

COMPOSITIONS PORTFOLIO COMMENTARY

by

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### **Abstract**

For this submission, I have included a commentary on the works I have written over the last two years and a CD of recordings of most of the works in the portfolio. The commentary shows the development I have made as a composer: moving from an initially fairly conventional style of composing, with an emphasis on rhythmic drive and melody, to a polystylist approach to composition - whereby I try to combine a myriad of influences in my work, and to a style of music that is more focussed on timbre, sonority and texture. I also decided to continue to develop and explore the possibilities of writing contemporary music for amateurs. The works range from pieces written for specific ensembles for workshops at Birmingham University, such as the Hermes Ensemble (*'Jimi'*), The Birmingham Contemporary Music Group (*'Fragments'*) and EXAUDI (*Yo volveré*) to works written for local projects in Germany.

The first set of songs (*The Climate Change Songs*) was written for a singer in Potsdam, Angela Baier- Bantien. *Walpurgisnacht* was written as part of a project with a group of local contemporary composers, which ultimately led to the publication of one of the oboe duets as part of a compendium of works together with the other composers. *One Day* was commissioned by the jazz saxophonist, Lars Stoermer and played by him on the accompanying CD. *Beck's Dream* was written for and performed by the guitarist Martin Milner. *Fragile Planet* was written for the pianist Mamiko Wada and played by Susan Handy on the accompanying CD. The total length of the submission is approximately 47 minutes and is comprised of 13 contrasting works.

**272 words**



## List of Submitted Works

1. ***The Climate Change Songs*: for mezzo-soprano and piano**
  - *Shale* (no recording available)
  - *Shishmaref* (track one of CD)
  - *Dark Eyes May See* (track two of CD)
  
2. ***Jimi*: Septet for the Hermes Ensemble** (track three of CD)
  
3. ***Walpurgisnacht*: 4 Duets for oboe and piano**
  - *Witches' Dance* (track four of CD)
  - *Trouble's Brewing* (track five of CD)
  - *Spice* (track six of CD)
  - *Night Flight* (no recording available)
  
4. ***Yo volveré*: for SATB a cappella choir** (track seven of CD)
  
5. ***Fragments*: for the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group** (track eight of CD)
  
6. ***One Day*: for soprano saxophone and piano** (track nine of CD)
  
7. ***Beck's Dream*: for electric guitar** (track ten of CD)
  
8. ***Fragile Planet*: for piano solo** (track eleven of CD)

## CD Track Listing

1. *Shishmaref (The Climate Change Songs, no.2)* performed by Angela Baier-Banthien (mezzo-soprano) and Susan Handy (piano)
2. *Dark Eyes May See (The Climate Change Songs, no.3)* performed by Angela Baier-Banthien (mezzo-soprano) and Susan Handy (piano)
3. *Jimi* performed by the Hermes Ensemble (flute/alto flute, bass clarinet/clarinet in Bb, marimba, piano, violin, viola, 'cello)
4. *Witches' Dance (Walpurgisnacht, no.1)* performed by Maike Wegener (oboe) and Mirko Krejci (piano)
5. *Trouble's Brewing (Walpurgisnacht, no.2)* arrangement for soprano saxophone & piano, performed by Lars Stoermer (soprano sax.) and Eike Wulfmeier (piano)
6. *Spice (Walpurgisnacht, no.3)* arrangement for soprano saxophone & piano, performed by Lars Stoermer (soprano sax.) and Eike Wulfmeier (piano)
7. *Yo volveré* performed by Juliet Fraser – soprano; Tom Williams – countertenor; Jonathan Bungard– tenor; Jimmy Holliday– bass
8. *Fragments* performed by the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group (flute/piccolo, clarinet, bassoon, horn, trumpet, percussion, harp, violin, viola, 'cello, double bass)
9. *One Day* for soprano saxophone & piano, performed by Lars Stoermer (soprano sax.) and Eike Wulfmeier (piano)
10. *Beck's Dream* for solo electric guitar, performed by Martin Milner
11. *Fragile Planet* for solo piano, performed by Susan Handy

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## Commentary on the works in my compositions portfolio

### 1. Background

As a child, I couldn't settle on learning one instrument and although clarinet remained my main instrument, I also took lessons on the bassoon, guitar, piano and saxophone: this tendency towards being a multi-instrumentalist has continued over the years and has proven useful to me in my studies in composition, as I have a practical feel for lots of instruments. Also, my many years of playing in orchestras have exposed me to a wealth of Western Art Music and timbre combinations.

I studied for my B.A. (Hons) in Music and French at Goldsmiths' College, London, from 1989 – 1993, specializing in original composition and ethnomusicology. There, I took up the sitar<sup>1</sup> and studied North Indian Hindustani Classical Music; this continues to have an influence on my compositional style. Having completed my degree, I lived in Japan for 8 months, where I took drum kit lessons. I then moved to Germany, where I continued to learn the drums, and met Lars Stoermer, a jazz saxophonist for whom I have composed a piece in this portfolio. After 14 months in Germany, I returned to England to do a PGCE in music at Southampton University, since then, I have been working as a music teacher, moving permanently to Germany in 1998. From 2007 -2009, I worked part-time and took composition classes with Wolfgang Thiel<sup>2</sup>. I took up the viola in 2008 to learn more about writing for string instruments and under Wolfgang's tutelage, published several works<sup>3</sup>. Nevertheless, I felt the need to grow more as a composer and to become a better teacher of

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<sup>1</sup> Gerry Farrell taught me sitar, he was in the gharana of Debu Chaudhuri.

<sup>2</sup> Prof.Dr.Wolfgang Thiel, former lecturer in film music composition at Hanns Eisler College in Berlin and film music composer, with whom I have continued to have regular instruction.

<sup>3</sup>Publications during this time include: *Five Pieces* for viola & piano (Gramann, 2011), *One Night in Winter* for solo viola as part of the audio book *Eines Abends im Winter* (Kinsky) and a book of violin/piano duets *Caputher Colours* (Gramann, 2013)

composition; I therefore applied to study for a research MA in composition at Birmingham University in 2012.

## 2. Research Questions

I decided to focus on three areas of enquiry for my composition portfolio: a) polystylism, b) how to broaden my palette as a composer and c) how to develop contemporary music, which is accessible for amateur musicians. I wanted to combine my myriad influences, from jazz, rock & folk music to North Indian Hindustani Classical Music, with my own deeply embedded knowledge and understanding of Western Art Music. This combining of styles leads to a polystylist vein of composing that follows in the tradition of many modern and contemporary composers: Steve Martland, Graham Fitkin, Louis Andriessen, Mark Anthony Turnage and Alfred Schnittke to name but a few. The second area of enquiry was to broaden my palette as a composer by developing my understanding and use of timbre, texture and sonority: my compositions before starting my MA had focused on music as a ‘functional language’, with a clear emphasis on more-or-less conventional, clear phrases, tonal harmony, rhythmically driven lyrical melodies. I had never considered much about writing music to create a sonic landscape – music more focussed on timbre, sonority and texture – and this has been part of my re-evaluation of, and development in my music over the course of the master’s degree. Finally, I decided to continue to explore the possibilities of writing contemporary Western Art Music for amateurs as a continuation of my previous work with a contemporary composer’s group in Brandenburg.

At the beginning of the course, I was influenced in particular by the German composer Georg Friedrich Haas’ unnerving sonic landscape in his *Limited Approximations*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Heard at the lecture ‘Musik als Plastik’ (‘Music as sound installation’) by Armin Köhler of Südwest Deutsche Rundfunk (Köhler, 2012)

(Haas, 2010) for orchestra and 6 grand pianos: the way the music does not tell a story but just *is*. In *Limited Approximations*, each of the six grand pianos had been tuned a twelfth of a tone apart, breaking the octave into 72 microtones. Harmonics were used in the orchestral parts as a backdrop, combining well with the tuning of the pianos which can be seen as an ‘approximation of the overtone scale’ (Haas, n.d.). The dissonance created by the out of tune pianos created an out of this world feel; in this, music is an experience, a sound that one wallows in. Although I hadn’t written anything like this, I could appreciate Haas’ *Limited Approximations* for its beauty, its sonic complexity, his combinations of timbres, his use of microtones and the overall effect they created. My work has not moved to such extremes as the music of Georg Friedrich Haas, but I feel it has developed over the course of my master’s degree in terms of my harmonic language, my exploration of timbre, texture and sonority and the way in which I now combine different stylistic traits in my works.

### **3. *The Climate Change Songs: for piano and mezzo-soprano***

Before writing my *Climate Change Songs*, I explored the scores of some of Lutoslawski’s works, specifically his *Livre Pour Orchestre* (composed in 1968) (Lutoslawski, 1969) *Musique Funèbre* (composed in 1958) (Lutoslawski, 1958) *Concerto for Orchestra* (composed in 1954) (Lutoslawski, 2000), and *Symphony no. 1* (composed in 1947) (Lutoslawski, 1972), and I studied Haas’ *Limited Approximations* (Haas, 2010).

#### **3.1 *The Climate Change Songs: no.1 Shale***

I wrote *Shale* with an open key signature to see what would happen if I did not restrict myself regarding tonality from the outset as I have in the past. I wanted the music to reflect the violence of fracking, hence the extremes in range, use of glissandi, aggressive Sprechgesang, rhythmic laughter of the vocal line and the opening *forte* G, at the top of the

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mezzo's range, sliding down a diminished fourth to a D#. The use of dissonant piano chords reflects the unnerving context of this piece.

*Shale* may not be a particularly extreme piece for some, but it is unlike anything I had previously written; the exploration of chord clusters and colours was new to me and lends an expressive feel to this work. The latter is a direct influence from studying Lutoslawski and the medium of 'Musik als Plastik' or music as a sound installation.

### **3.2 *The Climate Change Songs: no. 2 Shishmaref***

One of the main compositional concerns regarding *Shishmaref* was to find a suitable melancholic text that reflected common people's fears about climate change and their disillusionment with the steps world governments are taking. I finally settled on a brief poem by Martin Milner (Milner, n.d.) that describes the startling effects of climate change on the village of Shishmaref in Alaska, where, due to the melting of the permafrost and the increase in sea levels causing an increase in the tidal surges, the coastline is eroding at an alarming rate (Kolbert, 2006). Even the name of the village, 'Shishmaref', suggested the sea to me and I found the lyrics to be a source of musical inspiration. The challenge was to create images and feelings through the music: the unsettling, unnerving sense of imminent doom, the feeling of the sea gradually submerging the land.

The opening piano motif represents the waves that are eroding Shishmaref's coastline. The shifting feel of 2 against 3 in the piano part, like sand being sucked away beneath the feet of the inhabitants and the whole tone feel on the *tenuto* notes in the left hand in the first three bars (possibly an unconscious reference to Debussy's *La Mer* of 1903 - 1905) and the general melancholy created by the descending patterns and the feeling that everything is sliding down towards the sea bed, all add to the overall mood of this piece.

The vocal line from bars 9 to 15 is developed by the piano in bar 16ff, the right hand plays a variation on this in the upper register: I developed the RH of the piano from bar 16 to a line which suddenly changes octaves, so making the line more disjunct and more haunting & unnerving. The fermata at bar 35 on a shimmering low Db to D, an augmented octave above, exemplifies a kind of dissonance that is a prominent, unsettling feature of this song. This is followed by the climax of the piece at bars 44-45 where the mezzo- soprano finally reaches a high G and the piano and singer play homophonically for the only time in the piece. This is followed by a sigh and a murky, whole tone cluster descent into the lowest register of the piano, again reflecting the submergence of the town of Shishmaref into the seabed, with the right hand getting hauntingly high until the final *piano pianissimo* shimmering dissonant dyad of the piano followed by a swelling ‘Sh’ from the singer in the last bar.

I felt, through *Shishmaref*, that I had entered a previously unknown sound world. I had managed through my music to focus on sonority, texture and harmony in a way that I had not explored before commencing my master’s degree.

### **3.3 The Climate Change Songs: no.3 *Dark eyes may see***

*Dark eyes may see* is the last song of the triptych. I wanted this final song, in spite of the bleak news regarding climate change, to somehow be a beacon of hope and also a call for individual reflection and action. In the first line of the text ‘*Turn to grow dark eyes may see,*’<sup>5</sup> the words are chosen for their vowel sounds, which relate to those associated with the seven chakras or energy wheels (Goldman, 1992, p.4-6). The varied, ever changing vowel sounds bring out the different qualities of the singer’s voice. This gave me a starting point for my lyrics and provided the inspiration I needed to write the rest of the text.

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<sup>5</sup> This first line was given to me as inspiration for the song by the poet, Martin Milner

The opening melody conveys a feeling of space through its disjunct nature and a feeling of tension created through its chromatic inflections, it wasn't until after I had written the song, that I realized a possible unconscious influence from *Mars* from Holst's *The Planets* suite (composed in 1914 -1916). The accompanying quirky piano part is scattered with false relations, so keeping the harmonies fresh. The integration of a jazzy walking bass line can be heard in the left hand from bar 32 – 35. The disjunct and dissonant nature of the opening melodic line continues a new direction in my compositional thinking.<sup>6</sup>

#### **4. *Jimi* for clarinet/bass clarinet, flute/alto flute, marimba, piano, viola, violin, cello**

The septet *Jimi*, composed for the Hermes Ensemble, was directly influenced by a previous work of mine *Purple Groove* (Gramann, 2013) for violin and piano. It shares the same rhythmic drive, playing off between a 2 and a 3 feel, and has as a central harmonic motif the dissonance between the major and minor third. The latter is in turn directly influenced by the famous 'E7#9' chord of Hendrix's *Purple Haze* (composed by Hendrix in 1966), the blues generally, with the tension created by the dissonance between the major and minor 3<sup>rd</sup>, and Bartók's 'Lake of Tears motif' (Cooper, 1996, p.94) with its arpeggio which combines both a C major and C minor feel<sup>7</sup>. My initial thought on selecting the instruments, was that the timbre of the bass clarinet and marimba would go well together. The opening marimba line was initially a lot more disjunct and although the line sounded more interesting, I realized that it would be too difficult to play such a line on the marimba. This opening line is the scaffolding for a large portion of the work, initially exposed as a solo and later in the background (bar 64), where the flute provides a bluesy melodic line and the combination of low tessitura piano and 'cello blurs the sense of tonality. The harmonic tension doesn't

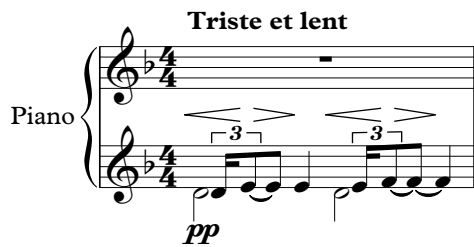
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<sup>6</sup> For this portfolio, the recordings I am submitting of two of 'The Climate Change Songs' are performed by Angela Baier Banthien (mezzo-soprano) and Susan Handy (piano).

<sup>7</sup> The 'Lake of Tears' motif can originally be found in Bartók's opera *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* (Bartók, 1911) and again in the 'Elegie' of his *Concerto for Orchestra* (Bartók, 1943).

resolve until bar 80, where the music eventually returns to the tonal centre of D. The blurred sense of tonality from bar 64 was a new harmonic direction for me; the piece otherwise shares many traits from my earlier works with its rhythmic drive and lyrical melodic lines.

*Jimi* was also influenced by ‘Des Pas sur la Neige’ (composed in 1910) from Debussy’s first book of Preludes, no. 6. (Debussy, 1986):



*Ce rythme doit avoir la valeur sonore d'un fond de paysage triste et glacé.*

This opening motif recurs almost throughout the entire piece, but is often cloaked with different harmonisations or melodic lines in the right and left hands, so the piece never sounds merely repetitive; the final version of the motif is hauntingly played two octaves higher than the original. Likewise in *Jimi*, I have recurring motifs that are cloaked in different ways.

Section C is meant to be played with real dynamic contrasts so that the energy doesn't fade. I initially had a slower tempo, but decided to increase it, so as not to reduce the energy level. I wanted this slower section to be an expansive contrast to the opening and closing of *Jimi*. I imagined a spacious soundscape with dissonant moments creating tension. I wanted to use the Clarinet in Bb as the solo instrument in this section finding its warm and velvety sound preferable to the reediness of the bass clarinet. Likewise, I revised the direction for the opening of the violin and viola parts to *sul tasto* to ensure a warmer timbre. There is less rhythmic interest for the most part of this section, so it is vital that the dynamic and timbral contrasts come across well to keep the music energized.

The end of section C also features a sequential passage that is directly influenced by the North Indian Hindustani Classical music's 'tihai' (Farrell, 1990, p.68ff), whereby the music repeats a phrase three times at the climax of the piece, to finally resolve on 'sum' (Farrell, 1990, p.113) which is both the beginning and the end of a rhythmic cycle. In *Jimi*, one could not strictly call it a tihai, as each phrase is ascending sequentially (from bar 155), but there is a feeling of climax and release, with the repetitive ascending phrase which then resolves like the 'sum' of North Indian Hindustani Music, for both the end of section C and the beginning of the recapitulation of material from section A, on beat one of bar 163.<sup>8</sup> I liked the idea of a rhythmic cycle that constantly propels the music forward through the overlapping of the end of a phrase with the beginning of the next phrase: the way that the energy of a musical line does not get stopped by a cadence point but can be propelled forwards into the next phrase through such a tihai-like construction. This final part of the composition is a variation on section A, with different textural features & more drawn-out climactic passages.

The interesting thing about *Jimi* is that it combines both my earlier love of lyrical melodies and driving rhythms with my new exploration of different sound worlds: both through the experimentation of dissonance, eg. the bitonality and blurred sense of tonality from bar 64 and also through my exploration in section C of different timbre combinations, uses of instrumental effects and varying textures and dynamics.<sup>9</sup> I also manage to draw on

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<sup>8</sup> I have entered a revised version of the score for my portfolio, written a semitone higher than the original and with a simplified rather than shifting time signature & slightly simplified marimba part: the workshop with the Hermes Ensemble helped me to realize that writing out the music more simply might increase the likelihood of it being performed.

<sup>9</sup> I have submitted this very rough recording from the workshop with the Hermes Ensemble with the portfolio, as the original version was too difficult and the marimba player confessed to having had no time to practice the piece previously as can be heard by what he plays in the recording; he assured me however that the changes I made to the revised score mean that the present version is much easier to play.



ideas from many different styles of music, from Hendrix to Bartók, to Debussy to North Indian Hindustani Music.

## 5. *Walpurgisnacht*

The final work in my first academic year stemmed from my involvement in a local contemporary composers' group<sup>10</sup>. The publishing company, Hofmeister, asked us to write a book of duets for oboe and piano, for amateur oboists. The goal of the book was to introduce amateur oboists to contemporary work and to stretch them stylistically.<sup>11</sup>

Writing for beginners to intermediate-level students in a contemporary way, is in some respects a lot more challenging than writing for professional musicians. There are many limitations to be considered. In other respects, it makes the task of the composer easier in the sense that there are clear boundaries of what can or cannot work. Since the book was to be a compendium of the work of eight composers, there was also a limit to the length that the duet could be, so again, clear boundaries were set.

### 5.1 *Walpurgisnacht: no.1. Witches' Dance*

The opening melodic idea for *Witches' Dance* came to me intuitively as an irregular dance in 7/4, sounding awkward and clumsy, with 'witchy' acciaccaturas. The rest of the music was developed consciously. I developed off-beat, dissonant piano chords to accompany the opening theme and push the music forwards. I later changed the time

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<sup>10</sup> 'Fachgruppe Neue Musik' is a contemporary composers group based in the Bundesland of Brandenburg, Germany: the role of the group is to write contemporary music, which is accessible for the students of the state music schools, a music that although it is contemporary must still be technically viable for a beginner or intermediate student to play.

<sup>11</sup> In preparation for the writing of this duet, I attended a half-day seminar on writing contemporary oboe (Thielbach, 2013)

signature of the opening theme to make it more accessible for younger students to a bar of 4/4 followed by a bar of 3/4.

Section B hovers between an F $\natural$  and F $\sharp$  tonal centre which creates an uncomfortable harmonic feel. The homophony in bars 46 – 47 builds up to the climactic combination of sections A & B played simultaneously at bar 48, which uncomfortably has two consecutive tonal centres of G $\sharp$  and G $\natural$ . The octave leaps in the left hand are now an octave lower, heightening the climax, with added rests in the LH creating rhythmic interest and also lightening the bass line so that the upper parts (RH and oboe) come across. For the last phrase (bar 64-65) and in other parts of the score (eg. RH piano bar 6), I initially wrote the acciaccaturas in the RH of the piano too, but realized that parallel acciaccaturas would sound messy, so I left them with the oboe part, keeping the piano supportive here. The left hand octave jumps are influenced by the boogie-woogie piano music I played in my teens.

Although *Witches' Dance* has the rhythmic drive of earlier works, I explored new harmonic territory: developing my use of dissonance and exploring further the bitonality that I had started to develop in *Jimi*.

## **5.2 *Walpurgisnacht: no.2. Trouble's Brewing***

For my second piece, I wanted to make the oboe part technically simpler than in *Witches' Dance*: the idea being that if the duets were ever to be published, there would be a variety of different levels within the book. I also wanted the piece to be evocative to help the player to imagine the particular mood that I intended. The opening trills represent the 'trouble brewing' and could represent a bubbling cauldron.

Being a mature student and having listened to a huge amount of music for the last 44 years, I find that not all of the pieces in this portfolio can be said to be influenced by one specific piece of music, but are rather subliminally influenced by all of the different kinds of music that I have performed and heard over the years. For this second duet however, I very specifically found inspiration in Michael Torke's piece *Ecstatic Orange* (composed in 1985), (Torke, 2010). Apart from the sheer brilliance of Torke's orchestration, I enjoyed the way that his thematic material stemmed from four notes: it provided the stimulus I needed to start composing. I liked the shape and the tension of this four-note motif: a rising minor 2<sup>nd</sup>, then a perfect fourth leap followed by a descending minor 2<sup>nd</sup>, making the overall range of the motif a tritone.

The opening RH piano motif (motif 'x') was influenced directly by *Ecstatic Orange*. This is accompanied with oscillating, unsettling broken triads in the left hand made up of 'nearly' octaves and 'nearly' fifths. From bar 5, a variation of the opening 4 bars is played. This time, the right hand has taken over the left hand's quarter notes, the inner part is syncopated and the left hand has taken over the eerie motif x. In bar 9, there is a free imitation between the right and left hands and an augmentation and development of motif x in the oboe part. In bars 15 - 17, there is a dramatic climax and a return of the oboe trill. This is followed by one beat of silence, a unison at 15ma in the piano followed by a recapitulation of the theme, with the oboe now playing motif x, three oboe notes are then cheekily echoed by the right hand and then the left hand of the piano. There is a final unsettling oboe note and then a piano dyad F# - F $\natural$ , the 'uncomfortable' diminished octave recurs: such an exploration of dissonance is at a different level to my earlier works.

### **5.3 *Walpurgisnacht: no.3. Spice***

The augmented triads of the scherzo of Poulenc's *Oboe Sonata* (composed in 1962) (Poulenc, 1963) influenced the middle section of *Spice* (bar 16ff), but in *Spice* they are slow and expansive with gradually shifting rhythms above a contrapuntal piano part which develops the opening eighth note motif of the oboe part and the disjunct shake of the left hand rhythm of bar 9. Augmented chords are both a harmonic and melodic element throughout *Spice*. The swap between 3/4 and 6/8 is an integral part of the piece. In *Spice*, I continued to develop my exploration of dissonance, I experimented with augmented chords, reflected on the spacing of chords for the piano and I also enjoyed exploring different textural combinations.

#### **5.4 *Walpurgisnacht: no.4. Night Flight***

The initial idea for *Night Flight* came to me during a dramatic thunderstorm. I imagined a group of witches riding the tempest and the opening piano idea came intuitively to me. After experimenting with changing the tempo of the piece to a slower middle section, I then rejected this idea in favour of a fast tempo reminiscent of the *perpetuum mobile* of the final movement of Bartók's *Concerto for Orchestra* (composed in 1943) (Bartók, 2004), with the opening piano idea constantly playing like the falling and rising of the wind, and a recurring lightning motif which comes in for the first time in bar 24 after an introductory, gradual oboe build up. After the oboe commences with the lightning motif, the music is relentless until the end, even through the middle *piano* section. The lightning motif is rarely fixed, but often has the range of an 'uncomfortable' octave, be it an augmented octave or a major 7<sup>th</sup>, with a lot of tension in the disjunct leap, the middle note of the lightning motif is sometimes a 5<sup>th</sup>, sometimes a 4<sup>th</sup>, sometimes a tritone. I try not to fall into too many patterns so as to keep the music energized.

I broke up some of the sequences so it did not become too mechanical. I also adjusted some of the oboe writing where it was too difficult at speed to leap in one direction and then immediately in the other direction. Likewise, with the oboe articulation, some of the slurring I had initially written spanned over an octave and would have proved difficult for an oboist to achieve successfully. To heighten the climax at bar 54, I added cluster chords. The music then suddenly pulls back to *piano* and I reworked the left hand of the piano to include the triplet quarter note rhythm of the climax, which then gradually dissolves back into a pounding eighth note left hand accompaniment and a final homophonic, contrary motion lightning motif to close *Night Flight*.<sup>12</sup>

The use of cluster chords, the experimentation with different textures, and the exploration of disjunct, dissonant intervals are all prominent features of the duets in *Walpurgisnacht* and reflect my development as a composer in terms of my use of harmony, dissonance and texture in particular.

## 6. *Yo volveré*

The use of breathing as a timbral feature in Eric Whitacre's *Cloudburst* (Whitacre, 1996) directly influenced my use of vocal effects to represent the sea in *Yo volveré*. Another feature of *Cloudburst* that also influenced me is the way Whitacre takes basic triadic harmony and then maintains pedal notes in some voices and divides the choir to make the other singers shift in conjunct motion to a new, close harmony cluster; the effect is mesmerizing:

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<sup>12</sup> The oboist who was going to record all the pieces in *Walpurgisnacht* fell sick after the recording of *Witches' Dance*, so for the purpose of this portfolio, I am submitting recordings of the other pieces played by soprano saxophone and piano, as both the range and the timbre of the soprano saxophone lend themselves well to the range and quality of sound required for these pieces.

Opening of *Cloudburst* by Eric Whitacre

The image shows a musical score for four voices: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The score is in 4/4 time with a key signature of two sharps (D major). The lyrics are: Soprano: 'La llu - vi - a O (m) (m)'; Alto: 'La llu - vi - a O (m) (m)'; Tenor: 'La llu - vi - a O (m) (m)'; Bass: 'La llu - vi a O (m) (m)'. The music features a homophonic texture with a common melodic line for all voices, supported by a bass line that moves stepwise in contrary motion.

I had to write this piece to be performed at an EXAUDI workshop with only 4 voices, so I did not have the same potential of large clusters as Whitacre, but I did use the idea of moving conjunctly whilst maintaining pedal notes. For example, at the opening of *Yo volveré* where the alto maintains a pedal E from bars 1 to 5 and the tenor moves conjunctly from the opening unison E to a D and then remains on the pedal note D until bar 5, whilst soprano and bass parts continue stepwise in contrary motion. Also, towards the middle of *Cloudburst*, there is a section where the choir sings in staggered entries, each time the chord becomes more expansive, with eventually the soprano part rising over the top. I use these staggered entries, imitating the soaring of the waves of the sea, from letter D to E in *Yo volveré*, so allowing the music to build up to a mini climax at letter E.

I chose the poem *Yo volveré* by Pablo Neruda (Neruda, 1970) as it struck me as suitable to set to music for a short choral work partly because of the brevity of the text and the feeling of space between the lines and partly because of the evocative nature of the text, which lent itself well to word painting. The text seemed to divide well into two main kinds of blocks which are then varied in the music: the opening homophonic texture which recurs in varied form throughout the music and then the polyphonic second section which is evocative of wave-like shapes in the gentle rocking of the pitches and swelling of the dynamics.

The repeating wave-like coda is gradually meant to get quieter, as if becoming part of the infinite spirit at the end of this piece, the conductor should only stop the piece when she/he feels that the music has merged into the infinite spirit and the choir cannot hum any softer.<sup>13</sup>

In this piece, I explored close harmony as well as widely spaced open chords across the choir, I experimented with different kinds of imitative and polyphonic texture and gradually shifting dynamics to set the mood of the sea, I tried to use silence to convey something of the vastness of the ocean and the spirit world around us. Texture, sonority and silence are all central features of *Yo volveré* and are part of the compositional journey that I have taken over the past two years.

### **7. *Fragments*: Composition for the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group**

The use of silence and space in this composition is intentional and reflects the title. Harmonically, I develop some of the harmonies I had begun to explore with the oboe and piano duets, focussing on the minor second and tritone. My main compositional concern for *Fragments* was how to write for the harp and how to combine it so that the harp could be heard alongside the rest of the ensemble. I therefore decided that the limitations and scope of the harp should in some way be a cornerstone of my composition. I listened to or studied the scores of several works that include the harp: works by Ravel, where his use of harp both in a soloistic sense (*Introduction and Allegro* for String Quartet, Flute, Clarinet and Harp composed in 1905) (Ravel, n.d.) and as an orchestral colour (*Mother Goose Suite*, composed in 1911), (Ravel, 1989) are impressive; works of David Watkins': *Bolero* (Watkins, 1979), *Nocturne* and *Fire Dance* from his *Petite Suite* (Watkins, 1984); Carlos Salzedo's *Chanson dans la Nuit*, (composed in 1927) (Salzedo, 1953), with effects such as *près de la table*,

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<sup>13</sup> The recording I have entered with this portfolio is not sung how I would ideally envisage this piece which would be for a large S, A, T, B choir, but it gives a good idea of how the piece could sound.

harmonics, and striking the soundboard - all of these effects are in *Fragments*; the combination of flute and harp and the use of dissonance and space in Birtwistle's *Tragoedia* (composed in 1965) (Birtwistle, 1967), mvt V; Stravinsky's *Symphony in 3 movements* (composed in 1942 – 1945) (Stravinsky, 1984 ), in particular movement II's textural writing.

The use of harp as a cornerstone instrument can be seen in many parts of *Fragments*, for example: the use of *piano* at the beginning, with staccato accompanying notes by the ensemble and clear bell-like harmonics & percussion on the sound board of the harp which cut across well, or the use of arpeggiated, flowing chords from Figure F which are contrasting to the rhythm of the rest of the ensemble and therefore also cut across clearly. I have also used the harp to enhance other instrumental lines, eg. the flute, clarinet & bassoon lines from figure H where the harp harmonics sound in unison with the flute line and later with the clarinet and then bassoon lines, adding extra colour to this section. Harp harmonics also feature prominently at the end of the piece, where I allow space for the final two harp harmonics to sound out clearly, ending with the tritone interval E $\sharp$  (4 bars after figure R) to B $\flat$  as the final note of the piece.

I wanted to be economical with my ideas, for example the sixteenth note triplet on the trumpet which features towards the beginning of the piece, recurs throughout and at the end several ideas, or fragments, occur simultaneously, until the final fragmentation, where parts break down at the end, the piece ending with the staggered triplet motif across the winds and then the final harp harmonic. Likewise, the syncopated flute line, initially at figure A, is developed as a homophonic chordal texture by full orchestra at figure B and then brought back at figure O in varied form, combined with a sinister Bartók pizz strings motif which is in turn developed from figure M, which can be seen as a development from letter I, which is



developed from letter G which is in turn developed from the introductory staccato motifs at the very opening of *Fragments*.<sup>14</sup>

*Fragments* is quirky, questioning and expectant in its use of silence. The silence is sometimes awkward and uncomfortable, sometimes playful, but I always find that the silence helps to energize the music. Sometimes the texture is broken right down to a minimal group of instruments, I varied the instrumentation of repeated sections and played with textural combinations. *Fragments* combines my old passion for syncopated rhythms with a new exploration of different timbre combinations, effects and sonority.

### **8. *One Day* for soprano saxophone and piano**

*One Day* was written for the jazz saxophonist Lars Stoermer and is influenced by his playing style and some of the more lyrical, melancholic pieces that he has composed for his quartet, such as: *Red to Green* and *One Wave, One Sea* from his album *In Here* (produced by Ajazz in 2014). *One Day* also has influences from my Irish roots in the lilting, ornamented melodic lines and from rock and blues music, with ‘blue’ and dissonant notes adding to the harmonic flavour of this piece, and rock-ballad like elements in the climax section of the piece (bars 57 to 72). The introduction (bars 1 – 30) and the coda (bar 73ff) in particular focus on sonority, dissonance (in particular the interval of the compound minor 2<sup>nd</sup>) and resolution or lack thereof and the use of space to allow the music to breathe and resonate, reflecting a new direction that my work has taken through this M.A.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> I have included a recording of the BCMG playing *Fragments* as part of this portfolio; since this recording, I have made some revisions to the score regarding the registers of instruments and division of parts in places to help increase the depth of sound in the forte passages.

<sup>15</sup> I have included a recording of *One Day* in this portfolio as performed by Lars Stoermer and pianist Eike Wulfmeier.

## 9. *Beck's Dream* for solo electric guitar

The works of several composers have influenced *Beck's Dream*: firstly the solo guitar works of Ralph Towner, in particular the mood and gentle harmonic progression in *Green and Golden* (Towner, 2002) and *Silence of a Candle* (Towner, 2002), that uses sonorously spaced chords and harmonics beautifully. It is also influenced by Jeff Beck's style of electric guitar playing: one of Beck's favourite effects is that of 'bowing' a chord in by striking it with the volume control set to zero and then gradually increasing the volume, so removing the attack and creating a bowed-like effect. Last of all, in this composition, I have tried to move away from rhythm and melody as the driving force behind the work and move towards the kind of soundscapes created by Haas.

*Beck's Dream* focuses solely on timbre, harmony and sonority – exploring chords with different voicings on the electric guitar, combining fretted notes with harmonics within a chord and allowing the chords the time to grow due to the slow tempo, use of fermatas, use of volume control and the free style of playing. It is the use of time and space which are critical to the success of this composition, to allow the chords once struck to almost grow out of nowhere and change in their sonority as they are allowed to resonate. The non-amplified sound of the struck chord, followed by silence and then a blooming of quite a different resonance is fascinating. I have indicated on the score approximate times as to how long to let the chords sound, but each performer needs to use their ears to increase and then decrease the volume control sensitively, allowing the chord the time to take on different sonorities before a gradual decrease in volume.

*Beck's Dream* needs to be played with a lot of reverb and the performer can decide for each performance how they wish to set the equalization in order to change the effect of the sustained chord after it has been struck. The use of harmonics sections to break up the

chords provides contrast and as the piece goes on, some of the chords integrate harmonics too, so adding new colours and more widely-spaced pitches à la Towner to the resonance. This piece, probably more than any other in the portfolio, shows how far I have travelled in my journey influenced by Haas' works; in *Beck's Dream*, I have explored a different kind of sound world to my past compositions, *Beck's Dream* is all about sonority.<sup>16</sup>

### **10. *Fragile Planet* for piano solo**

Climate change and my struggle with the worry that the planet appears to be on the brink of destruction as far as the human race is concerned, is an issue that troubles me deeply. So ends my portfolio as it began with *The Climate Change Songs*, reflecting on the impact of climate change on planet Earth. My intention was to write a simple, moving, melancholic piano piece, with one of the focal motives being the minor 2<sup>nd</sup> appoggiatura descending to a minor 3<sup>rd</sup> which features throughout in different forms and gives the work a kind of sadness. As in *Beck's Dream*, I used silence to allow time for the chords to resonate, to let their sonority bloom and then decay. I also tried to make use of the full range of the piano. This piece combines the lyricism of earlier works with the attempt to create sonorous passages exploring the range and expressivity of the piano as a solo instrument. Unlike my earlier compositions, where rhythm is the strongest musical element, I felt that this piece was almost an exercise in developing a different kind of voice, one where texture and sonority play the greater role.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> I have included a recording of *Beck's Dream* in this portfolio, as performed by Martin Milner.

<sup>17</sup> For the purposes of this portfolio, I have included a rough recording of *Fragile Planet* as played by Susan Handy.

## 11. Conclusion

My work before starting my master's degree had been described by my composition tutor Wolfgang Thiel as belonging to the Third Stream in music. Having completed my masters, I personally feel that my work has been affected by a myriad of influences from many sources as well as Western Art Music. From the jazz, rock and North Indian Hindustani Classical Music influence, as can be heard in *Jimi* to influence from Stravinsky's Neoclassical phase as can be heard in *Fragments* especially in the reduced textures of sections of this work. Important too is the influence of my vocation as a pedagogue and the desire to write a contemporary music, which is accessible to amateurs as can be seen in particular in pieces 1 to 3 of *Walpurgisnacht*.

During the journey I have taken over the past two years, I have explored ways of composing and thinking about music that were new to me. It is not that I have rejected my old style of composing, but rather that I have added new colours to my compositional palette. From my initial steps of liberating myself from the 'tyranny' of a key signature in *Shale* and learning to explore chords purely as sound rather than worrying about function, I have greatly expanded my sound world. Working closely together with musicians to better understand their instruments has been really stimulating – the physical constraints of the harp and the marimba and the peculiarities of the electric guitar and effects helped me to rethink my writing.

Comparing a piece like *Beck's Dream* to my oboe duets, I can see that the oboe duets have a clear narrative, whereas *Beck's Dream*, like Haas' *Limited Approximations*, doesn't tell a story, but has contrasting sections which focus on sonority. What is also very different about *Beck's Dream* is that I, as the composer, relinquish some element of control in this piece and in a way allow the sound through the interpretation of the performer, to take over.

In *Beck's Dream*, I encourage the performer to take some ownership in the composition too, this is a risk but also an act of faith and trust in the performer. Composing *Beck's Dream* has led me to reflect on the relationship between the composer and the performer and how this can take on different forms.

I am pleased with the depth and breadth of my portfolio, how I have experimented with: timbre, texture, sonority, harmony and dissonance; how I have explored combining different stylistic traits in my work and how I have expanded my repertoire of contemporary Western Art Music for amateurs. I hope that the listener can glean some of the joy I have felt in taking this journey and experience the love that I have for composing.

Word count: 6710 words

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Gerry Farrell taught me sitar, he was in the gharana of Debu Chaudhuri.
- <sup>2</sup> Prof.Dr.Wolfgang Thiel, former lecturer in film music composition at Hanns Eisler College in Berlin
- <sup>3</sup> Publications during this time include: *Five Pieces* for viola & piano (Gramann, 2011), *One Night in Winter* for solo viola as part of the audio book *Eines Abends im Winter* (Kinsky, 2011) and a book of violin/piano duets *Caputher Colours* (Gramann, 2013)
- <sup>4</sup> Heard at the lecture 'Musik als Plastik' ('Music as sound installation') by Armin Köhler of Südwest Deutsche Rundfunk (Köhler, 2012)
- <sup>5</sup> This first line was written for me as inspiration for the song by the poet, Martin Milner
- <sup>6</sup> For this portfolio, the recordings I am submitting of two of 'The Climate Change Songs' are performed by Angela Baier Banthien (mezzo-soprano) and Susan Handy (piano).
- <sup>7</sup> The 'Lake of Tears' motif can originally be found in the Bartók's opera *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* (Bartók, 1911) and again in the 'Elegie' of his *Concerto for Orchestra* (Bartók, 1943); it is an arpeggiated motif based on what has come to be known as the 'coloured C' chord (Cooper, 1996) whereby Bartók combines both a C major and C minor feel to dramatic effect.
- <sup>8</sup> I have entered a revised version of the score for my portfolio, written a semitone higher than the original and with a simplified rather than shifting time signature & slightly simplified marimba part: the workshop with the Hermes Ensemble helped me to realize that writing out the music more simply might increase the likelihood of it being performed.
- <sup>9</sup> I have submitted this very rough recording from the workshop with the Hermes Ensemble with the portfolio, as the original version was too difficult and the marimba player confessed to having had no time to practice the piece previously as can be heard by what he plays in the recording; he assured me however that the changes I made to the revised score mean that the present version is much easier to play.
- <sup>10</sup> 'Fachgruppe Neue Musik' is a contemporary composers group based in the Bundesland of Brandenburg, Germany: the role of the group is to write contemporary music, which is accessible for the students of the state music schools, a music that although it is contemporary must still be technically viable for a beginner or intermediate student to play.
- <sup>11</sup> In preparation for the writing of this duet, I attended a half-day seminar on writing contemporary oboe (Thielbach, 2013)
- <sup>12</sup> The oboist who was going to record all the pieces in *Walpurgisnacht* fell sick after the recording of *Witches' Dance*, so for the purpose of this portfolio, I am submitting recordings of the other pieces played by soprano saxophone and piano, as both the range and the timbre of the soprano saxophone lend themselves well to the range and quality of sound required for these pieces.
- <sup>13</sup> The recording I have entered with this portfolio is not sung how I would ideally envisage this piece which would be for a large S, A, T, B choir, but it gives a good idea of how the piece could sound.
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- <sup>15</sup> I have included a recording of *One Day* in this portfolio as performed by Lars Stoermer and pianist Eike Wulfmeier.
- <sup>16</sup> I have included a recording of *Beck's Dream* in this portfolio, as performed by Martin Milner.
- <sup>17</sup> For the purposes of this portfolio, I have included a rough recording of *Fragile Planet* as played by Susan Handy.

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