

APPROACHING TOWARDS A ZEN MUSIC: A CREATIVE RESPONSE, BY BRAD GILL

***Lumsdaine's *Towards a Zen Music* is published alongside my essay with its author's permission.**

This piece of writing is an experimental response to David Lumsdaine's article 'Towards a Zen Music', adapted from a graduate seminar originally conceived in 1983. It is an essay in the sense of exploring an idea in the spirit of intellectual free-play, 'testing the quality of' a subject or idea (<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/essay>) rather than of formal academic writing, as is my response. The context for undertaking the task was my final semester after a number of years teaching the Advanced Analysis unit to final year, principally composition honours students studying at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music mid-2014.

My principal concern in the early part of semester teaching this unit was cultivating self-awareness in the students of their pre-conceptions as to what constitutes musical analysis, their existing ideals and prejudices regarding the value of different forms of musical and cultural expression more broadly, the conditioning effect of their tastes, and a predisposition to predetermining results (for example, only approaching a twelve-tone work in terms of its row because of the foreknowledge it is a twelve-tone piece). This is against a background of the perception by senior staff of a decline in depth of thinking and analytical skill over recent years in senior students, and an increasing awareness on my part both of developing ideas regarding the teaching of music theory and international institutions with similar concerns (anecdotally expressed at any rate by professionals in the field in blogs, for example: <http://blogs.nmz.de/badblog/2014/07/04/an-analysis-of-analysis/>)

It is also against a background of trying to embody inquiry-based learning in my classes, and 'remove the fear' from the learning environment. This aim became important to me for two principal reasons – in addition to the obvious goal of professional development in a tertiary environment in which guidance in this regard was almost totally absent (except two 'teaching and learning' days each year and rotating anonymous student feedback). These are:

- Informal feedback from students that I was perceived as unduly harsh or unrealistic in my expectations, with a disjunct between student perceptions of my expectations and those expectations;
- Memory of having ideas about music different from my compositional techniques and analysis teachers that were treated as interesting but less important than the 'correct' answers e.g. the interpretation presented by the teacher of, for example, the use of a row and the tri-chords (or whatever) in say, a Webern piece. In fact, the method of 'teaching' was that the analysis was written on the board and/or presented in handouts, and there was a dynamic of our being guided to and thereby limited by the approach presented. Of course, this conditioned the students, me included, to a particular approach, predestining the results of analysis and greatly limiting critical thinking. This was especially troubling to me in retrospect both because this was my initial mode of teaching until I undertook the first year of a Graduate Diploma in education, and because extensive personal research has revealed the limitations of the modes of analysis taught in such classes and the 'fear-based' effect of such a learning environment. Expressing these realisations arouses mixed feelings, as I feel great

gratitude for the expansion in thinking and awareness of different approaches to music I was exposed to in my undergraduate classes. For me this coexists with a desire to learn from what I now see as problematic teaching and learning methodology.

And so, I've tried to develop a framework where, in teaching analysis to senior undergraduate students, I would assign readings covering atonal theory the students had nominally been introduced to in earlier years, rather than spend face time articulating information easily acquired through reading, ascertain quickly in class the level of understanding, and then adopt a totally open approach: here is a music of some kind, 'what do you see/hear'? This entails total confidence in the teacher by the student cohort, and the overcoming of fear of failure, getting the wrong answer, as it were, trust of both the teacher and the cohort to support open ended exploration and a willingness to suggest and 'audition' strategies in a trial and error, exploratory fashion with fear of failure being totally removed from the equation, and with an open minded willingness to engage with potentially unorthodox approaches.

My principal means to cultivate such a dynamic, as well as address the second layer of uncertainty – a disjunct of expectation regarding standards – was the assigning of three challenging readings and requesting creative responses to these readings: Lumsdaine's was the first. The idea was that from the perspective of the student (composer, or potentially musicologist, performer, conductor) a creative authentically engaged response of varying but flexible word lengths (in whatever form – aphorism, essay, incorporating diagrams – whatever) was required, the only criteria being a demonstrable genuine engagement and clear demonstration that, if an argumentative response was generated, as in fact it frequently was, it was convincing on its own terms. Lumsdaine's essay was chosen as it explicitly deals with the area of construct, prejudice, meaning, at its heart it interrogates the foundations of value judgement, taste, what can meaningfully be said about anything. Even at the level of getting past 'what has this got to do with a music analysis?#@\$\$' and surmounting the foreign (for the majority of students) Zen-based concepts and unorthodox style, what was required was open mindedness, questioning prejudice, seeing past the surface of an actually inherently musical structure totally amenable to the sort of analysis possibly required throughout semester, and much more.

The strategy to use to task to engender an open-minded, trust based class dynamic was to ask the class to prepare an initial bullet-point (or equivalent) 'summary' of their initial thoughts, canvas it with me and the class as a quasi-review panel to open a dialogue, and allow both a further 1-2 weeks to write a more considered response (and the option was presented where I felt an unduly closed minded response was presented) to further explore. There was no 'right' answer, and a great variety of responses, some surprisingly personal and open, resulted, setting the tone for a semester in which for me, the cohort as a whole achieved a depth of understanding in the work undertaken that was at a very high level.

The other component of the task was that I would produce my own response, limited to resources at hand or from my little library at home so it would be comparable, expressing to the full my character and thinking at the time as one possible example of a type of response. I covered up to page 8 of Lumsdaine's paper, and enjoyed it greatly. My intention, in fact, was to 'complete' my example, in the sense of addressing later points in 'Towards a Zen Music', but reading over it from time-to-time it *feels* complete as is. I've done some minor edits (a

few sentences were – probably still are! a little clunky, and there were some obvious grammatical errors due to doing it in a week to have ready for the students), but other than these, it is what was distributed to students.

An aim of SIDEBAND is to cultivate a community of engaged performers and audience with an investment in what we're doing. Rather than go for maximum publicity, 'hammering' every avenue and trying to gain as large an audience as quickly as possible, we've evolved a dynamic of thus far free, small public concerts with an invested interested but growing little audience. The writings page of our website seems an appropriate place for this type of experimental personal expression of our ideas for those interested to read, comment and engage if they like, and if the ideas expressed form a life of their own beyond this platform, all the better.

David's original paper follows my response in its complete form as an appendix, and is reproduced with the permission of its author.

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Brad Gill: Notes in progress on *Towards a Zen Music* (David Lumsdaine)

As I read this paper it occurred to me that it would be an interesting exercise to analyse it much as we will be approaching many musical examples throughout the semester. I began to *really* notice the musical way Lumsdaine has shaped the flow of his thought through recurring ideas and images, re-framed in waves or ‘variations’ on a collection of key ideas and concepts, the way it ‘breathes’ the build-up and rhythm building to an ideational climax as it were, and overall arch structure. All of which makes sense given the long and deep connection between rhetoric and music, in European music history at least, which has been such a source of nourishment for Lumsdaine throughout his career.

Given the scope of response allowed, I am responding to Lumsdaine’s paper from my perspective as composer and analyst. In any text such as this, particularly one rich in ideas and references, explicit and not, different readers will find a different focus, and the same reader will find more at different stages of their intellectual development if they take the time to return to it (an argument in favour of deep and repeated reading antithetical to the maximum gain/minimum time and effort mentality of our current popular, and increasingly, academic culture – but that’s another paper in itself).

I thought I was familiar with this essay, having read it a number of times, but in really interrogating and reflecting on it phrase by phrase, seeking out connections between ideas, I realised my reading was conditioned by what I was looking for – ideas on the connection of Zen and music seemingly relevant to my activities as composer-performer; that I was really only connecting with one trope – listen: ‘Music has its being in me, and I listen to myself through it’ (p.15); ‘One note, Now’ (p. 1). Things I was/am(?) exploring in my compositional praxis. But as I read it again, I’m almost overwhelmed by the levels of interconnection in the paper, and the resonances it suggests. But these again are conditioned to some extent by my choice of interests, readings, experience – current preoccupations, medieval reading culture for example.

I see the paper as a meditation on concerns recurrent in Lumsdaine’s thinking and work over a number of years:

- Language – it’s basis of our thought, conceptual constructs and experience of the world;
- How language and our constructs limit our thinking;
- Self-awareness of the limits of language and those consequences;
- The blind spots resulting from the constructs and formation of culturally parochial tastes;
- Originality and the associated issue of novelty;

I find these themes to be most fully explored pages 3-6 and 8-9, so to some extent I focus my comments around them. As this is in a sense a model for an honours class, for fairness I’ve limited *my own* digressions to sources which were either on hand, that I am currently reading or have previously read and know well enough to easily call to mind. All underline emphasis in any quote is mine.

I'll keep my own comments on Zen itself brief: David says he's concerned with a Zen that is 'not Zen as an aspect of Eastern culture, as a religion [etc.] ... but as a way of life, a mode of seeing, hearing, and feeling, which exists only now'. (p.1) It needs to be said Lumsdaine is a serious practicing Buddhist. But he's pointing out something important, which even many Buddhists don't really 'get': as a way of life the whole idea of it is that we see reality through a 'veil', comprised of our feelings and emotions; ideas and constructs; self-interest and evolutionary drives; our biological limits (we can't see in infra-red like a bee, or sonar like a bat, so a flower or a cave really is a total different reality to us, and yet it's not the reality at all). All of this distorts our experience of the world (which is why the Buddhism/Zen so often is framed in terms of dispelling illusion) and causes suffering when we take our sense of things to be how they actually are. Clearly this as a world view isn't contingent on its cultural expression; although of course different cultural expressions will focus upon different aspects. What makes Zen so interesting, so relevant, as a vehicle for exploring our ideas about music is that in its expression of Buddhism its major focus is on breaking down language and conceptual construct as a barrier to direct experience. And it begins with dismantling its own culture-specific aspects, often in a spirit of play. Which is in essence what Lumsdaine means to do for himself and perhaps for us, as readers/hears of his lecture/paper. And why he can say 'The argument is only a game. I can enjoy arguing but I don't imagine that it is possible to win (or lose)'. (p.1)

Listener/reader/composer/thinker – role;

Perception/mis-perception;

The formation of **intellectual habit**;

How can we learn to distinguish or disqualify these as essentially parochial criteria as a basis for evaluation of music, of art (of anything)? What sort of evaluation – inherent value?; functional value?; easy enjoyableness?; complexity? As analysts we're in a privileged position to really untangle how our tastes and habits colour everything we think, and to understand our limits as musicians (and David I'm sure would suggest, possibly people as well). As he says: 'If it impossible to say anything about Zen, what can I say about music?'

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Moving from a world of mundane activity 'into a world of silence'.

'Listening for what arises of its own accord'.

I'm struck as I read this by the similarity to the practice of *Lectio Divina* – the stage of *contemplatio* where, after reading, repeating and internalising a text, one is to pray (in the form of listening, engaging in silent contemplation) and await the arising of a deeper understanding of that text – more on that below. And as one matures, the text could be seen to respond to the reader (in that it seems to reveal content relevant to each stage of growth; put another way, the reader authors their own text – remarkably similar to some modern theories

of reading)¹. This all seems so similar in principle to Lumsdaine's 'The listener is composer, player, and audience'.

Pages 2-4

Originality and novelty

Can anything ever be truly new? As Wittgenstein puts it: 'We cannot think what we cannot think'². And, says David, even if we could, 'when I apprehend a new idea – it doesn't matter whether it's labelled as somebody else's or not, I still have to experience it'. Yet as he continues: 'We are not so much taken aback by the shock of discovery as by the shock of recognition'.

What then, of the value placed on novelty – the ever new – by so many composers, writers, popular culture, industry? Where/how does the elevation of originality as an indicator of worth or cultural significance fit in, and become essentially the defining feature of what we call 'creativity'?³ It's important to note that this is, even within our own cultural construct a relatively recent notion (some would say a romantic/post-romantic one). Again, I'm reminded of my research into medieval culture. Ancient notions of **creativity** were not predicated on originality as a principle feature in the above sense. Those likely to produce text (whether written or oral – more on this) were highly literate, and as a social group shared a common internal 'library' – which is another way of saying there was a common literary culture. And creativity was seen as a total internalisation of text (memorisation, integration, internalisation) and 'new' ideas were thought to emerge from the synthesis and inter-connections between this 'stored' material⁴ and so it is 'made anew' in some sense to/with/through/for each individual.⁵

What have we lost with this model of deep engagement largely replaced by the obsession with the often puerile (in its quest to be novel)? Do we have anything like this level of musical literacy (or cultural literacy more broadly)? Surely the whole notion of 'taste' or 'good composition' stems from this type of deep interconnected learning – and I personally find it fascinating that many of the key 20th C composers and thinkers are incredibly 'cultured' in this sense, whilst also tending to form the most knowledgeable and open-minded of professional musicians.

Leaving aside modern creativity theory, we can think back to the notion of artist as artisan – a figurehead there may have been, but many of the images or collections of images we consider

¹ My understanding of LD is largely drawn from: Robertson, Duncan (2011) *Lectio Divina: The Medieval Experience of Reading*, Cistercian Studies

² Lumsdaine here is quoting from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* – English tr. In different editions

³ i.e. when we say someone is 'creative', I think it's fair to say most people mean demonstrating 'originality'.

⁴ The metaphor of a storehouse was one of the common ones used to describe this, described as early as Cicero. Physical books being scarce, memorisation was important. But it's important not to overlook that – as evinced by the continued memorisation that was part of *Lectio Divina*, the technology didn't supplant the model of processing the actual text.

⁵ This is a loose summary of chapter 1 from: Curruthers, Mary (1990, 2008) *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, 2nd edition, Cambridge University Press

culturally important (for example the Sistine Chapel) were crafted by teams of artists. We could argue this is true for Western religious art – done in the service of God, but there are analogies throughout history. I admit my point is faulted, in that we obviously do have pre-romantic cultural forms such as literature from much further back (Cicero, Virgil – we’d have to go back to Homer for the supposed individual creator to truly disappear); but will we ever know who was responsible for the mosaics in so many Roman households, the artists who decorated a Pharaoh’s tomb in ancient Egypt? I associate ‘Rhapsody in Blue’ with Gershwin, but I haven’t the faintest idea who orchestrated the work, and by definition created the form of that work I know. Can any of you name the digital artists behind *Inception*?⁶ My point is to question the link between total originality (impossible in any real sense anyway), novelty, and the assumed link within our art culture between this and individual ego expression and creativity as manifesting superior cultural value.

Interesting equivalents abound in Tibetan culture. Matthieu Ricard⁷:

‘It seems to me that the notion of novelty, the desire to keep on inventing things through a fear of copying the past, is an exaggeration of the importance given to the ‘personality’, to the individuality that’s supposed to express itself at any price’. (Ricard, pp. 310-11)

‘Western art often tries to create an imaginary world, while sacred art helps to penetrate the nature of reality’. [Interestingly this is very similar to visual art generally conceived as revealing a truth by transcending a subject’s surface] (Ricard, pp. 310-11)

Importantly:

‘The traditional artist puts all his skill into the quality of his art, but he’ll never just give his imagination free reign to invent completely new symbols or forms [... in Tibet] artists put all their heart and talent into what they do, but their personality vanishes completely behind their work’. (Ricard, pp. 310-11)

Further along in *Towards a Zen Music*, the theme of originality and ‘composer-is-listener-is-audience’ are further explored. (p.8)

“‘This is my song,’” says the singer of a verse from a Grote Eylandt song cycle [...] the composer has changed one image in the song that was given to him’. Coupled with the fact that until relatively recently – I’d say in fact until city-based musical cultures – the distinction between roles was so very blurred, and any cultural praxis served a function of some kind, had to exist for/within its social context. ‘Did the Romantic problem of originality arise? Did the problem of communication?’ (Lumsdaine, P. 8)⁸

⁶ We might reflect on how an emphasis on personality ties in with sales at any cost (look at the cover of any new classical music CD, take Hilary Hahn and Bach for example. There’s a huge picture of her; her name in blazing letters (‘sex sells’) as does the figure-head repertoire of Bach’s a minor concerto or whatever. The ‘rise of the individual’ is totally related to broader social and economic factors.

⁷ Jean-Francois Revel, Matthieu Ricard, John Canti and Jack Miles (2000) *The Monk and the Philosopher: A Father and Son discuss the Meaning of Life*, Schocken

⁸ I find the discussion in - Goehr, A. (1998) ‘Music as Communication’, Chapter 13 in *Finding the Key: Selected Writings of Alexander Goehr*, Faber and Faber, London – really quite insightful and thought-proving in regards this topic (putting aside the dated tone of some of it)

I think it's interesting to note also that throughout his writing, David reminds himself (us?) of his own cultural condition. There has been much discussion of composer 'as listener'; references to his own career as composer, as listener; discussion of such roles and their interrelations – here, an acknowledgement of these distinctions and how these terms and divisions have shaped the entire discussion! The limits and constraints of language again, of concepts. As soon as such terms are used, their entire baggage of concepts and associations come into play and steer any such discourse – back to the 'Zen' of the title.

The problem of communication may not arise in such unified (perhaps 'healthy'?) cultures, and perhaps when music and the arts are either grounded in religion or totally immersive as with many non-city based cultures, perhaps neither does evaluative judgement? But I'm pretty sure we're not being encouraged to abandon our critical faculties, even if we're told:

'No thought, no reflection, no analysis, No cultivation, no intention; Let it settle by itself'. (Lumsdaine, p. 8)

Eventually, perhaps. Obviously David is speaking from an extremely musically literate 'post-formative-synthesis' much like the medieval monks or the orators from antiquity. As composer/analysts we need our 'tool-box' of techniques, and such a sense of confidence in combination with skill, background knowledge etc. to put aside our tastes, existing theories and notions, our safety-nets and constructs (our intellectual 'crutches') and engage with what we're looking at in a totally open, open-minded, unaffected, unbiased (or at least 'bias-aware') way, so that we can break through to the 'spirit' of what we're trying to understand or create. Really 'listening' or 'seeing' what is there. And the greater the unbiased insight, stemming from the broader experience, utilising the more extensive tool-box, the more clearly what actually is significant in whatever we're looking at or creating becomes apparent; the clearer it is what questions to ask (but without pre-determining what we're trying to find); and the more authentic and meaningful – and potentially genuinely novel the insights.

And I think always going back to an awareness of the limits of language can help us avoid falling into the trap of mis-using language. Or trying to use it to do what it can't do.