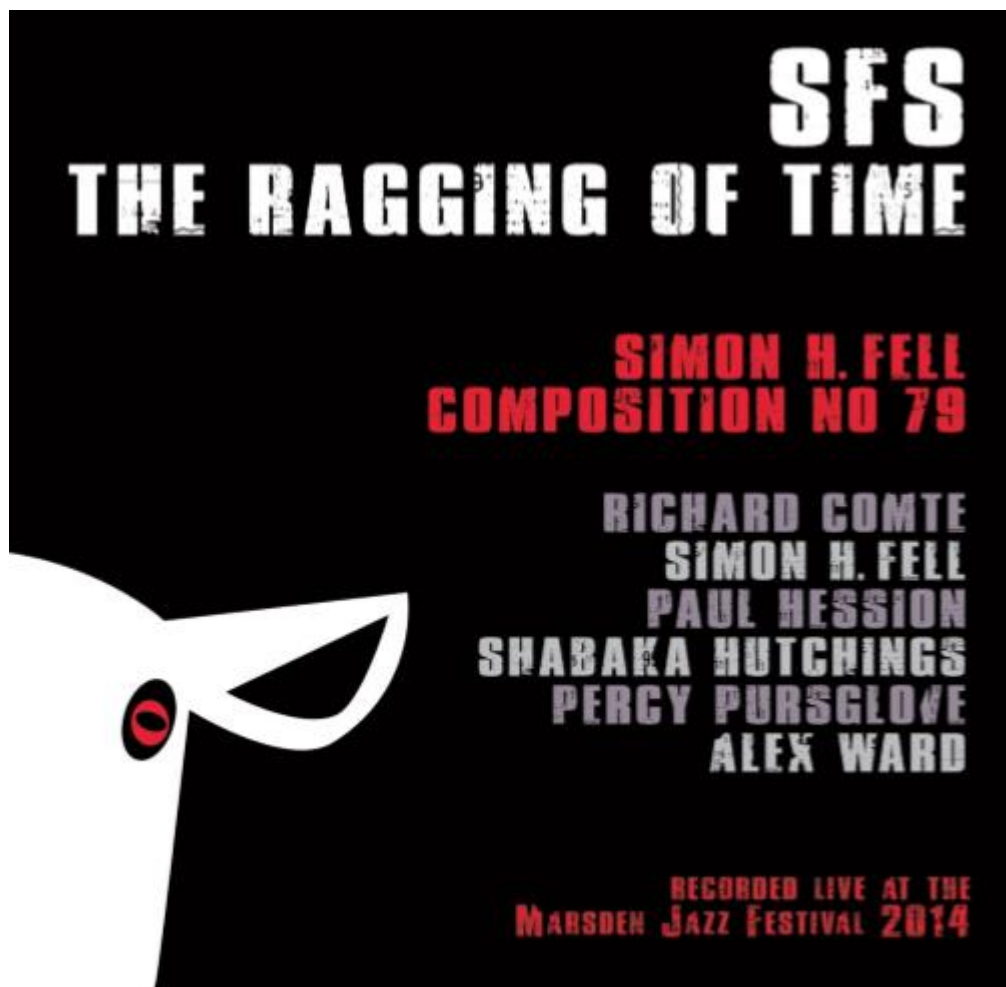


Simon H. Fell: Marsden and The Ragging of Time



The idea behind this lecture/presentation is to try and give some insight into the creative processes involved in realising a composition commission, and in particular one for improvising musicians, and commissioned in this case by a jazz festival (rather than a festival of improvised or contemporary music). Now there are lots of potential questions here, but to keep this as brief as possible, I'm inevitably going to have to skim over some of them quite quickly – but this doesn't mean that they're not worth exploring, and that I haven't considered them as part of my work, so if anyone wants to discuss anything I don't cover we'll try and make time to do it

later on in conversation.

The plan is that, after a general introduction, I'll talk in detail about each of the three movements of the finished piece, and how they were created. We'll then listen to as much of each movement as we have time for, and I'll use the screen to call your attention to the elements in the music that we've discussed. My aim is to spend about half the time talking, and about half the time listening, so I hope that balance will be comfortable for you. There'll be a break a little bit before halfway through, so we can stretch our legs, etc. There's much more I could say if we had time, but ultimately listening to the music is the most important way of appreciating what we'll be discussing, so we must leave time for that!

Intro:

Some of you may have attended the first performance of The Ragging of Time, the piece my Marsden commission eventually became, on the 11th October 2014.



SFS @ MJF; 11th October 2014

Alex Ward, Shabaka Hutchings, Percy Pursglove, Richard Comte, Paul Hession (hidden), Simon H. Fell

image © Peter Woodman 2014

Some of you may be aware of some of my past work, having been to other gigs, or heard recordings or radio broadcasts. But some of you may not have heard of either me or The Ragging of Time before, so I will attempt a very brief introduction to both.

I'm a double bassist, an improviser and a composer. I have played notated music (in the classical sense) in the past, although I rarely do so now. I still play what might be described as conventional mainstream jazz from time to time, although I wouldn't claim to be a jazz musician in the sense that I know 900 standards in every key and have devoted my life to perfecting my jazz craftsmanship. My main field of operation is freely improvised music, and has been for nearly 40 years; as you may be aware this is a field of musical operations which can overlap with jazz, but doesn't always, which can overlap with contemporary classical music, but doesn't always, and which can overlap with electronic and computer music, but doesn't always. It's a field of musical activity which has doggedly gone its own way for the last 50 years, with a small (if not minute) – but fiercely dedicated – audience, and a passionately inventive international pool of musicians.

So I'm an improviser – but didn't I just say I was also a composer?

What's more I'm a composer who prefers to write for improvisers – isn't there an innate contradiction here? Yes, there clearly is – although anyone who's familiar with the history of jazz composition will be aware of at least one noble tradition of trying to square that circle. My thinking about the relationship of composition to improvisation is very influenced by the work of the eminent American academic, composer and improviser George Lewis, and I will occasionally use a couple of Lewis' terms in the discussions that follow: Eurological and Afrological. Briefly, the approaches to composition implied by these two terms can be

summarised as follows:

Eurological:

a literature- and notation-derived system, underpinned by a very specific kind of technical proficiency, that focuses on the production of works; these works are usually seen as the product of individual creators, although these may require realisation by interpretative 'assistants'; exemplified by the Western European classical music tradition.

Afrological:

an orature-derived system where the acquisition of knowledge is often practice-based, frequently including auto-didacticism and eccentric or unconventional technical approaches. Rather than focussing on the production of works, this practice emphasises the undertaking of (often unrepeatable) collaborative creative acts, and thus has intrinsic links with improvisation, collectivity and impermanence; exemplified by the jazz tradition.

Eurological denotes a literature- and notation-derived system, underpinned by a very specific kind of technical proficiency, that focuses on the production of works; these works are usually seen as the product of individual creators, although these may require realisation by interpretative 'assistants'. This is clearly the basis of the Western European classical music tradition. On the other hand, Afrological would denote an orature-derived system where the acquisition of knowledge is often practice-based, frequently including auto-didacticism and eccentric or unconventional technical approaches; rather than focussing on the production of works, this practice emphasises the undertaking of (often unrepeatable) collaborative creative acts, and thus has intrinsic links with improvisation, collectivity and impermanence. For the purposes of this evening, we could usefully label this approach 'jazz'.

There's much more I could say about all this, but we don't have the time to explore all the ramifications – however, since I intend to spend quite a bit of this evening listening to the recording of the first performance of *The Ragging of Time*, I hope during this process it will become clear why composing for improvisers is such a stimulating and rewarding (if high risk) activity. I've been exploring this activity since the mid-1980s, in groups ranging from duos to chamber orchestras, working with musicians of all backgrounds.

OK, let's press on. If jazz is a music based on individual (and sometimes collective) improvisation, as I think most people would agree, what is the role of the composer in jazz? I should explain that I'm not thinking here of a musician who writes 'heads', upon the chord changes of which the musicians then improvise; although this is a noble and invaluable part of the jazz tradition, I'm thinking more about jazz composers whose work might be said to be influenced by the larger-scale structural and aesthetic aspirations of (what for the sake of convenience I'll call) the European classical music tradition. Not that jazz needs to refer to such a tradition in any way whatsoever – the 'aspirations' I just referred to simply evoke a wider choice of jazz creativity to be explored, rather than implying that Eurological elements bring so-called improvement, sophistication or 'validity'. My jazz universe – and I hope yours too – needs both Thelonious Monk and Duke Ellington, both Ray Brown and Charles Mingus, both Stan Getz and Anthony Braxton. As you will have spotted, I just mentioned three of the most significant jazz composers, in my opinion, in the sense I'm using the term (and yes, I mean Ellington, Mingus and Braxton).



We could all add other examples, although one I'd like to mention here is Jelly Roll Morton, who as you will see was to play an important role in the genesis of *The Ragging of Time*. There are many questions about writing scores for jazz musicians and improvisers, both technical and

human, which I just don't have time to cover at this juncture – but they are significant. In shorthand, let's say that the jazz composer is an enabler rather than a prescriber, and is as much concerned with providing a context in which improvised material can be the most important element as with realising pre-determined moments of beauty, provocation or pattern-building. A jazz composer's music needs to be played to be understood, since the score is not a script for how the music will sound, but a series of provisional proposals for communal interaction undertaken by trusted collaborators.

However, let's get specific and jump to 2014. Either at the end of 2013 or very early in 2014 I had received a message from John Quail at the Marsden Jazz Festival exploring the idea of a possible commission for the Festival's 2014 edition. I assume that many of you here will know who John is – for those who don't, John was at that time the Chair of the Marsden Festival committee, and was also programming the Festival's New Stream events (as he always has...). John is going to loom large in the story I'm about to relate, so I hope most of you will already have some acquaintance with him.

The message from John and the idea of a Marsden commission was somewhat unusual, in that every commission I've received in the past had been through someone (a promoter, festival director, radio or recording producer) who knew me, knew my work, was interesting in what I was doing and wanted to give me the opportunity to explore further the compositional furrow I've been ploughing since 1983.

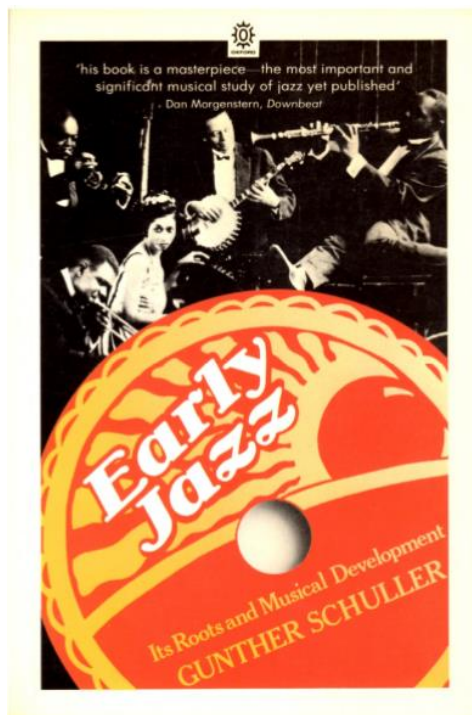
However, John's message came through a third party (Prof. Philip Thomas at the University of Huddersfield) who had recommended me to John, and it was clear that John had never heard of me or my work until this recommendation had been made. I've long since ceased to be

surprised by being off people's radar, since creative music is a complex series of niches within niches, so this didn't upset me unduly, even though by that time five of my large-scale commissions or other substantial pieces had been broadcast by the BBC's Jazz on 3 (musicians take note, sometimes the number of people out there listening is fewer than you might think!).

Anyway, John turned out to be (as some of you will know) an absolutely spiffing fellow, with a robust interest in exploring the new and pushing the envelope – we first met in January 2014, and the CDs I gave him of previous composition projects didn't seem to faze him at all. Such open mindedness in the face of the unknown is rare, especially in people who have to sell concert tickets in unlikely locations – so I was extremely heartened. However, John was also to present me with another surprise; when we met it quickly became clear that he had an idea of what the commissioned music might explore, and had suggestions about stylistic and thematic ideas which were comparatively specific. I'd never encountered this before; as previously mentioned, other commissions had been from people who knew roughly what I did, and wanted me to do more of it. But John didn't know what I did – however he had an idea of what he thought I might do; this kind of artistic direction from a commissioner was a new experience for me, and somewhat took me by surprise. The idea of exploring early jazz was an unexpected one for me, as someone who is often pigeon-holed as a card-carrying avant-gardist; even though the truth is inevitably much more complicated than will fit the pigeon-hole, the very early years of jazz were ones which in 2014 I had not yet come to terms with – either as a performer or as a listener. John was to change all that.

John's idea of reflecting upon a century of jazz through the lens of

modernity has been well documented, on the festival website, through the introduction to the concert for those who were there, and in the sleeve notes John wrote for the CD release. I also wrote a piece for the Festival blog about the commissioning process, which may well be still available to consult. The key thing is that, as well as these ideas, at that first meeting John gave me a copy of Gunther Schuller's 1968 book *Early Jazz*, in the 1986 OUP paperback edition.



I'm not sure what John imagined would result from giving me such a book, but as we will see it proved to be decisive in generating many elements of the subsequent commission. At the time I was somewhat bemused, but I was pleased to accept the book, as it is a fine study which was not already in my collection.

There were of course several further meetings, and numerous practicalities to resolve, but I'm now going to skip directly to the process of writing the music. Part of the non-classical approach to composition which I have discussed means that often serious work can't really start until I have an idea of who's going to be in the band; the music is written

for specific individual voices with particular personal characteristics and technical resources, and without that information it is hard to develop ideas to any great extent. Over the course of the next few months it was confirmed that the band would be Percy Pursglove on trumpet, Alex Ward on clarinet, Shabaka Hutchings on bass clarinet, Richard Comte on guitar, Paul Hession on drums and myself on double bass. Now I could write something!

Searching for that often difficult initial inspiration, I picked up (among other things) the copy of Early Jazz that John had given me. As some of you may know, the book contains numerous transcriptions of early jazz themes, arrangements and improvisations. Something I had occasionally done in the past was to create new pieces by arranging, re-writing or otherwise transforming transcriptions of improvisations (as has George Russell, who probably should have been on my earlier list of jazz composers); the complexities and philosophical mirrorings involved in the process are attractive, and the resulting music often has a fascinating schizophrenic quality. I resolved to examine the source material that the Schuller transcriptions might provide.

Interestingly, my initial attempts to 'modernise' this material were ultimately too fussy, too much like jazz-rock fusion – I'd transformed the material using rich and dissonant harmonies, complex shifting time signatures and modal extrapolations. But along the way I'd lost the grace and purity of the earlier music, and produced something that wouldn't have been that out of place being played by Stanley Clarke and George Duke.



These early versions soon went into the waste paper basket.

André Hodeir describes a particular Louis Armstrong improvisation as “a masterpiece; it is impossible to imagine anything more sober and balanced” and Schuller himself adds that “no composer, not even a Mozart or a Schubert, composed anything more natural and simply inspired”. It quickly became clear that the only way to treat such fantastically coherent and eloquent music was to let it stand. The time shifting modernist elements would simply have to cut across or into this material, but could not be used to ‘improve’ or ‘update’ it. I resolved to start the piece with a vicious simultaneous ‘shock of the old’ and ‘shock of the new’; thus work began in earnest.

variant 1 : lebam lebam (un cauchemar)

1. Lebam Lebam (Un Cauchemar) Grouse H. Fell
Composition No. 79a (2014)

♩ = 100 beats

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Movement 1: lebam lebam (un cauchemar)

The first Schuller transcriptions to catch my eye were taken from two versions of Mabel's Dream by King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band. The first

variant 1 : lebam lebam (un cauchemar)

Example 2 *Mabel's Dream*—Paramount Version

is of three versions of the trio section theme taken from the 1923
Paramount recording, while the second

variant 1 : lebam lebam (un cauchemar)

Example 3 *Mabel's Dream*—Okeh Version

features Oliver's melody and Louis Armstrong's counter melody from the Okeh version, recorded 6 months later. It seemed to me that superimposing or combining these 5 versions of the same material would be an interesting way of introducing thematic unity while providing apparently unpredictable and conflicting minor variants. Thus the opening thematic statement of the first movement includes the second Oliver version from the Paramount recording on the clarinet, with the Okeh version of the same material in the trumpet. The bass clarinet plays the Armstrong counter-melody.

Let's listen to the original materials from 1923/24. Here's the passage transcribed by Schuller from the Paramount recording in September 1923; we'll hear from the beginning of the trio section.

[The Ragging of Time lecture track 01](#)

variant 1 : lebam lebam (un cauchemar)

Example 2 *Mabel's Dream*—Paramount Version

The musical score is written on a single staff in 2/4 time, with a tempo marking of 'ca. 138'. The key signature has two flats (Bb and Eb). The melody is transcribed with various harmonic annotations above it, including chords such as Ab, Eb, Ab, Ab7, Eb, Ab, Eb, Ab, Ab7, Eb, C, C7, Eb, Eb7, Ab7, Ab, and Eb7. There are also annotations for '8 bar interlude' and 'chords as before'. The score ends with a 'trilled' note.

Schuller must have had better ears than I, or have been working from a better recording – but my interest is in his transcription as a translation of what was already played, rather than a recording of it. If you noticed the 8 bar interlude, keep it in mind – we'll come back to that later.

Here's the later version, from Spring 1924. Oliver's melody is almost overshadowed by the growing confidence (and sophistication) of Armstrong's countermelody.

[The Ragging of Time lecture track 02](#)

variant 1 : lebam lebam (un cauchemar)

Example 3: *Mabel's Dream*—Okeh Version

The image displays a musical score for the Okeh version of 'Mabel's Dream'. It features two staves: the top staff is for Oliver and the bottom staff is for Armstrong. The tempo is marked as '♩ = ca. 138'. The key signature has three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The score is divided into four systems. The first system shows Oliver's melody starting with a half note, followed by Armstrong's accompaniment. The second system continues the melody with various chords (Ab, Eb, Ab, Fm, Eb) indicated above the staff. The third system shows a more complex melodic line with chords (Ab, Eb, Ab, Ab7, Eb, C, C7). The fourth system concludes the piece with chords (Eb, Eb7, Ab7, Eb7, Ab) and a final cadence.

For my own piece, in order to contrast as strongly as possible with this 'antique' material, I decided to intercut a series of the extended techniques which form an aural shorthand for the language of contemporary improvisation; these then provide a thematic sequence and melodic material in their own right, which is permuted later. So,

intercut with the 1923/24 material, you will hear (1) air sounds, (2) popping and clicking sounds, (3) instrumental moans and groans and (4) vocal sounds. In effect, these ‘unvoiced’ timbral elements provide the abstract counterbalance to the specific historical material of the notation. Figure 2 presents free notated development of the Mabel material, followed by a section of conduction, using the ‘unvoiced’ material. Figure 3 uses the opening melody of the 1923 version of Mabel, which sounds like this,

[The Ragging of Time lecture track 03](#)

but this material is played in retrograde by the clarinet and bass clarinet – i.e. the music is written backwards. While this may seem perverse, once again this is another technique which is most effective for keeping some indefinable spirit of the original while making it strange and disconcerting. (This technique also led to the movement’s title, Lebam being the retrograde of Mabel, and its French-sounding character led me to translate the dream into a French nightmare – un cauchemar.)

The retrograde section is followed by a comparatively jazzy improvisation with clarinet, bass and drums, using the Mabel chord progression. I was particularly pleased that Alex, without us having discussed it, seems to manage to work in a nod to Acker Bilk in the opening his solo – perhaps I am imagining it, but there’s a hint of Acker in that first phrase.



(Acker is part of my own jazz history; in my childhood two Bilk LPs were the only jazz elements to be found in my parents' meagre record collection.)

Let's listen to Lebam Lebam up to this point. Some of the improvised material has been elided; I regret this elision greatly, since improvisation is a key part of the overall piece, possibly the most important part. However, for a full understanding of the overall piece, you are recommended to seek out a copy of the recording and listen to it in its entirety (see link on the Marsden Jazz Festival website).

Here's the first part of Movement 1:

[The Ragging of Time lecture track 04](#)

0m09s : *Fig 1* - the second Oliver version of the *Mabel* theme from the Paramount recording in the clarinet;

the Okeh version of the same material in the trumpet:

the bass clarinet plays the Armstrong counter-melody;

intercut with 4 types of 'unvoiced' sounds

3m11s : *Fig 2* - free notated development of the *Mabel* material;

Followed by a section of conduction, using the 'unvoiced' material

6m23s : *Fig 3* - the opening melody of the 1923 version of *Mabel* played in retrograde by clarinet and bass clarinet

6m52s : *Fig 4* - *Mabel* 8-bar interlude with interjections of maximum rhythmic complexity

7m10s : *Fig 3 (bar 161)* - clarinet, bass and drums improvisation;

Alex's Acker nod?

7m38s : improvisation elided

Following the clarinet, bass and drums improvisation, there is a more abstract guitar/drums duo, and we'll rejoin the piece part way into this duo. The following sections explore various permutations of the thematic material outlined earlier, but rather than list them here I'll display them on the screen as we listen to the performance. The movement finishes with a combination of the opening trio melodies again, along with the free variation material from figure 2. This is followed by a most non 1920s chromatic coda, providing a 'shock of the mainstream', and whose 1950s overtones will be developed further in Movement 2. (Or at least so it seems, but the coda is actually extracted and expanded from Jelly Roll Morton's 1923 composition Black Bottom Stomp, which will form an important part of Movement 2.)

[The Ragging of Time lecture track 05](#)

0m11s : *Fig 5* - free atonal development of *Mabel* theme(s) in clarinet and muted trumpet, set against the *Mabel* bass line (chromatically transposed) in the bass clarinet;

Subsequently the bass clarinet returns to the original tonality and is joined by the rhythm section playing the *Mabel* chords (with an ironic coda)

2m54s : improvisation elided

3m10s : *Fig 7* - the opening melody of the 1923 version of *Mabel* played (forwards this time) by clarinet, trumpet and guitar;

3m59s : improvisation elided

4m16s : *Fig 7 (bar 145)* - out-of-time free exploration of all the original *Mabel* material in retrograde, combined once again with ‘unvoiced’ material

5m56s : *Fig 8* - all three opening *Mabel* trio melodies again, combined with the free variation material from *figure 2*; followed by a quasi-mainstream chromatic coda, moving the music ahead 30 years, in preparation for Variant 2.

variant 2 : unstable cylindrical structure

11
Simon H. Fell
Composition No. 786 (2014)

2. Unstable Cylindrical Structure

1 *♩ = 50 slow, sloppy blues*

cl (AK)
bd (SH)
gr (PC)
bass (SP)
dr (PH)

13 *chugger*

19

Movement 2: unstable cylindrical structure

The second movement takes as its starting point a jazz collaboration which was seminal in stimulating my interest in the music, and which in my view remains one of the artform’s highpoints. I have in mind the work

of Charles Mingus with Eric Dolphy, and really I should add Dannie Richmond to this recipe. I have never heard an uninteresting recording where these three musicians are combined; Mingus' composition and band-leading of the late 50s/early 60s is always exceptional, his rhythm section playing with Richmond is always extraordinary, and when an adventurous virtuoso like Dolphy is added to this mix it approaches my idea of Jazz Heaven. Knowing that the Marsden band would include Shabaka, who is an exceptional bass clarinetist, and Paul Hession, both one of my oldest friends and one of my favourite propulsive swing drummers, I felt one Marsden movement had to explore this territory – marking perhaps the halfway point between the 1910s and the present day.

Unstable Cylindrical Structure takes as its starting point one of jazz's more traditional building blocks – it's a blues, and a blues in *Bb* at that. The chords are a very straightforward blues structure, without any inventive substitutions – I wanted to make the starting point as simple as possible, because in my experience simpler material has more elasticity. A straightforward blues (or similar format) has a structural resilience that allows it to be teased, stretched, fragmented and subverted while still retaining perceptible points of reference; complex jazz harmonies, whether it be Giant Steps or Waltz for Debby, simply dissolve too soon when the acid of freedom is applied to them. I think (hope) that you'll understand what I mean when we listen to Richard's guitar solo from this movement.

Although I have described the harmonic structure as straightforward, the melodic material in this movement is anything but. The main theme is a loping stride from one end of the register to the other played by the *Bb* and bass clarinets in octaves. In composing the melody, I simply tried to

select pitches that were as alien to the harmony as possible, although assembling them in a way that made them sound ‘conventional’; as the twelve-bar theme progresses, this tendency becomes more and more pronounced – but the elasticity and gravitational pull of the blues structure seems to explain all the dissonance as blurred or blue or bent pitches, effectively breaking the stranglehold of quantised western pitch concepts.

At bar 13, the clarinets are joined by the trumpet with additional melodic material. This material is again drawn from Schuller’s transcriptions, in this case of part of Jelly Roll Morton’s famous improvisation on New Orleans Joys, another key recording from 1923 – and also a blues in B $\flat$. The improvisation is noteworthy because during it Morton consciously ‘decouples’ his hands, playing different time in his right hand against a stable bass; this technique has been further explored since by Erroll Garner and many other pianists, but Morton’s bold experiment here results in a passage of which Schuller writes “absolutely precise notation of the passage in question is probably not possible, or if possible, so complex in notation as to be virtually unreadable”. Of course, since Schuller wrote that passage a whole strand of contemporary composed music which specialises in unplayably complex notation has become core repertoire for numerous ensembles, although of course there is often an interpretation- or improvisation-filled gap between text and realisation. But what excited me about using this passage was the double gap of transcribing an untranscribable passage, resulting in one corruption, and then asking a jazz musician to play the unplayable transcription, thus adding a second layer of corruption. As you will possibly have gleaned, in such circumstances I consider such so-called corruption as not only interesting and creative, but also arguably the

essence of notation performance in the jazz idiom. Anyone who's heard Basie charts (for example) played perfectly in Eurological tune and time by a highly skilled European student band will know what I mean...

First of all, let's listen to the passage in question:

[The Ragging of Time lecture track 06](#)

Now, here is Schuller's transcription

Example 8 *New Orleans Joys*



I've deliberately kept the two separate, so the transcription can become an object in its own right, rather than just a document of Morton's original. Of course, when Percy plays this passage, he's walking the tightrope of trying to realise this notation against the very idiomatic material of the Mingus-type theme; I've no idea if Percy or Alex knew the Morton piece, or had made the connection, but I prefer to hope that they hadn't and were playing this as another perverse musical object that I had encrusted onto the blues progression.

One of the most memorable moments of this movement was Richard's guitar solo which follows this theme. Richard Comte is not primarily a jazz guitarist, although that forms part of his technical training – he is primarily a free improviser with strong roots in both grunge and death metal, and minimal abstraction. It was his rock roots that I wanted to

bring into play here, but it took several rehearsal run-throughs to convince him that was what I really wanted. Being in Marsden, at a Jazz Festival with some pretty hefty mainstream elements, and lots of people with proper jazz chops, had intimidated Richard into thinking he should play a 'jazz' guitar solo, despite what I asked for in the score. After a couple of runs through, which were fine but no different from what one might hear in a pub in the centre of town during the Festival weekend, we collectively managed to persuade Richard to be himself, as you will hear. One of the things I particularly enjoy about this section is the resilience of the blues structure which I mentioned earlier – no matter how much we pull at it, overload it and try and break it, it will graciously allow us to slip back into place any time we wish. For me, this is a kind of playing that can only happen with music from the jazz tradition.

Why did I want Richard to play this certain kind of solo? And should I have 'composed' his solo in this regard at all? The second question is potentially prickly and complex, and some musicians would baulk violently at suggestions being made about the character of a theoretically improvised passage. However, these are the kind of musicians that I prefer not to invite to participate in such projects. For me, as a jazz composer there is a range of influence that I might have on the music, from almost completely predetermining it to having no input at all in a certain section. Collaborating on the character of an improvisation is part of that range, and as with all this music the outcome is a mix of my ideas and the musicians' in varying percentages.

To return to the first question – why did I want to encourage this type of solo? In fact, I wanted to make reference to a particular moment in the Mingus discography, but from music much later in his career than the Dophy period I cited above. *Me, Myself An Eye* was recorded in 1978,

by which time Mingus himself was too weak to play, or lead the band; Jack Walrath transcribed Mingus' sung compositions and arrangements, added his own arrangements of some Mingus pieces, and recorded the whole with an all-star New York big band. The moment that concerns us here is Larry Coryell's solo on Devil Woman – when I first heard this album in the early 80s, I was shocked by how rocky Coryell's electric guitar sounded in the context of an otherwise acoustic big band. Listening back to it in preparation for this lecture, I realised that my memory of the transgressive nature of the original solo had developed over the years, and with my now 21st-century ears it sounds pretty unremarkable – but it was my attempt to recreate what I had remembered (and in remembering had exaggerated) that pushed me to tease the second movement solo from Richard that you'll hear in a moment. Here, out of interest, is part of Coryell's 1978 solo though – we'll pick it up at the end of his first chorus.

[The Ragging of Time lecture track 07](#)

Now here is the opening of Unstable Cylindrical Structure, just until the end of the guitar solo.

[The Ragging of Time lecture track 08](#)

0m47s : *Fig 1 bar 13 – New Orleans* Joys material added on trumpet and clarinet, a tone apart; a reference to (i) Monk and (ii) Joe Lovano's *aulochrome*

3m39s : improvisation elided

After Richard's solo, the character of the movement changes dramatically. A diametrically opposed type of improvisation leads us into figure 4, where the music returns again to the early pioneers, and in particular, Jelly Roll Morton. In researching material for the piece I'd discovered a passage – on this occasion not mentioned by Schuller –

from 1926's Black Bottom Stomp. Here's the opening of Morton's 1926 recording:

[The Ragging of Time lecture track 09](#)

Hidden within this distinctly jolly music is a remarkable phrase – the syncopated figuration which punctuates the theme and some of the solos. The harmony is quite beautiful, especially in the anonymous transcription for the Firehouse Jazz Band Fake Book.

I wanted to use this material to reflect the influence of Gospel Music on jazz composers throughout the music's history, not least Mingus of course. The unaccompanied winds play the Morton passage reverentially, with their vocal interjections (repeated from the opening of Movement 1) seeming now to reflect a moment of spiritual transcendence. Emerging from this rarefied atmosphere, Alex very slowly plays Sidney Bechet's obligato line from Old Fashioned Love, recorded by the Clarence Williams Blue Five in 1923. This is another Schuller transcription

Example 4 *Old Fashioned Love*



and here is how the original sounds:

[The Ragging of Time lecture track 10](#)

If played slowly, it actually sounds like late 19th century romanticism, If the G7 chord is resolved to C major.

This fits marvellously well with Morton's Bach chorale-like interlude, as

you will hear when we listen to the movement.

After this interlude, the *Black Bottom Stomp* material is arpeggiated against the blues progression of the main theme, with the addition of the *New Orleans Joys* material in the trumpet along with the free variation of the theme heard towards the beginning of the piece. The movement then ends in an appropriately traditional fashion, with a simple restatement of the main theme.

The Ragging of Time lecture track 11

0m12s : *Fig 4 – Black Bottom Stomp* material played slowly, with ‘unvoiced’ interjections;

Bechet’s *Old Fashioned Love* obbligato, played very slowly

3m06s : *Fig 6 - Black Bottom Stomp* material arpeggiated against the blues progression of the main theme;

Subsequently with the addition of the *New Orleans Joys* material in the trumpet and the free variation of the theme heard towards the beginning of the movement;

Then restatement of the main theme.

variant 3 : the human omelette (1926)

17
Simon H. Fell
Composition No. 79c (2014)

3. The Human Omelette (1926)

1 SEXTET non-idiomatic Free Improvisation 1

2 ♩ = 120 swing FREE JAZZ BLOWING 10 min (10 min) FREE TIME 10 min

3 ♩ = 120 swing FREE JAZZ BLOWING 10 min (10 min) FREE TIME 10 min

Movement 3: the human omelette

The starting point for this final movement is Schuller's transcription of Louis Armstrong's improvised solo on his 1926 recording of Big Butter and Egg Man. This is the passage I referred to earlier, about which Hodeir rhapsodised, and regarding which Schuller wrote "no composer, not even a Mozart or a Schubert, composed anything more natural and simply inspired". Here is Schuller's transcription

Example 7 *Big Butter and Egg Man*



and here is how it actually sounds:

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This is one of the most magnificent moments in jazz history, and I decided to use it as the theme of the third movement – acknowledging a convoluted jazz tradition of transcribing recorded solos to make new contrafact themes, such as Moody’s Mood for Love, George Russell’s version of So What, or Joni Mitchell’s version of Goodbye Pork Pie Hat. However, this theme only appears in ghost-like form for most of the piece’s duration; as you will hear, its full glory is withheld until the very end of the piece. The movement opens with free improvisation, then collective blowing from the horns against a very rapid pulse. Gradually there is an extended metric modulation as this material is intercut with

progressively slowing passages of rhythmic unison, with two-bar bursts of Big Butter and Egg Man's underlying harmony. If this is a bit hard to imagine, let's just listen to it; this excerpt ends with a jazz solo from Percy, which was again somewhat composed. Percy was reluctant to play jazz at this point, and was lusting after freedom; I managed to convince him that after what had just been played, we needed to at least start with some jazz. Subsequently things do get freer, although unfortunately we don't have time to listen to the entire improvisation.

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1m53s : *Fig 1 – Fig 5* – collective blowing from the horns against a very rapid pulse;

an extended metric modulation as this material is undercut with progressively slowing passages of rhythmic unison;

combined with 2-bar bursts of *Big Butter and Egg Man's* underlying harmony

6m07s : improvisation elided

After a sequence of jazz and free jazz improvisations, figure 8 presents a dramatic change of atmosphere. The starting point for this section was the date 1926, the date of the Big Butter and Egg Man recording; I was interested to see what else was happening at this time, and began researching this date in musical history. The results established the remarkable diversity and experiment present in music during the interwar years – from a list of notable first recordings and performances including Varèse, Gershwin, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Bing Crosby, Shostakovich and Jelly Roll Morton (the recording of Black Bottom Stomp we heard in movement two), I selected two to work with: East St. Louis Toodle-oo by Duke Ellington and the Five Pieces for Orchestra Op. 10 by Anton Webern. Before any Webern experts in the room remark that these pieces were actually written in 1913, I'll point out that

they weren't published until 1923 (the date of Mabel's Dream from movement one), and were first performed in 1926, so they fit into my numerological scheme very well indeed.

I wanted to combine these two pieces to make a new piece of music which would form the second section of this movement. Although the original Ellington version of East St. Louis Toodle-oo was recorded in 1926, this time I sent my time machine scuttling forward nearly 70 years for my reference version. I've always particularly liked Dave Grusin's 1993 version of this piece, with Clark Terry in the Bubber Miley role, and it was this version which was uppermost in my mind. Here are the openings of the two versions in chronological order.

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Now here's the fourth piece from Webern's Op. 10, Fließend Und Äusserst Zart, along with the score; the performance is by the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Antal Dorati in 1963. As you'll hear, the piece is very short.

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IV.

Fließend, äußerst zart ($\text{♩} = ca 60$)
rit. - - - tempo

Fl. in B
ppp

Trp. in B
m. Dpf.
dolce
ppp
chiarissimo
ppp
nur geduldet

Pos.
m. Dpf.
ppp

Mand.
dolce
Zeit lassen
ppp

Col.
ppp

Hrf.
ppp

kl. Tr.
ppp

Fließend, äußerst zart ($\text{♩} = ca 60$)
rit. - - - tempo

Solo - Org.
m. Dpf.
wie ein Hauch
ppp

Solo - Br.
m. Dpf.
ppp

U. B. 5007 / U. B. 13408

If there are any extremely sharp-eared listeners in the room who are worryingly familiar with my earlier work, they'll have recognised that I've already quoted this piece before, in my large-scale work *Compilation III* of 1994. Since the recording of that piece caused quite a critical stir worldwide at the time, I'm particularly happy to quote myself, quoting Webern, 20 years later.

A transcription of this short Webern piece is superimposed on the East St. Louis Toodle-oo harmonic material, twice forwards and then once in retrograde. The trick here was to recreate the skeletal feel of the Webern in the Ellington material, and I did this by trial and error, gradually reducing the Ellington until it seemed to balance with the Webern. In fact, this worked better than I had hoped – the resulting music seems of

a piece, with the Ellington *Eb* minor harmony seeming to fit comfortably with the dodecaphonic atonality of Webern. When I hear the Webern now, I hear it in relation to *Eb* minor, to Duke Ellington and Bubber Miley, to Dave Grusin and Clark Terry, and to Percy, Alex, Shabaka and Richard who played the piece so beautifully in Marsden. This synthesis of abstract composition with the personal stamp of living breathing musicians past and present, is the essence of Afrological composition for me.

The next section of this movement takes us back from *Eb* minor to the F major tonality of the opening. This is achieved by a series of two-note chords which ‘cross-fade’ the two tonalities, but also more importantly by Shabaka improvising a bridge section, rather than me composing it.

Whilst I was nominally the composer of this piece, I hope it is by now clear to you that none of this music would happen without the participation of creative musicians, and at this point I decided to let Shabaka invent a connection between notated sections. He does this marvellously, but of course every time this piece is played this section will be completely different – especially if a different musician takes this part, as will happen in the upcoming London performance.

Let’s listen to this part, up to the beginning of Shabaka’s solo transitional section:

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0m24s : *Fig 8* – Webern Op. 10 no.4 is superimposed over Ellington’s *East St. Louis Toodle-oo* harmonic material, twice forwards and then once in retrograde

2m08s : improvisation elided

The cue to come out of Shabaka’s solo and into the next written section was, structurally speaking, one of the most challenging junctures of the

whole piece. Percy described the moment when suddenly he has to pick up his notated material on the basis of three quick notes from Shabaka, with no indication of when they will arrive and what will proceed them, as 'very dangerous'. I built in some extra emphatic cuing via hand signals, but it remains a tense moment for the entire group. We pulled it off in Marsden, and I keep my fingers crossed for the next performance! The final section of the piece begins by joyously combining all the material heard thus far in the movement over the Big Butter and Egg Man chord progression. Webern, Ellington, Armstrong and yours truly all rub shoulders in this enthusiastic *melée*, until Percy finally – for the first time in the piece – plays on the trumpet the three pickup notes of the Armstrong transcription. This is a signal for everyone to play a relatively straight but joyous 21st century Dixieland, as we finally hear the full

Armstrong solo. However, just as we seem to be heading for a most traditional II V I cadence, the music jerks us back to E flat minor instead of the dominant C major we were expecting.

Why? Well, one of the key elements of the early discussions between John and I during the commission's genesis was early jazz's relationship with the First World War. Although most of the music I've drawn on for raw material comes from the 1920s, the Great War was never far from my mind. The Webern piece used in this movement was written in 1913, after all. Thus the joyous Dixieland suddenly transforms into a haunting minor. A fleeting reference to the 'unvoiced' material from the very beginning of the whole piece suddenly seems to speak of artillery, disfigurement, violence, before Duke Ellington's now funereal East St. Louis harmony, fused with the harmonic twist from Morton's Black Bottom Stomp leads us to an inversion of tradition – rather than the

ragging of the music celebrating the return to life after the sobriety of the funeral procession, here it is death which has the final word.

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0m14s : *Fig 10* – all the *Human Omelette* material heard thus far, combined over the *Big Butter and Egg Man* chord progression

joyous 21st century Dixieland, as we finally hear the full Armstrong solo

1m51s : *Fig 10 bar 213* – the joyous Dixieland transforms into a haunting minor

a fleeting reference to the ‘unvoiced’ material from the very beginning of the whole piece

Ellington’s *East St. Louis* harmony, fused with the harmonic twist from Morton’s *Black Bottom Stomp*

Eb minor prevails



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