself ditching more than one of my improvised elements and substituting newly composed ones in their place. Some of the ideas from *Flail*, excellent in themselves, just didn't 'go' when slotted into the matrix and juxtaposed in new ways. The original [ON], [I] and [y] were the principal victims of this cull.

On 15th June, two days before finishing *Navratilova*, I suddenly had a new idea about *Boethius*. While writing it in February I had decided that any inversions (*Blueprint* prescribes 18 of them) would exclude the reversal of the upper and lower voices: the music would be inverted as required but the bassline would remain in the bass. Now in June it occurred to me that this may have been a wrong decision. I tried out *Boethius* with the inversions fully inverted and the improvement slapped me in the face. How could I have missed so obvious a thing? The answer, as always, is that I started from an assumption – that the bass must stay in the left

hand – which I didn't question and which happened to be wrong. *Always question your assumptions* – is this the most important maxim for the creative artist?

Bashô

On 17th June 2004, one month to the day after my wedding with Alison, *Navratilova* was finished. In the celebratory atmosphere of a long task completed I unexpectedly came up with a final idea. The Sonata that had since February been *Stillness* transformed itself into *Bashô* and a haiku was written as its motto.

Third Sonata was complete.

2. Compositional techniques in *Minotaur*

Minotaur was the last of the six sonatas to be conceived and the fourth to be composed. It was written between 4th and 6th January 2004.

The idea was to make a chain of single notes (*given pitches*) – a 'thread' to guide the improviser through the labyrinth of the matrix: hence the title. (Pedants will point out that I ought to have called it *Theseus* since it was he who had the idea of paying out a thread which would show him the way out of the maze once he had killed the Minotaur. True. Tough munchies.)

The player improvises the music from the usual modes, visiting the given pitches as they appear in the course of each element. Within each element all the notes of its mode appear as given pitches, once only: so the 'alison' elements contain 8 notes each, the 'daryl' ones 5. When an element recurs the given notes are repeated exactly, or are inverted/retrograded in accordance with *Third Sonata's* ground plan.

I determined the precise nature of each given note by chance operations. I used two tools: the transparent mauve plastic 12-sided die which I bought in a games shop when my children were small (we had gone in to buy *Dungeons and Dragons*) and which I have used in many works including *Piece for the Wicked*, *Safra Preludes* and *Dicing with De'Ath*; and a set of 6-sided dice given to Alison and me by Reynaldo Young at Christmas 2003.

The following parameters were determined by the dice:

- The order in which the notes appear.
- The tessitura of each note: the piano keyboard was divided into 7 regions of an octave each, 4 notes (the bottom 2 and the top 2) being omitted from consideration.
- The position of each note: each element was divided into 20 segments of equal length; notes were assigned to the first 8 segments thrown up by the dice (the first 5 in the case of the 'daryl' elements) – the rest were left empty.

3. Compositional techniques in *Boethius*

1. The 'alisontru' model. I began with the idea of a two part invention in canon. The lower voice would consist of a single statement of the material, the upper voice four statements at various transpositions and diminutions. For the notation I chose conventional barring and I arrived at the length of the model (72 bars of $\frac{2}{4}$ at crotchet =60) by adding together the durations in seconds of the 'alisontru' elements as prescribed in *Blueprint*.

The rhythm of the material was first separately fixed, taking the longest and slowest statement (the lower voice at the full 72 bars) as my macquette. I used the following chance operations to arrive at the rhythm:

First I filled the passage with crotchets, two to each bar. Now I threw dice to determine whether any crotchet would be split into two quavers. Then I threw again to determine whether each of the resulting values would be a note or a rest. In this last case I 'loaded' the dice in favour of notes, about a 2 to 1 probability against a rest occurring. Finally any note with a rest following it was lengthened to fill the gap, leaving a legato rhythm of crotchets, quavers and multiples thereof. At the end of the process I had 119 notes.

Now I applied pitches to the rhythm. I made a single line improvisation, altered it to contain the 'alison' cryptogram at a certain point (boxed on the first page of the score) and edited it to exactly 119 notes. I applied the pitches note for note to the pre-existing rhythm. Thus I had arrived at a first draft of the lower voice of the model. It remained to divide the model into sections according to the lengths of the 'alisontru' elements and apply the appropriate modes to the pitches by moving them, mostly up to the next available mode note.

The lower voice was now complete, and as planned I used it to provide the material for the four diminutions of the upper voice:

Lower voice	1st note F#	72 bars
Upper voice 1st statement	1st note E	6 bars
2nd	1st note C	14 bars
3rd	1st note A	22 bars
4th	1st note F#	30 bars

Thus 1) each succeeding statement in the upper voice would be a minor third lower than its predecessor (the first note of the first statement had to be adjusted up a semitone from its 'true' E♭ to fit the [A] mode); and 2) each succeeding statement would be 8 bars longer than the last.

The upper voice was made in this way, though I was quite free with changes:

- In all four statements the music was expanded from a single line texture in various ways for better effect.
- Certain pitches were changed for better effect (always respecting the applicable mode).
- The third statement was changed quite radically at [ON]: this element would open the finished Sonata and I wanted an arresting start. The other three upper voice statements were similarly changed for consistency, but when I tried the same thing with the lower voice it sounded awful, so (with very few misgivings) I left it as it was.

When I started 'alisontru' I had the idea that the four diminutions in the upper voice would be processed to make O, I, RI and R forms. I soon realised that this confused the listener and muddled the articulation of the form. I dropped it.

A draft of 'alisontru' now existed. At the very beginning of the composition process I had decided that (unlike *Cellini* and the soon-to-arrive *Navratilova*) all the material would be composed, with respect to inversions and retrogrades, so as to flow most naturally at its final complete presentation (page 45 system 5 in the score). This produced a situation where many elements ([A] [I] [S] [T] and [R], five of the eight) actually represented in their first composed versions retrogrades and inversions of music that 'originated' earlier in the piece. These elements now had to be painstakingly put into their 'original' forms (and [L] and [ON] also retrograded and inverted here and there) for the completion of the 'alisontru' elements of the Sonata.

When I first composed *Boethius* I decided that any inversions would exclude the reversal of upper and lower voices: the music would be inverted but the bassline would remain in the

bass. On 15th June 2004 while completing *Navratilova* it occurred to me that this may have been a wrong decision. Accordingly I tried out a version with the inversions fully inverted and adopted the changes.

2. The 'daryl' model. The generation of this stream was much simpler. Two linked improvisations in $\frac{6}{8}$ were put into the computer. The first consisted of block chords, rhythmically independent in the right and left hands. The second was a LH melody with a block chord accompaniment in the RH.

The second improvisation was quickly dumped and the first selected as the sole source for the 'daryl' elements. Before using it I retrograded it: then I altered it slightly to emphasise its compound, $\frac{6}{8}$ rhythmic nature. Then I adjusted it to the correct lengths for the 'daryl' elements and edited it again for the rhythmic integrity of its separate sections. Finally I applied the appropriate modes to the music; and reduced the chords where necessary to four (sometimes three) notes per hand.

4. Pole notes in *Navratilova*

Navratilova was the final Sonata to be realised. Interestingly none of the previous five threw up the need to specify pole notes: in the highly improvised *Minotaur* and *Blueprint* it is for the player to choose pole notes, if they wish; in the more composed *Cellini*, *Boethius* and *Bashô* it's all implied and the player need not worry about it. Interestingly the implied pole notes in these three Sonatas are in many cases different, and different again from the given ones in *Navratilova*. For instance, in the case of [ON], in *Cellini* the pole note might be said to be F; in *Boethius* E; in *Bashô* either E or F#; while in *Navratilova* the given pole note is F#: different pole notes in the same element using the same mode.

But only in *Navratilova* is there a need to state the pole notes, and even here only sometimes. The need to have pole notes at all comes from the design of the Sonata: specifically from the empty space I have left for free improvisation. Here alone the player needs the help they provide in moving from one element to the next in a logical and progressive way. Modes can be used to suggest tonalities, and I soon discovered when trying out *Navratilova* that there are both elegant and, unfortunately, naff ways of going from, say, [S] to [ON] on the first page. Prescribing pole notes of A \flat and F# minimises the chances of a naff juxtaposition.

To some elements (eg [R]) I gave a pole note, not out of necessity but simply for fun.