

TRIBUTE

Peter Dickinson at (• =) 80

Peter Dickinson does not look like an octogenarian: there must be some illusion. I would put him at a good ten years younger. The bracing sea air of Lytham St Anne's, where he was born, and Aldeburgh, where he now lives, must have done its job particularly well. But more to the point, Dickinson himself has always done his job – three jobs, to be precise – and there is no doubt that this has kept him young. What one experiences in his presence is not so much a boundless energy, which might be wearying for all concerned, as a determination to keep at it, and at the same time to keep fresh. This by no means easy balance has entailed a canny but probably instinctive combination of both fixed and varied focus, a combination to be borne in mind not just in looking back on his career but when considering the music he has composed.

The varied focus is evident in his unusual ability to have pursued to the highest professional standards a life of composing, performing (as a pianist) and scholarship. Students of university music departments in Britain have traditionally done all three of these as a kind of Holy Trinity of their religion – not that their necessity or even existence strikes most music students as self-evident. Many are dragged kicking and screaming into composition; most arrive knowing only that they are performers, performance being what the world thinks the music professor teaches; but some of these happily give up playing and singing for writing essays and a dissertation as their undergraduate career progresses. Others equally happily continue to pursue all three branches of their art until graduation, often with distinction. But making a career of all three is another matter, and here Dickinson has stood out. I for one have always admired him for it, because I believe that that is what a musician ideally should be able to achieve, and have felt surprise not at its effortlessness – for it is clear that it *has* taken effort – but that it has been possible at all.

The fixed focus has been a matter of reference points supporting and connecting the variety of outlet. We all construct these as our life and thought develop, and they both reflect and

determine our individuality. To take the prime example: Dickinson went to the USA in the late 1950s, and its music has influenced him ever since. But not all its music: even here he has been selective, or perhaps one should say elective, in Goethe's sense of chemical inevitability, in his affinities. Film music, musicals, Bernstein, Sondheim, Irving Berlin, Tin Pan Alley, Sousa: no. Blues, ragtime, jazz, Cage, Copland, Cowell, and especially Ives: yes. Some European fixed points, largely twentieth century and for the most part poetic, have been literary (there was thought of reading English at Cambridge): Auden, Larkin, Eliot, Joyce, Stevie Smith, Alan Porter, Thomas Blackburn (Dickinson's teaching colleague in the 1960s); but Joyce as novelist too. Of the musical ones, some but not all are directly reflected in the titles of Dickinson's monographs, edited volumes, and editions of music: in chronological order of publication, Erik Satie, Lord Berners, Lennox Berkeley, Billy Mayerl, Aaron Copland, John Cage, Samuel Barber, and Bernarr Rainbow.¹

Of these elective affinities, Berkeley and Mayerl have been the most demanding companions insofar as they occasioned Dickinson's two full-length musical studies, thorough, historically informed and critically comprehensive both. Rainbow's name may surprise, but he was Dickinson's boss at the College of St Mark and St John in Chelsea (1962–66), and Dickinson has been notably loyal to him. Loyalty to creative friends and a creative ideal is what the recurrence of Satie, Berkeley, Cage

¹ Twenty British Composers (London, 1975); An Erik Satie Entertainment: a Selection of Songs and Piano Music (1976); Lord Berners: the Collected Vocal Music and the Collected Music for Solo Piano (London, 1982, 2nd edn 2000); The Music of Lennox Berkeley (London, 1988, enlarged edn Woodbridge, 2003); Marigold: the Music of Billy Mayerl (Oxford, 1999); Copland Connotations: Studies and Interviews (Woodbridge, 2002); CageTalk: Dialogues with and about John Cage (Rochester NY and Woodbridge, 2006, enlarged edn 2014); Lord Berners: Composer, Writer, Painter (Woodbridge, 2008); Lord Berners: Complete Piano Duets (London, 2009); Samuel Barber Remembered (Rochester NY and Woodbridge, 2010); Bernarr Rainbow on Music (Woodbridge, 2010); Lennox Berkeley and Friends: Writings, Letters and Interviews (Woodbridge, 2012); and Music Education in Crisis: the Bernarr Rainbow Lectures and other Assessments (Woodbridge, 2013). There are many other editions of the music of Berkeley.

and all the others is about, functioning almost like a code of honour in Dickinson's life and philosophy. He has expected loyalty from others, too. One could imagine this stemming from the fact that his younger sister Meriel became an eminent professional singer and he was able to establish a long-term recital and recording partnership with her: other performers and colleagues are part of the wider family. In the case of the violinist Ralph Holmes, the working-out of such loyalty has been remarkable. Holmes posthumously inspired Dickinson's Violin Concerto of 1986, and it is partly based on the first theme of Beethoven's 'Spring' Sonata for violin and piano, a work they had toured together. Not only that, but their performance of the sonata in concert at Keele University was relayed by Radio Stoke, and the recording, captured on home equipment, proved good enough for issue as a commercial CD, judged one of the best performances available by at least one reviewer. Here was North Staffordshire repaying Dickinson's ten-year loyalty to Keele, whose music department he founded in 1974.

Dickinson's correlatives – Ives, Berkeley and the rest – have more in common than their striking heterogeneity would suggest. They are nevertheless better understood not in relation to each other but as a series of distances from which something else can be measured, or as a number of separate orientations to help guide his own travelling around the geography of artistic creation. Something like this has clearly been in operation both within his composed output and across his three professional lives as a whole.

Dickinson has done much to explain what these orientations have meant. In a *Musical Times* article of 1989 he coined the term 'style-modulation', subtitling the article 'an approach to stylistic pluralism' and treating the idea as an extension of the principle of proportionally shifting tempo in Elliott Carter's music that Richard Goldman termed 'metric modulation'.² He described how something quite shockingly different could be incorporated into a musical fabric, for whatever purpose, the composer finding ways of relating or joining or mutually confronting the two. What he has always stressed is that the composer exercises control, knows what he or she is doing, and has techniques for achieving, regulating, or at least measuring stylistic

difference. In his inaugural lecture as Professor of Music at Goldsmiths College, University of London, in 1996, he insisted that 'the composer is planning the changes of style in the same way as he or she controls the pitches and textures'.³ Later in the inaugural lecture he referred to the emergence of the Bach chorale at the end of Berg's Violin Concerto as 'a wonderfully subtle example of progressive style-modulation'. In other words, the shock of a different world is achieved through master craft. Elsewhere he has shown himself fully aware that intrusions of musical sound require a context of 'consistency' and 'justification'.⁴

I shall spend the remainder of this article exploring the craft of modulation and its implications in the three senses so far mentioned or applicable, but also in a further one, a suggestion of my own. All uses of the term in a musical context relate back to its primary meaning, tonal modulation: that is, planned and controlled change of key within a musical continuum. In Willi Apel's *Harvard Dictionary of Music* of 1944, representing the peak of positivist musicology, the article on 'Modulation' insists on the principle of the pivot chord, which it illustrates as a chord with two meanings, a simultaneous double perspective on the old key and the new key, duly diagrammatised with labels showing the dual grammatical function below the music examples provided. Modulation is a kind of pun, almost an exercise of wit. The article does acknowledge sudden changes of key such as Schubert's, but is at pains to state that 'Even in these cases ... an analysis according to the principles of pivot chords may be made in order to explain the harmonic relationships'.⁵ There is, in other words, only one rule of modulatory logic. Absent, however, is any hint of Schenker's notion of nested levels of tonal experience, whereby a new key is only superficial, a 'composing-out' of a chord (such as the dominant or a Neapolitan) still subject to the overall grammar of the tonic.

Something of the punning wit of tonal modulation applies to metric modulation in Carter. The principle emerged in his Cello Sonata of 1948, and a passage near the beginning of its replacement first movement sees it already operational in the manner described by David Schiff: 'Usually the tempo changes through the

² Peter Dickinson: 'Style-Modulation: an Approach to Stylistic Pluralism', *Musical Times*, 130 (1989), pp. 208–11; David Schiff: 'Carter, Elliott (Cook)', in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd edn, ed. Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell (London: Macmillan, 2001), vol. 5, pp. 201–6, here 203.

³ Peter Dickinson: 'Style-Modulation as a Compositional Technique', published lecture (London: Goldsmiths College, 1996), p. 3.

⁴ Dickinson, 'Style-modulation', p. 211.

⁵ Willi Apel: 'Modulation', *The Harvard Dictionary of Music* (London, 1944), pp. 453–4, here 454.

Example 1:

Elliott Carter, Cello Sonata, first movement, bars 14–22 (cello part only)

renotation of a continuous stream of notes of equal duration'.⁶ Example 1 begins with quintuplets in a 4/4 bar of crotchet = 72; thus there are $72 \times 5 = 360$ semiquavers to the minute. The speed of these semiquavers remains constant throughout the subsequent changes of metre, and when the dotted semiquavers emerge there are therefore $360 \times 2/3 = 240$ of these to the minute. They are followed by notes of twice their value, dotted quavers, at 120 to the minute, and these equate to the crotchet of the new 4/4 metre. Thus we have moved from one 4/4 metre to another in which the pulse is two-thirds as fast again. Through sleight of hand, we are now travelling at a different speed; the meaning of something has proved different from what we thought, like an optical or in this case an aural illusion. It is worth adding that a tonal journey has been running alongside this metric one: the enharmonic change from flats to sharps in the first bar of the example is followed by a sharpward continuum, G♯s, D♯s and A♯s being progressively added, until by enharmonic prestidigitation we are back with flats again.

The aural illusion may be a fruitful way of grasping Dickinson's style modulations. Again, the context is often a rhythmic continuum, something that has had us following along with comfort or trust only to realise that we are really somewhere else. The Piano Concerto of 1979–84 contains perhaps the most memorable example of this. Halfway through the score, though it is two-thirds of the way through the work's duration, comes the rupture shown at the double

bar in Example 2, after a hectic bar once again of quintuplets, of which the final two are shown here. The illusion is that we thought we were watching and listening to a virtuoso soloist, supported by an orchestra. But no: a curtain rises on a new action, a ragtime pianist who, at the back near the percussion, literally upstages the soloist, taking along key players (double bass, side drum). And if one is inevitably reminded of curtain up at the beginning of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, revealing Jasbo Brown in full-flight honky-tonk, it is one thing to have onstage instrumental music contrasting with the sounds of the pit in a real opera, quite another to have to control its overall meaning in purely musical terms in an abstract concerto.

The meaning of this particular style modulation could be said to be worked out in three ways. First, there is the incongruence of character. The soloist has been playing a particularly demonic, Lisztian continuum of very fast notes, serially clever too, for it consists of a series of 10 chromatic pitches, the two missing ones, the tritone G–C♯, having constituted part of a held compound dominant 7th in the orchestra earlier in the bar. This atonal series repeats an octave lower each time, sweeping the keyboard until it cannot go any further because it has run out of notes: the pianist has been caught out, as it were, and breaks off with a startled staccato. The deadpan, phlegmatic character of the ensuing ragtime piano could not be more different, keeping its head down motionless in its world of sleaze (to avoid bullets?) in the middle part of the keyboard where it maunders around in its introduction. The orchestra helps dramatise the moment: a soft harp glissando is like a film wipe or, indeed, that rising curtain. Sharply

⁶ Schiff, 'Carter', p. 203.

[Tranquillo ($\downarrow = 40$)]

Solo pf [pp senza accento] 5

Orch pf (upright) dim. [senza ped.]

Moderato $\downarrow = 80$

Orch pf (upright) *p* Like a Joplin rag in the distance

Orch *pp*

Perc. *pp* va db (one player nearest piano) pizz db (one player nearest piano)

Solo pf *p* Tam tam 3 suspended cymbals (with snare)

Solo pf PED (held through)

Orch pf (upright) *p*

Orch *p* vln 2 fl. pieces vln 1 (half) obs hns vb (slow vibrato) tb pp

Perc. *p*

Solo pf *p*

Example 2:

Peter Dickinson, Piano Concerto,
bars 156–164. Reproduced by
permission of the composer.

offbeat pizzicati in high and low strings and short chords in extreme woodwind registers are like blinks or double takes: are we really seeing and hearing this? Perhaps a cheesy smile dawns with the long held violin A and the vibraphone completing its triad. Where the solo pianist is concerned, there is nothing for it but to tiptoe sheepishly to one side, out of step, carrying the rag's introductory pitches with it, back up six octaves of keyboard (the seventh follows beyond Example 2).

Second, there is the weight of multiple difference, piled up in every dimension as if in cultural panic. High art (Liszt, serialism) is followed by low entertainment (ragtime); English music (in Dickinson's 'own' idiom) by American (quasi-Joplin); new by old. Despite the proportional tempi, the rhythmic continuum is, if not at sixes and sevens, at fours and fives between the two pianos and the two sections, the fives persisting in the new one and creating a randomness in the placing and patterning of the solo piano's single notes: only once are two bars rhythmically the same. The sustained orchestral harmonies of the previous section are replaced with brittle clusters (derived from complex sets) that go out of their way not to accord with the ragtime syncopations, doing so again only once, at the first syncopation of the tune proper in bar 161. (From here on, they come at the following number of semiquavers' distance: 6, 4, 2, 2, 4, 3, 5 – i.e. again with studied randomness, though this is again derived from durational sets.)⁷

Third, however, is an underlying congruence. To experience this is to perceive the pivot of the illusion, the pun, the double meaning. The overriding element of control is melodic, as Dickinson himself has stated, because the rag is based on the concerto's three main themes.⁸ It is thus an old-fashioned case of thematic transformation: a tune's destiny is not what we thought. The rag's main tune is the rather Britten-like dirge that formed the concerto's first theme, while its introduction is drawn from the second theme, namely the first four bars of the solo piano's toccata in the 'Quasi cadenza' section. The B section of the rag, in the subdominant, transforms the concerto's third theme, the sustained one in the strings heard against the toccata. There is even a sense

of metric modulation, because the solo piano's 10-note serial motif in the bar preceding the rag cancels out the quintuplets while cutting across them, creating eight statements altogether lasting one bar, each therefore equivalent to one crotchet beat in the new tempo. And of course the very differences stressed in the previous paragraph generate their own relational logic and therefore unity.

If this all begins to feel aesthetically standard rather than exceptional, that is surely how it should be with a career such as Dickinson's. His procedures have taken their place in our culture, and we can appreciate them less for the cultural challenge they may have seemed at the time of creation, more for the classic interplay of musical sounds they now represent. A creative insistence upon the appearance, the illusion, of being out on a limb, was in retrospect part of an achieved wholeness. And this is where my final type of modulation becomes apparent: career modulation.

The concept might be applied to any lifetime set of activities, but the pesky enumeration of those three subdisciplines of music, performing, creating and appraising (as they are apt to be called in institutional benchmark documents), has always put music's gifted subjects under an unusual strain. There are too many ways of doing what we can do. How to modulate between them? In the end it probably comes down to three factors: what we have inherited, how we earn our living, and what we leave behind. Between them, these constitute who we are.

Composers are perhaps obsessed with what they will leave behind. The trouble is, they do not earn their living by composing, as F M Scherer has shown.⁹ Even film music composition, while it paid well in Dickinson's generation, though even better in the previous one, was never a sustainable livelihood, as its destructive effects on Malcolm Arnold demonstrated; nor was it one pursued by Dickinson. Moreover, composing is a lonely business, coming from nowhere – rarely, these days, a family business, unlike what it was for the Bachs and the Couperins, and even they were organists and directors of music first and foremost – and going out into the void. Compositions do not hang in galleries or drawing rooms or stand in public squares; they do not enjoy long runs; scores are not read like books,

⁷ Indications of set organisation from the composer (personal communication, 14 November 2014).

⁸ Peter Dickinson, 'Three Concertos [and] Merseyside Echoes', CD booklet note (Heritage HTGCD 276, BBC, 2014), pp. 2–7, here 3.

⁹ F M Scherer, *Quarter Notes and Bank Notes: the Economics of Music Composition in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

and even when purchased, have no being until performed. Thank God for recordings! – and Dickinson has been instinctively smart enough to pursue these, intent on maximum return.

The composer's calling accords singularly ill with our culturally unstable times, since the fall of Communism so dominated by the capitalist marketplace. It was at a graduation ceremony at Dickinson's Keele, though after his time, that its new Chancellor, Sir Claus Moser, stressed to those being awarded their degrees that they were likely to have not one career but two or more in the course of their increasingly long lives. Later we learnt to call such adaptability the acquisition of transferable skills. Dickinson's several careers, as performer, composer and musicologist, were in this context ahead of the game, and one wonders whether the early visit to the USA, not just as a Rotary Foundation Fellow but staying on in New York for a year or two as a freelance musician and then salaried university lecturer, gave him a taste for a heady combination of freedom, earning power, competitiveness and risk that could not be relinquished. Yet the intellectually curious and multiply talented musician always had plural opportunities even in Britain, which for a couple of centuries had actually been necessities. There was a thrill of the chase that London's concert life, its publishing and, above all perhaps, the BBC encouraged. Since the Second World War it was always possible to be a career academic in music, but it was not necessary. Until John Tyrrell stepped in alongside Stanley Sadie, no edition of *Grove's Dictionary* had been edited from a university post.

So I shall end by suggesting a few modulatory devices or pivots that it seems to me have served Dickinson well throughout an impressive and fecund multiple career. The first is the BBC performer's audition, which he accomplished early (as an organist). It was a passport to the profession, and has surely repaid the youthful effort that preceded it. The second is what his parents laid down as role models. On his mother's part, this was a professional approach to personal bearing and the spoken voice – she gave recitals – which has made him a natural broadcaster of talks, conductor of interviews, chair of committees (even the UK's Research Assessment Exercise music panel: twice!), and composer of literary bent, for there are extensive spoken parts in many of his works, from the church drama *The Judas Tree* of 1965 to *Larkin's Jazz* of 1989, and the ritual dimensions and techniques of his musical idiom serve them well. On his father's part, it was I think a brilliant combination of the ideal of the provincial general

practitioner with that of the international researcher, for Frank Dickinson, practising optometrist, was one of the pioneers of contact lenses.¹⁰ Peter has similarly served provincial universities, teacher training colleges and adult education departments on the one hand, and his own far-reaching agenda of making a difference in the world of international artistic creation on the other. The third device, which brings us back to our starting-point, is that process of measuring and validating himself in relation to a fastidiously chosen plurality of others. My favourite example of this, beyond what I have already explored, is his recently published imaginary interview with Erik Satie, written at the time of Satie's centenary in 1966.¹¹ It works brilliantly, and of all his interviews, this must be the best, through being a creative fantasy cast entirely at cross-purposes, a modulation between the living and the dead if ever there was one. Getting it right (Satie's words are authentic) entailed scholarship, just as getting the style of a rag or the parody of a composer right in one of his compositions entailed stylistic rectitude: research of a sort.

Each of us tries to choose the right combination, number and sequence of avenues for our own flourishing and survival. Dickinson lined his up fairly early on and has rung the changes on them, moving in and out of salaried university posts, of performance, scholarship and composition, and of engagement with the surrealists, the American experimentalists, English twentieth-century poets, and those popular forms dear to his heart: rags, blues, and hymns. But perhaps in the end – though it almost pains me to say this as a historical musicologist keen to view musical lives, both famous and obscure, more in the anthropological round than has been habitual – Peter Dickinson the composer matters most. When all the cultural supports, contingencies and investments necessary for earning a living, making a reputation, creating a personal brand, and staving off insecurities are seen for the one enormous lever that they are, the modulatory consequent, that is the underlying firmness of his own musical voice, will possibly come as a surprise to him but can certainly float off without its illusion of props. What will remain is a compositional strength and imagination equal to his day, newer days, and days far beyond both. Just as in Mozart we no longer respond to horn calls,

¹⁰ http://www.andrewgasson.co.uk/pioneers_dickinson.htm, accessed 25 November 2014.

¹¹ Peter Dickinson, 'Conversations with Erik Satie', *Musical Opinion*, 1501 (Oct–Dec 2014), pp. 22–3.

military signals and dance tunes as intrusions of arch significance, the time has probably already come when all the elements of the Dickinsonian sound-world, above all in the three concertos that are at the centre of his output, need signify nothing more than characteristic contributions to

beautiful, imaginative and tensile pieces of music of his composing. The works are what we value, not the friendly obeisances that went into the making of them.

Stephen Banfield