

SIXTIETH BIRTHDAY

Approaching the silence of patterns: The music of Michael Blake

Martin Scherzinger

Michael Blake was born in Cape Town in 1951. He was awarded the BMus degree by the University of the Witwatersrand, the MMus degree by Goldsmiths College (London), and the doctorate in music composition from Rhodes University. In 1977 Blake settled in England, where he lived for twenty years. A tireless advocate for new music, Blake performed in, collaborated with, and administered various ensembles, including the well-known *London New Music*, which he founded in 1986. In 1997 Blake returned to South Africa, where he successfully negotiated South Africa's re-entry into the *International Society for Contemporary Music* (ISCM). He has taught courses in composition, contemporary music and analysis at Goldsmiths College, Rhodes University and the University of South Africa. He resides in Stellenbosch with his wife Christine Lucia, an eminent musicologist. They are currently both Extraordinary Professors at Stellenbosch University.

It was during his 'English period' that Blake's compositional ambitions shifted from the then dominant aesthetics of modernism toward a 'new simplicity', a German-based movement associated with the Anglo-American 'experimental school' (Henry Cowell, John Cage, Morton Feldman, La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Gavin Bryars, Howard Skempton, Gavin Briers, and later Kevin Volans and Walter Zimmermann, amongst others). In its rejection of the excesses of modernist complexity, these composers emphasized simplicity of basic musical means and materials. In Blake's words: 'A lot of experimental music explores only one idea, or one parameter, and much of it is non-goal directed, cyclic, minimal, postminimal, postmodern, chance, indeterminate, and so on' (Muller, 2002: 122). It is in the context of this aesthetic shift in Europe that African music came to serve as a natural conduit to Blake's compositional

output, in which it claims continued residency today.

While Blake's music draws on and makes reference to a broad stylistic palette, ranging from Claude Debussy, Igor Stravinsky, Louis Andriessen and Kevin Volans, his unique interest in African musical patterning is evident throughout his compositional career. Early works, like *Taireva* (whose title, roughly translated as 'I warned you', refers to a famous Shona *mbira dza vadzimu* tune), *Kwela* (a work for chamber orchestra that re-casts, the South African jazz-inflected pennywhistle' music of the 1950s in ever-slippery rhythmic arrangements) and *Let Us Run out of the Rain* (which is grounded in patterns found in Nsenga *kalimba* music), explicitly evoke African modes of music-making. In these works Blake offers refracted paraphrases of various genres of African music in a way that menaces the opposition between quotation and abstract invention. *Let Us Run out of the Rain*, for example, a piece for two players at one piano or harpsichord or for four players on marimba and vibraphone, hovers between, on the one hand, direct references to *kalimba* music, and on the other, the formal assemblage of the music's internally derived processes as such. The music thus shuttles between a referential, directed modality and a visceral, self-enclosed one. On the one hand, by transferring the overtone-rich sounds of the *kalimba* to the time-worn blandness of the modern industrial piano, the music paradoxically conjures the faded colours and open spaces of the southern African landscape. On the other hand, Blake's use of this strikingly un-exotic timbre in the context of quotation directs a paradoxical attention to the purely formal play of the original music. As if simultaneously to embody *kalimba* music and to supply a commentary on it, *Let Us Run out of the Rain* distills typical gestures found on the *kalimba* only to abstract them and then examine them from different points of hearing. Blake filters and recombines typical *kalimba* fingering patterns into novel fragments, casting them in new temporal frames, which in turn articulate unpredictable formal episodes of call-and-response. Along the way, Blake's composition suggests a *possible* African music; it offers (new) 'traditional' patterns organized by formal relationships not indigenous to such patterns. *Let Us Run out of the Rain* is therefore both less and

more than the *kalimba* music it paraphrases; it

portrays a *kalimba* rhetoric that does not yet exist.

In the 1990s Blake's compositional output shifted from a musical style derived from creative

transcriptions of various indigenous genres to an abstract style, as disarmingly casual as it was uncompromisingly austere. In these works

references to traditional African music are no longer literal or overt. His *French Suite* for piano

solo, for example, traces elusively skeletal fragments of the formal patterns of the western

African *kora* and the southern African *mbira* in the unfamiliar (and defamiliarizing) context of

irregularly shifting rhythmic groupings. And yet the work also conjures the musical characteristics

of Erik Satie in its sparse simplicity and plainness. As in Satie, we here find tilted rocking rhythms

elaborated in a static harmonic field. The casual simplicity of the piece belies an unpredictable

rhythmic complexity: an ever changing tapestry of understated rhythmic shifts that demand close

listening to be fully grasped.

The *French Suite*'s opening section

is premised on a simple descending melody in the framework of an

eviscerated E Major mode. While the left hand

accompaniment alternates precariously between an

open E octave and two dyads (G/D and G/C

respectively), the right hand slowly journeys downward, in a hesitant back-and-forth over five

bars spanning the octave. This phrase is echoed in a disconcerting approximation. However, instead of sounding like a *repetition*, and thereby clarifying the music's fundamental rhythmic character, the echo is not quite imitative enough (like an image of a faulty memory). And instead of sounding like a *variation*, and thereby clarifying the character of the music's journey, the changes are not quite distinctive enough (like a memory of a faulty image). It is as if the music shuttles uncertainly between being and becoming – neither repeating nor going anywhere, it merely starts over. When the movement *does* open into a dance-like interlocking variation of the opening (bar 11, see figure 1), its groove is abruptly cut short, interrupted by a return to the opening phrase, again

only via approximation. But the promise of variation is further obstructed by a return to the opening that is severely abbreviated, recalling only

the *first* bar of the opening five-bar phrase (which is then subject to the neither/nor logic of phantom

repetition/variation). This is a *kaleidophonic* music built of possibilities, not of realizations. It issues

phantom parallels that lie at the nexus between repetition and change, shifting haphazardly from

section to section with cool indifference. But just as the music threatens to become enamoured of its

own lack of orientation, the composer suddenly introduces dramatic changes (an inexplorable

pounding on the hitherto neglected pitch class A in bars 84 ff., for example) as if, after all, to insist on

the hard touch of the composer's hand behind the floating kaleidophone.

In Blake's 'South African' period works, we find a signature rhythmic asymmetry, which puts an

angular lilt into the pacing of the music's flow. Likewise, melodic movement is given in irregular

temporalities, and

contantual lines are never fully aligned with

one another. Time signatures are constantly shifting to produce bars of different

lengths, which nonetheless often carry the *same* basic harmonic/melodic materials. Motives,

themes, and rhythmic gestures are thereby set adrift in a mobile field that hangs as if freely in the wind.

The hard-edged abstraction of the music's microscopic changes and sudden changes is offset

by the organic flow from one perspective to another. The music conjures the gradually shifting

arrangements of Morton Feldman's asymmetrical minimalism, and yet the resulting musical tableaux are just as often abruptly punctured and punctuated by new tableaux (textures, rhythms, melodies). In Blake's late musical style, one might say, a breezy mobility thus mingles with filmic montage. When it comes to the listener, the music comes not as a dialectical journey of full dramatic closure, but as passing moments of faltering rhythmic repetition punctuated by shifting instants and intensities.

The organ piece *San Polyphony*, for example, operates on the basis of *kenosis*. It is a kind of

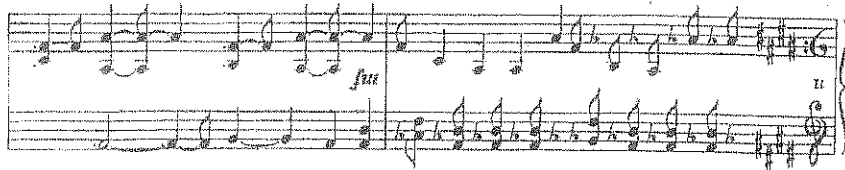


Fig. 1 'First Dance' from the *French Suite* bars 11-12*

*one another. Time signatures are

aligned with

never fully

contantual

lines are

and

temporalities,

one another. Time

signatures are

aligned with

never fully

contantual

lines are

and

temporalities,

one another. Time

signatures are

aligned with

never fully

contantual

lines are

and

temporalities,

one another. Time

signatures are

aligned with

never fully

contantual

lines are

and

temporalities,

dialectic-in-reverse. Here we find the gradual emptying out of a saturated melodic field of demisemiquavers, which, on encountering a fistful of dissonant tones (F# and C# in the context of a white note pentatonic collection), tilt finally into silence. From the pedals we are given the remote outlines of bass lines found in *mbira* music, which never quite behave like functioning harmonies in that repertoire. Still, sometimes this accompaniment comes to life as if it was the centre of musical interest, and at other times it recedes, its own momentum increasingly eroded by patterned silence. It is as if musical figures capriciously yield to textured ground as much as musical ground congeals into distinct figures. The music may be precisely notated but it transpires on the shifting threshold between counterpoint and texture: ambiguous, open and indeterminate.

As it is with *San Polyphony*, *Leaf Carrying Song*, for guitar and oboe (or oboe d'amore), is a study in anti-development, which gradually leads toward emptiness. The piece opens with a pentatonic continuum in descending guitar motives (from F# to B) that occasionally, and faintly, touch upon a high A. The oboe's melody, given in long sustained notes that are gradually shortened (from eight crotchets to dotted crotchets, and then to abbreviated dotted quavers), as if to foreshadow the music's large-scale reduction, spans a complementary ambit from A to E. The tension between the B/F fragment in the guitar and the A/E-centred oboe line is isolated in various intervening bars that cut into the texture of the continuum in unexpected places (bars 7, 13-15, 17, 25). These interrupting sections oscillate between these two 'tonics' (B and A) in a manner that recalls the single-string bow music of southern Africa (*uhadi*, *ughubu*, *chipendani*, etc.). Likewise, the asymmetric rhythmic dispositions of these breaks recall the intricate cross-rhythmic patterns of western African drum ensembles. As the music

progresses, the complexity of these interludes increases (in bar 25, for example, variously articulated patterns grounded in a dotted quaver pulse in the guitar run agilely against the oboe's motivic movement in quavers), but this development is itself held in check by yet further interruptions, such as the pulsing walking bass section in bars 53 ff.), which recalls Zulu music for the guitar (see figure 2). By the end of the piece, the many unmotivated episodes have ruptured the seams of the various continua, leaving shards of motivic figures suspended in silence. Although it clearly elaborates a *tonal* pitch space, and even conjures a brief modulation to F# (in bars 101 ff.), *Leaf Carrying Song* in fact *cancel*s the functional principle associated with traditional tonality. The modulation 'happens' – it is not achieved – as if this were a matter of colour instead of function. The music is thus less 'in' a key than it is 'on' it.

From the Alexander Calder-like organicism of his *Toy* series, which explore the ambiguous limits of counterpoint formation, to the Wolfgang Rihm-like expressionism of *Ways to Put in the Salt*,

which explores modes of articulation and punctuation, Michael Blake's music is impossible to summarize beyond a few general

The image shows a musical score for two staves: guitar and oboe. The guitar part is written in a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. It features a series of descending eighth-note patterns, some with accents and dynamic markings like 'f' and 'p'. The oboe part is written in a soprano clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. It consists of long, sustained notes that gradually shorten in duration over the course of the bars. The score is divided into two systems, with bar numbers 53-58 indicated.

Fig. 2 *Leaf Carrying Song* bars 53-58*

points. This is music without narrative line or dramatic trajectory (as in traditional Western music); nor is it music of time-transcendence cycles and circling (as in traditional African music). Where the music ought to generate data for large-scale structures it retards its own tendencies and prefers to meander. Where it ought to have rhetorical content there is a virtual blank. Its movements are casual; its form rudimentary: AB form, or ABC, or complex cross-hatching in which no sections assume structural ascendancy. It is music that exists on a cultural and stylistic borderline. The pitch language is neither tonal nor atonal. The rhythmic language is neither metric nor contra-metric. In Blake's musical universe tonality

becomes tone and time becomes timing. The work holds no promise save that of delicately patterned stasis. It is a music in which silence can ultimately prevail.

Reference

Muller, Stephanus. 2002. 'Michael Blake 50', in *Musica* 30(1), 119-126.

*Samples from Michael Blake's French Suite and Leaf Carrying Song reproduced by kind permission of Bardic Edition.

EDUCATIONAL

John Knox Bokwe: Father of black South African choral composition

Grant Olwage



John Knox Bokwe (b Alice, Cape Colony, 1855; d Alice, 1922) is known as the father of black South African choral composition; *Umdengentonga*, 'the little man who is mentally big' (Shepherd, 1968: 89). Bokwe's importance to the world of black choralism was generative in several respects. His own biography became a template for the amateur black choral composer: a self-taught composer (though unusually Bokwe had lessons in

piano and harmonium); who composes almost exclusively for voice; is typically also a choral conductor; and for whom choral practice is a part-time activity (Bokwe's other work included various jobs at the Lovedale Mission Institution, in the eastern Cape Colony, where he spent much of his life). In 1905 he was ordained as a minister of what we now know as the Presbyterian Church and established his own mission in Ugie in the north-east Eastern Cape; the portrait dates from this time. Briefly, though importantly, he was co-editor of the first black-managed newspaper in South Africa, *Imvo Zabantsundu (Native Opinion)*, during the two closing years of the nineteenth century. In many ways, then, Bokwe's life was to be the generic life of the black South African choral composer for much of the twentieth century.

The first notated piece of music by a black South African is also Bokwe's: *Msimdisti Wa Boni* (*Saviour of Sinners*) was published in the Lovedale paper *The Christian Express* in June 1875. Thus was black choralism's performance of (the Christian) religion inaugurated; churches, together with schools, remain the prime sites for the practices of choralism in South Africa. Equally important for the history of the performance and composition of black choral music, *Msimdisti Wa Boni* was printed in tonic sol-fa, the Victorian notation and method of sight-singing that had been 'invented' by John Curwen in the early 1840s, introduced to the Cape in 1855, and flourished in the colony's black mission schools (see Birket, n.d. [1871]).

Msimdisti Wa Boni is an exemplary Victorian hymn-tune in phrasal structure, melodic contour and harmonic practice: largely tonic and dominant entwined by a smattering of dominant sevenths and secondary dominants and sevenths. Much of Bokwe's output is of similar hymn-tunes and his mastery of that compositional discourse was such that his music was printed in British hymnals. Other forms of 'mainstream' British church music that influenced Bokwe's style were the Anglican chant and 'service of song'; an example of the latter is Bokwe's compilation work *Indoda Yamadoda (Man of Men)* based on the Nehemiah story.

As important an influence was gospel hymnody (not to be confused with contemporary (black)

Contents

Editorial	2
INTERVIEW	
Performing contemporary music in present-day South Africa: An interview with Jill Richards Mareli Stolp	3
FEATURED COMPOSITION	
<i>Schau-fe(r)n-ster</i> by Andile Khumalo	6
SIXTIETH BIRTHDAY	
Approaching the silence of patterns: The music of Michael Blake Martin Scherzinger	15
EDUCATIONAL	
John Knox Bokwe: Father of black South African choral composition Grant Olwage	18
REPORTS	
The eMusic Indaba 2010 in Durban Jürgen Bräuninger & Cameron Harris	20
The ISCM World New Music Days 2010 in Sydney, Australia Clare Loveday	23
The New Music Indaba 2011 in Johannesburg Cameron Harris	25
The ISCM World New Music Days 2011 in Zagreb, Croatia Angie Mullins	26
SELECTED 2010-2011 NEWS	28
FINAL THOUGHT	
On the South African composer's dilemma Jean-Pierre de la Porte	29

Contributors

Jürgen Bräuninger is a composer and Associate Professor at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Jean-Pierre de la Porte is research director of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Architecture and Infrastructure (IASAI/Deloitte).

Cameron Harris is a composer, oboist and lecturer at Wits University.

Andile Khumalo is a composer and Faculty Fellow at Columbia University, New York.

Clare Loveday is a Johannesburg-based composer and current Vice-chair of NewMusicSA.

Angie Mullins is a Johannesburg-based composer and current Chair of NewMusicSA.

Grant Olwage is a musicologist and Senior Lecturer at Wits University.

Martin Scherzinger is a musicologist and Associate Professor at New York University.

Mareli Stolp is a pianist, musicologist and lecturer at Rhodes University.

Fiona Tozer is a Durban-based composer and performing artist, and NewMusicSA treasurer.

Chris van Rhyen is a composer, musicologist and PhD candidate at Stellenbosch University.

Loubser van Rhyen is an IT team leader for EMI Music and studied art and design at WMC London.

© NewMusicSA 2012 ISSN No. 1684-0399

Opinions expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the Editor or NewMusicSA.

Editor: Chris van Rhyen

E-mail: chrisvanrhyen@newmusicosa.org.za