

# THE TONGUE FREE

**David Bruce introduces a reinvented George Benjamin**

George Benjamin's list of works now spans almost two decades. Taken as a whole it is an *oeuvre* which is very difficult to pigeon-hole, displaying, as Benjamin often wishes of his pieces, a capricious, quicksilver tendency, where what seems destined to settle into a style in one piece is soon uprooted by tangential developments in the next. Since his much talked-of impasse in the mid-80s, he has produced a major new work at the rate of one every three years. The obvious difficulty he has in writing is an inevitable result of the need he feels to constantly question the fundamentals of his technique. On the one hand, one hopes that he will eventually find a method of working which will allow him to increase his 'time:notes ratio'; on the other, it is hard not to admire his determined effort to sustain real musical invention rather than falling back on an easy formula. As such, it is fitting that his latest work, bearing the word 'invention' in the title, should contain some of his most successfully realised music to date.

*Three inventions for chamber orchestra*, premiered at this year's Salzburg Festival, and receiving their British premiere by the London Sinfonietta this month, are scored for 24 players – essentially double the standard 'one-of-each' line-up and a fascinating half-way-house between that and a full orchestra, much more than twice as rich in potential sounds as, say, 12 players and lacking the problems many composers find with the full orchestral strings. For those who know Benjamin's previous output, these pieces will contain a number of familiar features – the intricate detail of the scoring, full of string harmonics and pizzicatos; a delight in the exotic (including here four large gongs, major solos for contrabassoon, euphonium and flugelhorn, as well as a marvellous couple of bars for washing board); a harmony which flirts occasionally with tonality, especially through brief glimpses of pentatonicism and chords with a strong augmented/diminished flavour; as well as the kind of texture – fast, bubbling activity, with emergent solo lines – familiar since *Upon silence* (1990) or even the coruscating end of *Antara* (1987). (This latter feature, incidentally, is usually responsible for the counterpoint which the title's connotations suggest.)

What is different about the new work – at least for its second and third movements – is a new confidence in dealing with the way material is defined. For it is this in particular which has been the central crisis of Benjamin's music in recent years,

although it is, of course, a crisis of the times. Ivan Hewett has suggested that 'Benjamin, true to his Boulezian inheritance, wants to avoid anything that sounds like direct statement.'<sup>1</sup> I would modify this to say that he wants to avoid anything that sounds like a direct statement *returning* – the hiatus of arriving back somewhere, in music whose essential nature is moving forwards. In the mid-80s, Benjamin said 'I can't write harmony unless I feel it's going somewhere, unless it creates a sense of passion, of pushing forward',<sup>2</sup> and as, over the years, he has increased his desire to give his music this sensation of 'pushing forward', of feeling 'spontaneous, as if it was inventing itself as it progressed',<sup>3</sup> the less he has felt able to interrupt this progression by 'recapitulating' material (the strange exception being *Antara's* use of 'little more than verbatim recapitulation of the opening material'<sup>4</sup> in a piece which otherwise shuns traditional motivic techniques – Benjamin never pursued the formal experiments of this piece any further).

Pushing against this current in his music, however, is Benjamin's obvious desire to write highly characterised moments, which state themselves in no uncertain terms. These moments, deprived of any traditional means of return, can upset the balance of a form by creating an apparent structural importance which is then neither fulfilled nor explained. One such is the point in *Sudden time* at which four alto flutes, swooping across harmonics, play a quasi-canon, purely pentatonic figure above gamelan-like pizzicatos. It is a sudden, unambiguous clarity, emerging from the surrounding obfuscated bustle. Benjamin is obviously aware of the highly defined nature of this moment and he attempts to give it some kind of relevance by giving us a fragmentary reminder of it near the very end of the piece. Despite this, however, the material quite simply arrives from nowhere and disappears back to nowhere. We are left wondering how and why the music achieved this 'sudden definition'.

The key to the success of the new pieces lies in their use of a smaller quantity of material and in a distinction between the way that material is used, depending crucially on whether or not it is memorable. The reduction of material is evidenced particularly by the use of a repeated rhythmic figure in both the second and third *Inventions*. In both cases, after an introductory section, the music 'discovers' the figure which, once found, persists

The image shows a musical score for three staves. The top staff is labeled 'vln + pic', the middle '3 vla + ob', and the bottom 'db + vc'. The music features complex rhythmic patterns, including triplets and irregular accents. A tempo marking of quarter note = 48 is at the top left.

Ex.1

until the end of the piece. The two figures are closely related to one another, consisting of combinations of triplets and duplets which are then crossed by irregular accents (ex.1). Both dominate their respective pieces, providing the much-needed sense of coherence and also driving the music onwards in the kind of energised, motoric style we have come to expect from recent Ligeti. This is a surprising change of aesthetic, even by Benjamin's standards, but the result is nevertheless some of his most powerful and indeed personal music to date.

The third of the *Inventions*, a dark and searingly intense piece, is, at around ten minutes, the longest of the three. It sustains its rhythmic figure, a grating downward scale in close harmony on several strings, by occasionally counterbalancing it with an upward moving figure. Less rhythmically interesting, essentially just an upward scale, this second figure finds its place perfectly as a less-defined, background idea. Similarly, the fragmentary solo lines, whilst sharing between themselves a certain intervallic flavour and despite being texturally prominent, are never sufficiently defined to become memorable. This keeps them from disrupting the overall form and allows them to take on their intended role as passing features of the argument, rather than as leading characters in it. The interaction of these three features – the rhythmic figure, its counterpart, and the melodic lines – is occasionally interrupted by becalmed, Birtwistle-like moments – quietly held, suspense-ridden chords, punctuated by percussive octaves, or huge, threatening gong sounds.

This movement, then, establishes a clear hierarchy of ideas, in which the most important ones are the most clearly defined, the most memorable and the most frequently used. There is never any sense of recapitulation, because the only idea which might give such a sense, the rhythmic figure, never really goes away. If it does, it is only to allow the secondary ideas to take centre stage for a moment. This said, Benjamin is very careful to avoid the feeling of recapitulation in other ways. For example, whilst the material of the solo lines is not in itself memorable, the instrumentation – first contrabassoon, then euphonium – certainly is. This instrumentation is therefore never repeated – once each instrument has had its say, it is never heard from as a soloist again. Benjamin also cunningly waits a full three minutes before introducing the main rhythmic figure. This allows the piece to maintain the feeling of being about 'one thing' for a longer period, without putting too much strain on the interest of the main idea. (Ligeti's pieces involving one rhythmic idea, for example,

never last for much more than five minutes.) It is also an original twist to his usual approach of beginning with a defined area and then letting it 'wind-down' or mutate into something else – here we begin with relatively undefined music which only later evolves into the piece's main area of activity.

The influence of Ligeti in this piece may also extend to the harmony, in particular the use of parallel-motion in prominent lines as a kind of colour (the fourth movement of Ligeti's Piano Concerto, a movement Benjamin greatly admires, is full of it). This is actually the main carrier of harmony through the jungle of contrapuntal lines and can be seen, for example, in the main rhythmic figure itself (ex.1), as well as at the powerful, Varèse-like climaxes (ex.2). When combined with the harsh, extreme orchestration, this creates a movement whose overall effect is stunning in its portrayal of a terrifying bleakness, unique in the composer's output.

But if the third of the *Inventions* suggests Varèse or Ligeti, the second is closer to Knussen, in particular that of the recent *Songs without voices* (again, a work Benjamin admires). The 'song' here is played by the cor anglais, similar in style but more ebullient than the solo for the same instrument in *Sudden time*. It plays at first alone; later it gives way for a moment to the strings, or is joined by the bassoon in a strangely jazzy duet; only at the end does it give way to a screaming clarinet, jumping wildly between registers, as if to say 'this is how it's really done'. The effect is nevertheless of a single solo line plus accompaniment. This accompaniment consists almost exclusively of the backbone rhythmic figure mentioned earlier, played principally in 'quasi chitarra' upper strings, though also bouncing around the orchestra from time to time. This figure (see p.569), once started, is present without a break, as a kind of rhythmic tala. Alongside it there is a curious held octave on D# in clarinet and flute, played in a subliminal *pianissimo*, so that one is hardly aware of it until the music crescendos and dramatically escapes from it into the clarinet solo. Even here the D# is heard again in the high, practice-muted horn, making a whole two-thirds of the piece effectively a varying harmonic interpretation of this note. Although slightly different in concept from a traditional drone (especially as it is relatively high up in the first octave above middle C), this pedal, along with the constant underlying rhythmic figure and the highly ornamented solo line, is another feature suggesting somewhat the influence of the Indian classical music tradition. Benjamin has long admired the flexible, free-floating nature of melodic lines in Indian music, particularly in the opening *alap*

sections, where the soloist improvises before the rhythmic backbone emerges. This, interestingly, is exactly the order of events in the second *Invention* – an opening, free-flowing solo, to which a strong rhythmic identity is only later added. It is almost as if the piece were trying to present a microscopic reduction of the form of Indian music. This may all seem a little speculative, but Benjamin's wide interest in the music of non-western cultures is well-known and he has already talked specifically of the Indian influence in *Upon silence*.

*Upon silence* is also interesting in the context of the earlier discussion of definition of material for being one of the most successful of his previous works in this respect. It shares with the second *Invention* a clear distinction between soloist and accompaniment. More than the third *Invention*, these two pieces avoid any real direct statement. They work instead by maintaining a coherent background, which allows the soloist to 'improvise' on top (in *Upon silence* this coherence is mainly in the harmony, within which the five viols arabesque freely). As such, they are very close to Debussy's stated aspiration for 'a music truly free of motifs, or formed of one continuous motif that nothing interrupts and will never go back over itself.'<sup>5</sup>

Like the second and third *Inventions*, which 'discover' their main rhythmic idea after an introductory section, the first, written two years earlier as a tribute to Benjamin's former teacher, Olivier Messiaen, similarly 'discovers' a flugelhorn solo which, once begun, persists until the end of the piece. The solo is a strangely subdued contrast to the previous section, its sharp contours – a constantly see-sawing motion over wide intervals (at first on purely white notes) and a simple rhythmic outline, mixing crotchets and quavers in additive patterns – somewhat belied by its constant pianissimo marking. The work opens peacefully with gently rippling piano and harp arpeggios, coloured by two vibraphones and high string pizzicatos. This soon merges into a section which is effectively a tranquillo version of the main climax of *Sudden time* – a constant downward spiral of sixths and sevenths is cunningly transformed, in an Escher-like twist of geometry, into an upward scale of thirds and seconds. After a further brief section for hocketed stopped horns, the music suddenly changes character with the arrival of the flugelhorn solo. For the rest of the piece, the texture remains essentially the same – percussive stabs; gently bustling semiquavers in the strings; occasional solo lines reminiscent to some degree of the opening; all dominated by the solo instrument. Just as the music gains a little momentum it simply stops, dead in its tracks.

The arrival of the flugelhorn solo is perhaps the only moment in the *Three inventions* in which the clarity of definition of material is in question – one is not sure if it is intended as contrast, or continuation. This aside, the work as a whole can be claimed as one of Benjamin's most impressive achievements to date, a work in which the mastery of the orchestration, though still apparent, is not the be-all-and-end-all of the work and is finally matched in quality by the treatment of form and material. The 'beautiful voice' of which Ivan Hewett talked in *Sudden time*, which 'speaks in a straying murmur, accompanying every statement with a thousand hesitations'<sup>6</sup> is at last able to break free and deliver an oration of power and conviction.

The image shows a page of a musical score for Benjamin Britten's 'Upon Silence'. The score is for a full orchestra and includes parts for Piccolo, Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, Bass Clarinet, Contrabass Clarinet, Horn, Trumpet, Euphonium, Gong, Violin, Viola, and Violoncello. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 48. Dynamics include fff, p, pp, and ff. The score shows a complex texture with various rhythmic patterns and melodic lines.

Ex.2

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#### Notes

1. *MT*, December 1994, p.773.
2. In Paul Griffiths: *New sounds, new personalities* (London, 1985), p.26.
3. Sleeve note for CD of *Sudden time* (Nimbus NI 1432).
4. Robert Adlington in *MT*, February 1994, p.95.
5. Quoted in Simon Trezise: *Debussy: La mer* (Cambridge Music Handbooks, Cambridge, 1994), p.85.
6. Ivan Hewett: op.cit., p.773.