

Juhani Vesikkala in conversation with Brian Ferneyhough in Viitasaari Church during 20 minutes on the Viitasaari Time of Music festival on July 3rd, 2015. Excerpts have been included in Finnish in the August 2015 issue of RondoClassica.

JV: Brian Ferneyhough, welcome to Viitasaari Time of Music. You are the featured composer on this festival and also tutoring the composition class. What is happening in and around new music nowadays?

BF: Well, it's a very conflicting situation, it seems to me. The support systems for contemporary music have without doubt declined radically in the last few years. Even such mainstays of contemporary music culture such as Germany have been cutting rapidly the money available for new music. I think it is a very short-sighted policy, I mean I understand how very few people seem to want to know about contemporary music. But culture is culture and you have to look after culture on all levels and you can't just take the culture that shouts most about its popularity. That gets money anyway - doesn't need us to give it money from the state. So I think it has become really a fragmented situation. What you find is very largely individual countries looking after their own composers as best they can. But at the same time many young composers have a real urge to go abroad and to compare their works with other people's. And so you do find a lot of cross-referencing. And so I guess one can still speak of a communal contemporary music sensibility - even while the types of music that emerged from it are really radically different. But it is interesting that there are national schools of composition. There's a long time where that wasn't the case. And I think you can find those national characteristics even if you don't want them. They're going to be there. And I quite like keeping an ear open for what's happening. So, really I think the days of major industrial-strength contemporary music support have gone completely. Things like IRCAM wouldn't be possible today. And what's happening is that many young composers and many young performers are taking the matter into their own hands and doing self-organisation. And while still I regret the necessity for that I do think there's something positive in it, that composers and performers get together much more than they used to do. Where the performer learns your piece, does it and moves on to the next thing whereas now you can have a sort of mutual identity which informs the growth of aesthetic sensibility on both sides. We don't write anymore for vast forces, we don't have those vast forces available. So we fall back upon sometimes quite strange combinations of instruments, which creates a new sensibility for acoustic transformation. And although it doesn't interest me greatly I know that many of my students and other composers I meet are very interested in multimedia and trying to find a way for music to integrate with other forms of visual, aural, dramatic awareness. So I don't think it's all bad. I do think compared with thirty years ago, when contemporary music basically was a tool of the cold war. A Bundeskanzler in German went to concerts of Helmut Lachenmann's music. [sighs] Since the fall of the Berlin wall these things have changed and contemporary art for whatever reason is not being accorded the same degree of respect that

it once was. And so we'll see where it goes but I think the amount of new music being written is quite tremendous - and the number of young composers and the energy they invest in it is absolutely astounding.

JV: So should I interpret that you were looking for some kind of societal impact?

BF: Well that's what I think is happening - I think the contemporary arts in general but in particular music have pulled back inside themselves and looked at their own resources, they're not just producing something and then the performer produces that for the audience and then we go on and do something else. I think it's become much more of a societal identity-creating situation. Which to me can only be good, I mean, my best friends have always been musicians and I'm very happy to count many, many ensembles and their members among my good friends. And I think young composers are very grateful for that too. It isn't always the case that big famous ensembles come to small places and do things and so I think they're quite glad to do it occasionally. But money talks and you have to be very, very careful, even the big ensembles that still exist - one or two false steps could see them in very grave difficulties.

JV: Finances aside, what is the biggest one single past or ongoing change in contemporary music, that you have witnessed?

BF: Well I've witnessed quite a few and they've come and gone I think. I've lived in many countries and so I can't forget that the situation where one lives inevitable influences one's judgment of the sort of art produced. What I think is happening now is that there is a turn away from easily definable styles and categories of composition. And there is perhaps a turn more to the philosophical reflective side of what music can do. Obviously many composers are interested in integrating vernacular, popular art into their own compositions. I personally find this is very, very questionable but certainly I wouldn't stop them doing it. And particularly in Germany I think there is a drive towards more awareness of the effect that the productive means have on the art. That's why I said it's philosophical. It's turning back in that direction, without recommending any particular philosophical or political solution to the situation as merely saying we should estimate and evaluate the effect of the all-present popular culture on our music - which doesn't mean we have to include popular culture in our music but it does mean we have to investigate its mode of transmission.

JV: Your own music does fall in some categories.

BF: Says you!

JV: Yes, let's see, if some people call your music rhythmical, for example, and you are renowned for that. You have refined rhythm and timing. How did you decide to compose in this style or this category?

BF: I didn't decide to compose in this style: a style doesn't exist until you write works in it, and it reflects the desires and needs and sought-for results when analysing certain particular situations. A style isn't something you just pick up. Of course in the postmodern period I suppose you could say that styles are just envelopes into which you can just pour material and forms on. But I certainly don't think for myself that's the case. And I think that style is important in the sense that continuity of a style for a particular composer is an essential prerequisite for a deepening of the semantic and syntactical reflection on the part of the listener and the performer. It's simply that many many styles can be defined by "not this one, not that one, not that one", but I think it's very important that a composer reflect on history; not only in respect to the history of music which he perceives in front of him but the history of his own compositional invention. These things are sort of autobiographical to a composer whether he wants it or not.

So by maintaining a certain continuity of stylistic development then one is assured I guess of a commitment of expression towards being integrated into but also reflective of the compositional means at our disposal. I know it sounds sort of abstract, but there it is. I think that I don't see myself writing in a style. Perhaps young composers, yes, they'll look at what I've done and think oh that was successful sort of so, we'll do that. I can't see like that. I see that music is a growth, it comes out of certain conditions which you predetermine and work with. And yes, some of those remain constant over a large period of time. Very often today I get people, sometimes aggressive polemicists coming up to me and saying [sighs] "But your music's all the same"... Well, I don't think so. It's like saying Obrecht or Ockeghem always wrote the same piece. The fact that you've got a certain continuity means that roughly it's a power of depth, perception behind the things that you are using. And that's something that each of us... while we can't unite music in one style and we surely shouldn't, nevertheless for us there needs to be a commitment to the continuity and growth and sometimes decay of particular linguistic elements. It has to be like that. Otherwise why any word that comes after an other needn't have come after it could've come before it or any other time - and I think it's important that we re-evaluate consistencies and how they operate inside the musical material. Those consistencies are basically stylistic, or procedural or formal or what have we.

JV: So music becomes more inclusive for all kinds of perceivers?

BF: I think so - it depends on the individual of course. Yes, I mean you could of course face history and say some of those things that were done in recent history could be looked at again by different means - certainly it's possible. I just think that the progress of a composer from one work to the next is the history of transformation of the words, of the vocables which he enunciates. And it's crazy to say "oh, they all sound alike", but it's like somebody in Germany at that last Darmstadt festival said to me "well, major thirds are major thirds, we know what a major third sounds like, so get rid of those". Well, yes we know what a major

third sounds like but we don't always know what a major third does. And there's this doing, this operative quality of musical elements which needs to be affirmed and maintained.

JV: You have taught at Stanford among others. What are the noticeable differences in contemporary music that is being created in the States compared to Europe.

BF: Less so than it used to be. I think American music was very introverted for a very long time and related partly to the composers who emigrated to America, creating a certain sort of rather rigid serial structure like Milton Babbitt for instance. Or it was related to the rather conservative symphonic tradition. And in the last two decades I think young composers have become much, much more aware of Europe. And some of them come back to America to teach of course. So there is a community of concerns. At least between the States and Europe. I can't for anywhere else. And it's not really worth talking about style because it's worth... how shall I say it... It's worth composers keeping in touch with what other composers are doing. I mean for many years that wasn't the case; you had an academic American music and in Europe you had a sort of noise, political music - various sorts and then you got spectral music but then in America you got minimal music and so on, and so on, and so on. What I see is that many younger American composers, or North American composers, are taking seriously the demands which musical language imposes upon them. And they are not just trying to entertain and not just trying to get a PhD in whatever. They're not just doing something they know works because twenty other people have done it. And they're willing to take risks and they're willing to inhabit a poetic practice. And that's something that I've seen now in the last twenty years which I find really good.

JV: What can you learn from your pupils on courses like this?

BF: What can I learn from them.... well, to stay alive [laughs] ... It's not so much what I can learn, it's what I can experience. It's important when you get older that you expose yourself to things that aren't you. Otherwise you dry up and you, you know, you become a mummy. So it's good for me to keep teaching all these years and even though I sometimes am not in sympathy with what's being done I'm very punctilious in approaching it in a positive spirited way. And I don't think that teaches me anything from my own practice but certainly there is a value, simply, in optimism of creativity. And optimism is not to be underestimated when you've got a piece to write and you've got to get a certain kind of feel "I can do this" - horizons suddenly clicking open and closing again.

JV: You have had many pieces performed here and also today you're going to have one piece. What can you learn from performers?

BF: Humility. What can you learn from performers is... that they're not all philosophers. But they do have other qualities and it's up to us to sort of accommodate ourselves to those qualities.

As I said many of my best friends are musicians and I certainly don't talk about Kant or Hegel with them, sort of. But there are things we have in common; interest in bodily energy and motion, in terms of intentional expansion of bodily sensibility into a larger sphere. And I try to write according to that belief and I think many performers realise that.

JV: How has your thinking about complexity changed during the years?

BF: Complexity, what's that?

JV: People call your music sometimes complex.

BF: Well, they can call it what they like. You mean as a sort of identifiable strand of contemporary music, not just mine? What do I think about it... It's enabled certain composers to find themselves. I certainly wouldn't have set out at the beginning for that to happen, but I can't prevent it happening and why should I? On the other hand I hate it when I can go to a composer and say "Oh," that measure of his piece so-and-so, "that comes from "tap - buurh" of measure 43 of my piano piece so-and-so". And, with younger people you can sometimes understand that, but I discourage and I don't teach my own music on a regular basis. I discourage people... I don't tell them they shouldn't look at it but I discourage them in seeing it is a formula for success. It for many years wasn't and it isn't again I think. So I'm not cynical about it: I think people have to try to come to terms with what it is that moves them. And that's sometimes difficult. So I certainly take seriously people who do this sort of thing. But I do like to say to them "You know the oboe can't play that low C quarter-sharp" or, "what have you done with the harp here, how are the pedals working". "That multiphonic doesn't look to me to like it can be possible"; this is the sort of basic bread and butter work of a composition teacher over and beyond the sort of interesting aesthetic discussions. And what I think about it is that one begins to distinguish not differences among that body of composers so much but differences in what they historically relate to - many of them relate very much to Xenakis for instance.

JV: But, so you don't agree with people who tell that your music is somehow complex?

BF: All music [is complex]... well, good heavens. We have to be ambitious about what we think music can contain and what it can animate and evoke in the human spirit. I don't know why I'd bother if I didn't believe that. Is that complex? Well, possibly but I could imagine... I've often said I can sit down if I had to and write a piece with only long notes in it.

JV: Sure.

BF: I wouldn't particularly want to but I could, and it wouldn't necessarily be a bad piece - might be. It's a question of what moves you personally. And I'd like, as in some experimental

contemporary poetry, I like music both to gain from a historical perspective but also create its own historical perspective in the way in which it arises. And the potential for enrichment, multiplicity, and perspectivisation of musical means surely is still a valid concept. It's still something we need to have. Even I've heard many composers, as I said earlier, who say major thirds are major thirds and we won't use major thirds. It's okay with me but it seems to me it's missing the whole point about what music's potential is.

JV: Thank you so much for this interview and all the best for the festival!

BF: You're very welcome, thank you.