

***Esperance* by Chris Dench: a discussion of pedagogic problems and their solutions.**

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This paper examines a 3-minute piano work by British-born, Australian composer Chris Dench. Esperance (1985/86) was written as a small homage to two composer colleagues of Dench: James Erber and Sinan Savaskan around the births of their sons. It is a piece that presents the performer and teacher with pedagogic challenges at various levels. Issues such as having both hands play in unusual ratios eg. 7 against 9, often with differing ratios simultaneously in each hand, and understanding uncommon rhythms and notations are problems that need to be addressed. Pedagogic obstacles will be discussed in increasing order of cognitive development. These include theoretical challenges where notational issues are addressed, physical difficulties in executing the piece such as technical issues and the overall approach to the keyboard, and cognitive problems that require performers to analyse the piece and make interpretive and at times stylistic decisions. This piece represents one of many works found in the style of writing that is often labelled “complexist”, and it is used as an example of current repertoire. Issues raised in this piece and their suggested solutions may be applied to other repertoire by composers such as Boulez, Ligeti, Stockhausen and Xenakis. Conclusions drawn may also be relevant to other contemporary works of this style. This paper concludes by suggesting that pedagogies for the teaching of current piano repertoire are evolving to stay abreast of developments in new piano music and consequently, techniques for the efficient learning of this repertoire are developmental. It poses the theory that learning this style of music requires different techniques from those used in the learning of standard repertoire, and an understanding of learning as related to cognitive development may enhance the learning process and make it more logical.

Introduction

This paper describes a study in progress on modern, avant-garde piano music; specifically the teaching and learning of contemporary piano repertoire of approximately the last 50 years. The focus of this research is on the works of composers who push performers to their limits physically and/or intellectually; composers such as Chris Dench, Brian Ferneyhough, Michael Finnissy, Gyorgy Ligeti, and Iannis Xenakis. These composers do not base their music on traditional piano styles but write in a non-standard, non-mainstream style that may not be accepted or popular with the general population. The study is based on the theory that the teaching of current piano repertoire relies on solving problems in notation, technique, analysis, and the emotional and intellectual positions of the learner in relation to the music. This project proposes the theory that in the teaching of this current repertoire, evolving pedagogies may be seen.

Esperance by Chris Dench represents one of many works found in recent writing that is often labelled “complexist”, and is used as an example of this current repertoire. For example, Toop (1988, p.20) in his analyses of *Tilt* and *Enonce*, also by Dench, makes reference to *Esperance*, saying that these pieces “introduce many of the characteristic features of Dench’s recent compositional method.” Issues raised and their suggested solutions may be applied to other repertoire by composers such as Boulez, Ligeti, Stockhausen and Xenakis, and conclusions drawn may be relevant to other contemporary works of this style for other instruments.

Piano repertoire of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries may be classified into a number of categories such as impressionist, neoclassical, serial, minimalist and complexist. This study primarily investigates the pedagogy of what has been defined as complexist repertoire. One of the parameters of this repertoire is referred to as “complex” because of the intricate way its composers notate their scores. Halbreich, (1990, p.24) notes that “by complexity today one generally means so called ‘black scores’ replete with millions of notes, preferably (almost) unplayable.” As Halbreich mentions, often this music is so difficult that it is almost impossible for performers to meet the demands of composers. This repertoire is also labelled complexist due to the intellectual demands on the performer as well as the technically demanding passagework involved. Alberman (1990, p.8), second violinist of the Arditti quartet, when referring to this style of music, believes that “complexity in music usually involves some or all of the following elements: polyphony; wide variety of rhythmic or harmonic patterns; musical events happening too fast for easy comprehension – complex rhythms, changes in tone colour, effects.” Barrett (1990, p.11), who (along with many other composers involved) objects to being categorised as a “complexist” composer, lists textural density in both vertical and linear senses, performative difficulty in both technical and psychological senses, and structural intricacy as qualities of musical “complexity”. Toop (1988, p.4) summarises it all when he states that the term “should refer simply to relative difficulty of technical execution or density of musical substance.” The label has admittedly become more loaded than necessary in recent years, but a debate on this issue would form a separate discussion for another longer paper. Thus for the purposes of this paper, the above characteristics may all be included to form a working definition of “complexity.”

A short piano work by British-born, Australian composer Chris Dench, will be examined as a source of pedagogical problems. *Esperance* (1985/86) was written as a small homage to two composer colleagues of Dench: James Erber and Sinan Savaskan to celebrate the births of their sons. It has been performed and recorded many times by various pianists and Dench describes it as “one of my favourites of my works.” (Dench, internet access 22/3/05). It is part of a much larger collection of pieces entitled *Phase Portraits* which is still a work in progress. The title, which means “hope”, refers to a line in *King Lear*, spoken by Gloucester when he thinks that he is at the top of the cliff outside Dover, known as *Shakespeare Cliff*, known to Chris since his childhood. This cliff is the highest in the British Isles, but Chris bemoans the new freeway that bounds it on one side and the “unspeakable Channel Tunnel on the other” (Dench, internet access 22/3/05).

Chris Dench was born in London in 1953 and grew up in Dover. He is a self-taught composer whose works have been performed by leading new music ensembles and orchestras. Many of his works have been recorded and available on CD (eg. L. Chislett’s *Music for flute*, and *The Flute Ascendant*). According to Toop (1988, p.19), Dench “cites the major impetus to his composing career as being a recital...which included Takahashi’s *Chromamorphe II* and Scriabin’s *Preludes Op.74*.” Dench came to Australia in 1989 and is now an Australian citizen.

Esperance is a piece that presents the performer and teacher with pedagogic challenges at various levels. Confronted by a score such as *Esperance*, the question that immediately arises is what issues or problems need to be addressed

when teaching this piece. This question leads to some possible pedagogic strategies as answers.

There are a number of stylistic and technical issues to be considered when teaching and learning this piece. These include understanding the overall scheme and pitch structures in the piece, being aware of technical concerns so they may be addressed during performance and perhaps most importantly for this type of repertoire, having an appreciation for the rhythmic problems that occur throughout the work. For example, the latter presents the learner and teacher with difficulties such as having both hands play in unusual ratios (eg. 7 against 9 or 14 against 17, often with differing ratios simultaneously in each hand – often resulting in several tempi occurring at the same time), understanding uncommon rhythms and uncommon (non-standard) notations, and understanding complexity: the explicit writing, departure from traditional styles, changes in time signature and unusual time signatures, and so on, that comes with this type of repertoire.

These pedagogic issues may be grouped into three main areas to be discussed in increasing order of cognitive development. First, there needs to be a theoretical understanding of the notation before any interpretation and other cognitive approaches to notation can take place. Second, and flowing from this, the physical approach to executing the piece and how this applies to the fingers requires clarification. Third, it is necessary to have an intellectual understanding of what needs to be done to learn *Esperance*. Often, the theoretical and physical parameters precede the cognitive one, but in the case of *Esperance*, understanding the notation requires more than a mere reading of the notes, it also requires a high level of intellectual and psychological engagement, as is the case with most complexist repertoire. Hence in teaching this work, teachers are required to guide students through problems that include theoretical issues, such as how to approach and understand the score, cognitive issues that require both teacher and performer to know what the composer intends to say through the score, analysis of the piece, the making of interpretive and at times stylistic decisions, and finally, consideration of physical and technical issues such as how the overall approach to the keyboard is to be choreographed.

Notation

One would expect that theoretical matters such as notation would be relatively straightforward to decipher, but in the case of complexist repertoire, the notation often requires a higher level of cognitive processing especially when complicated ratios of rhythms are involved.

Esperance was composed on graph paper. The instructions at the top of the stave at the opening reads: lower stave always ♩ = ♩ (2cm = 1second) (see Example 1). Practically, this means that the lower stave or the left hand part at the opening essentially keeps the ♩ beat throughout the piece and the right hand part fits around it. This is clear because it is the left hand part that seems to have notes spaced 1 cm apart (with certain exceptions such as the first 3 notes). The need for a ruler to work out timing presents a little intellectual/psychological hurdle at first but it becomes straightforward when the learner begins marking the score perhaps with an 'x' 1cm apart. A suggestion would be to do this at a 1cm distance and

then taking out every second 'x' when the notes and rhythms are essentially learnt to meet the 2cm suggestion at the opening (see Example 1).

When marking out the beats of the first 'bar', the first grouping of dotted semiquavers in the left hand against the right hand crotchet-tied-to-demisemiquaver figuration is a little confusing (Example 1), but when the 'x's are marked in 1cm apart, it becomes clear that essentially it will be a 4 against 3 timing in the left hand with the right hand fitting into this pulse. Notationally, this opening phrase looks difficult. Although the notes may not be physically difficult to play, they are initially mentally hard to place. Toop (1988, p.21) cites Dench speaking at a BBC feature on the 'New Complexity':

Notationally, I have reached a point of a certain amount of redundancy, and I am striving to do something about that, but my perception of pieces that have been notated much more loosely has always been one of inarticulacy. I don't want to release control of the rhythmic life of the piece.

One of the main challenges regarding notation in this piece is the way the notes are grouped. For example, the two hands play in unusual ratios usually overlapping with each other (see Example 2), with rest points between the sections. As we will see below, Dench aims to do this in order to achieve multiple layers of shifting beats. This will inevitably lead to difficulties with notation. Even though a phrase of notes may be relatively easy to play physically, mentally and cognitively, the phrase may look hard and be difficult to place accurately.

In the opening bars of the piece, for instance, the change in time signature from 15/8 (or 15 semiquavers at 1cm intervals) to 5:6 (5 ♩ in the right hand to 6 ♩ in the left hand), is not as complicated as it initially seems because the basic beat of ♩ = 120 remains the same and the effect is a seamless continuation of the bass line (See Example 1). It is interesting to note Dench's use of time signatures. Although the opening time signature of 15/8 does function as a time signature in the traditional sense, the next one 5:6, as mentioned above, simply means 5 ♩s in the right hand to 6 in the left. Dench has 'invented' this way of notating time to suit the purposes of this piece. Each time there is a colon in the time sign, the top number represents the number of beats for the right hand and the bottom number represents the number of beats in the left hand. This is in contrast to traditional time signatures where the bottom number represents the type of note that receives a beat. Toop (1988, p. 22) observes that in Dench's recent works, there "has not been a simplification of the musical substance but an attempt to make the score itself more 'user-friendly', or at least less visually intimidating." In this piece, Dench achieved this by using the 'prolation signs' described above, where one level of irrationals found in time signatures (that is, the bottom number) is removed. As we have seen he was also very meticulous in his score-writing and the spatial location of the noteheads, and he is very specific in saying that the left hand should always maintain a suggested speed of ♩ = 120.

It may be said that the notation is the way it is because this is the only way a composer can write to achieve rhythmic continuity. It is interesting to note that Dench removes the graph paper at the final stages of writing so the performer does not have it as the final product. This is because the aim is to ultimately get past the issue of notation and play the work as a coherent piece, without any breaks in the performance.

Rhythm

The rhythm as we have already seen is very intricate and complicated because the composer is working at different rhythmic levels. The right hand often has one rhythm and the left hand has another rhythm, and when you put them together, it results in yet another rhythm. For example, at the last ‘bar’ of the top line, the right hand has three dotted quavers against 4 quaver beats in the left hand and the ratio marked is 9:8 semiquavers (see Example 3). Since the ♪ beats are marked 1cm apart, the solution to playing this bar is again to align the other notes and relate them to the underlying beat. Toop (1988, p.21) notes that “the most striking rhythmic feature of Dench’s work is the use of chains of periodic values, continually ‘changing gear’ through the use of irrationals in relation to the basic tempo.” The rhythmic structure of *Esperance* is completely based on this. Toop continues by saying that “the whole point of this technique is to create a multi-layered tapestry of shifting pulse-rates (or ‘pseudo-tempi’) whose components are at least nominally perceptible (hence the periodic rhythms)”. He gives the example of the first bar where a number of periodic attacks are fitted into assorted “basic values”, giving a sense of fluctuations in pulse even in the opening statement (see Example 4).

On the second page (see Example 5) when the ‘time signature’ changes from 5:6 to 7:9 (7 ♪s in the right hand to 9 ♪s in the left hand), the listener is again not able to discern the change in time signature. However there is an additional complication here because the right hand is marked 5:4 dotted ♪’s and the left hand is grouped as 6:5 crotchets with half of the notes in the group belonging to the previous bar or group. In addition to this, preceding the 5:4 dotted ♪s in the right hand, there is a group of 9:8 dotted semiquavers, and following this, there is a group of 9:8 semiquavers. Although the rhythms are written very precisely to give a sense of imprecision in the performance, conceptually, this poses a few problems for the learner. The question is how to make the right hand groups, with various ratios, fit in with the left hand, and how do the left hand figurations fit in with the right hand, especially when there are ratios overlapping each other? The solution is again to continue the pulse in the left hand and be able to execute the left hand part independently of the right hand part, and when the rhythm is accurately learnt, the right hand part can then be fitted around it.

Establishing the pulse/meter

When playing *Esperance*, performers need to work out the inner pulsation as accurately as possible. The counting is very precise but the impression to the audience is a lack of pulse or underlying beat. As mentioned above, the key to playing this piece is to work out the counting. The performer must feel the inner pulse at all times and the left hand needs to subtly keep this pulse going whilst the right hand fits in more freely with the left hand part.

Pitch structures

Dench, in his compositions of this time period “likes to re-use the same basic sets in different works” (Toop, 1988, p.21). For example, *Esperance* and *Tilt* (written earlier in the same year – 1985) work with the same pitch materials.

Dench starts with a basic set of pitches and employs a looping technique where a certain number of pitches are resounded in an “unpredictable yet coherent manner.” In *Esperance*, Dench extracts more complex pitch groupings from the basic sets by letting one hand use a transposed version of the conjunction set.

Phrasing

Esperance is filled with consistently long notes and long phrases. As with works from preceding centuries, these phrases should be consistent in sound throughout the piece in order to provide a sense of cohesion to the work. There is a need to phrase logically even though the phrasing is not marked at all times. There are very long lines in this piece, often played as single notes and if there is not a strong supporting sound with a logical line or contour occurring, the music will be a little flat. For example in ‘bars’ 4 and 5 (Example 1), the right hand holds a single high G whilst the left hand has single notes. A bar later, the right hand has a single line on the offbeat and the left hand has single notes on the beat. Practically speaking, unless there is some sort of logical phrasing here, the two lines will fizzle out and not be carried to the next phrase.

Furthermore, there are big gestures that occur whilst the underlying pulse continues throughout the piece. For example on the first page at the second line (Example 2), the last figuration works up to a faster motif and then settles back into the underlying pulse on the second page. Similarly on the third page, the right hand has some gestural figurations on the second line. Although there is a basic pulse that occurs through the work, the periodic gestures at times seem a little random and the key is to work on joining these gestures to make a coherent whole.

Dynamics

Changes in dynamics correspond to the approach of the hands and or arm to the keyboard. Gestures are bigger or smaller depending on dynamic markings. At extremes in dynamics, the pedal could be used to build intensity. In this piece, there are large extremes of sound on every page after the first. It is the opinion of this author that one needs to have played 19th-century works and been able to ‘throw’ the hand and arm in order to achieve the required contrasts and range of sound. *Esperance* follows on from the pianistic traditions of the 19th and 20th centuries and pianists who attempt complexist works such as this would benefit from experience in this earlier repertoire.

Fingering

In *Esperance*, the fingering should reflect the melodic line. This is often the case with music of preceding centuries as well. When ornaments occur in this piece, they are like rips in the texture. In order for them to be played as fast as possible, the fingering must be such that the notes fit as neatly as possible under the hand, that is, in 1 hand position if possible (Example 6 – p.2 last line). In addition, when executing large leaps the fingering needs to be as efficient as possible in order to aid the pianist in making leaps accurately and quickly. This

principle is again borrowed from technical, pianistic strategies of preceding centuries.

Conclusion

In conclusion, pedagogies for the teaching of current piano repertoire are evolving as they try to stay abreast of developments in new piano music. Consequently, techniques for the efficient learning of this repertoire are developing alongside the appearance of each new piece that requires them. This paper poses the hypothesis that learning this style of music requires different techniques, or at least a development of existing techniques, from those used in the learning of standard repertoire. It also suggests that understanding of learning as a component of cognitive development may enhance the learning process and make it more logical for the pianist who approaches works such as *Esperance*.

As teachers and performers, we have a responsibility to educate ourselves and our students in all styles and types of music. If this means having to understand the challenges composers place on performers, it is up to teachers to address this challenge. This style of music, whether we approve or disapprove of it, is a part of music history and it would be negligent for teachers to teach only the music of the 19th and early 20th centuries when there is much more repertoire to cover. By using pieces of this type as examples of the demands placed on pianists and linking this to the demands placed on teachers and learners, the role of contemporary piano composition in driving the development of piano pedagogy can be raised as an issue for serious consideration.

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Yvonne is currently completing a PhD in music education at Sydney University. She has a Masters degree from the Eastman School of Music and a Bachelor of Music degree with Honours from Sydney University. Yvonne gained her L. Mus. A and LTCL at the age of 15 and has won numerous eisteddfods and competitions. Until recently, she has been teaching at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, and was on the Keyboard Staff of Barker College, Knox Grammar School, St. Aloysius College, and St. Ignatius College where she was Head of Piano. She has released a CD of Australian works, *First Light*, with the Fellowship of Australian Composers and has also recorded for 2MBS-FM, Grevillea, and ABC-FM.

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