Strategic Defamiliarization: The Process of Difficulty in Brian Ferneyhough's Music

Dr. Ross Feller

"Time is what hinders everything from being given at once. It retards, or rather it is retardation."
– Henri Bergson

The fourteenth century, Italian humanist Francesco Petrarch once said, "what we acquire with difficulty and keep with care is always the dearer to us" (Doob 215). This is an early Renaissance way of saying: no pain, no gain. Ostensibly, we appreciate the process of paying dues. But in a world that worships total efficiency and near instant forms of communication, why would anyone intentionally steer clear of the fast, and easy track? The belief prevails that we do what we do so much faster than our predecessors did what they did, even as we spend untold hours teaching our computers to do what we desire. In the work of the expatriate British composer Brian Ferneyhough, difficulty, engaged through processes of delay, is used in order to combat habitual types of compositional, performance, and listening practices. His work develops a consistent, personal style, while critically deconstructing its own performance practice. This essay attempts to describe, in broad terms, Ferneyhough's 'aesthetic,' especially as it relates to the concerns of the so-called 'New Complexity'.

After the hegemony of total serialism waned in the late 1950s, Ferneyhough began composing works which posed extreme, provisional solutions to the compositional *cul de sac* young composers faced at that time. He sought to reinject vitality back into the idea of closed-form composition through the integration of excessive, unstable, and chaotic structures. He took his cue from the early hyperexpressive work of Pierre Boulez (what he's called his "Artaud period"), but also from the static sound blocks of Edgard Varese.

Because Ferneyhough privileges the compositional act of writing and has appropriated some of the accoutrements of serial practice, it is commonly assumed that he is merely a total serialist. The caricature total serial piece, curiously like much process oriented music, begins with the initiation of a process and ends when the process ends,

usually after most, if not all, permutations have been used. Ferneyhough's compositional approach is both, much broader in scope, and more narrowly focused on systemic procedure in order to create, or uncover, inherent contradictions in the system itself. As Jonathan Harvey puts it, "Ferneyhough has absorbed the discoveries of total serialism to a profounder degree than almost anyone else of his generation, without actually subscribing to its orthodoxies in his music" (9).

For Ferneyhough, a compositional system is not a means to mechanically produce music. Instead it creates a meaningful context in which compositional decisions are made. He holds that all artistic expression is ultimately derived from restriction, and that expression attains meaning only through contact with a previously mapped-out space. Often in his music one can locate a dichotomy between strict or automatic, and informal or intuitive approaches. Complex webs of polyphony are harnessed by organic, high profile gestures. It is the friction between these approaches that results in the extreme types of musical expression for which he is known.

When first encountering a Ferneyhough score one usually notices the complex notation which seems to minimize interpretation. In fact it is designed to *maximize* ambiguity and imprecision, two components which require interpretation. As everyone realizes, notation never specifies all a musician needs to know in order to perform a given piece. Often what is left unrepresented is determined by larger contextual factors. One could say the less explicit the notation, the more performers must rely upon conventional supplementary texts such as performance practice.

Ferneyhough's name is often associated with the 'New Complexity'. In addition to his work this term was originally applied to U.K. composers such as Michael Finnissy and James Dillon. As with any model powerful enough to attract adherents there are now many younger 'New Complexity' composers, the most noteworthy being Richard Barrett, Liza Lim, Chris Dench, Roger Redgate, and Olga Neuwirth. It must be said here that many of the aforementioned composers would reject the 'New Complexity' label, especially if it is meant to imply some sort of unified style. Yet, it is not an entirely inappropriate description. It is helpful to think of the term, as Richard Toop suggests (1993, 53), not as a box but rather as a frame of reference which includes a number of diverse and perhaps contradictory phenomena. According to Toop, the 'New

Complexity' composers are some of the few within new music circles "to retain the idea of art as an endless search for the transcendental, and of music as potential revelation" (1992, 54).

It is instructive to understand the background that initially spawned the use of the term 'New Complexity'. During the late 1960s the postmodern conundrum that it was, in principle, no longer possible to create new music began to be taken seriously. By the late 1970s some composers in Germany, England, and the U.S.A. developed ready-made solutions to this apparent impasse fueled by a dislike of twentieth century practice and heavily indebted to reified notions of history. The press labeled them neo-tonal, neo-Romantic, and in Germany they were known as the Neue Einfachkeit (or New Simplicity). They resurrected forms from the Common Practice Era in an effort to, as Wolgang Rihm put it, "develop a music which was capable of reaching people" (see Rexroth). Implicit in his comment (and spelled out elsewhere) is the claim that previous, especially modernist compositional trends such as serialism were inaccessible, incomprehensible, and overly self-conscious. Upon hindsight it appears that these 'movements' were not only opposed to serial practice but also to experimental avant-gardists like John Cage, Lamont Young, and Morton Feldman.

In his essay entitled, "Against Intellectual Complexity in Music," composer Michael Nyman claims to have discovered the most direct route to the listener's brain. He brands other routes as unnatural. For Nyman, the notion of "simplicity is an absolute, a constant, not part of a scale of values" (87). A strange idea coming from someone apparently concerned with experimental music. Simplicity is his panacea for the illness of complexity.

The American composer George Rochberg's arguments against complexity in music are based upon a quasi-scientific view of memory and a roadsign view of communication. This is to say that he confuses musical notation and communication with road signage, which must be immediately and unambiguously legible in order to prevent accidents.

In his book, *The Aesthetics of Survival*, he posits that complex music (e.g. any music which consciously employs systems) overburdens the nervous system resulting in "fatigue, frustration, dissatisfaction, anger, and even rage" (222). While the first two

results may be part of a performer's, or listener's, relationship to a complex work, the latter three attributes are examples of Rochberg's attempt to psychologize the encounter with a complex work by imbuing it with reactions that only occur *after* a person is predisposed to respond in a like manner. In other words these qualities are a result of ideology not science. Also, as Edward Hall has shown, the nervous system is well equipped to respond to complex encounters. Hall demonstrates that people routinely handle informational overload situations by delegating and establishing priorities. This is especially the case in what he calls "high context" situations like art and music, where most of the 'information content' is internalized in the listener or performer. It is not surprising to learn that, for Rochberg, musical communication only takes place when transmission is "uninhibited and undisturbed between the source of the stimulus (the music) and the receiving, responding system (the human nervous system)" (ibid.). Thus, complex music fails to communicate in his view.

Implicit in Rochberg's assumption is Roman Jakobson's model of communication. This model contains a sender, receiver, medium, message, code, and context. Successful communication is said to take place when the sender's signal reaches the receiver undisturbed by any interference in the transmission process. In the case of standard language situations, the sender must rely upon conventionally familiar signs to achieve this. Likewise, a musical composition that largely exists to represent conventional signs can be quickly consumed without extra effort or reflection. Listeners often assume that their recognition of convention is proof that something has been communicated. Additionally, the familiar requires less integrative effort than the unfamiliar and is often mistaken for what is natural.

Although the Jakobsonian model of communication applies perfectly well to linguistic and information theories, it is mostly irrelevant to the study of music or art. The process of musical 'communication' operates in fundamentally different ways than that of language or telephone transmission. Briefly put, communication always involves the use of signs. Whether you follow Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Peirce, or the ancient Greeks the definition of a sign will always include the proviso that it *represents something else* in some way. Short of the *Vulcan Mind Meld* there is no such thing as *direct* communication. Instead, the process of exchanging signs is grounded in the

Derridian play of substitution. Musical signification arises from relations between things, not in the things themselves. And it is co-determined by composers, performers, and listeners. Rochberg is suggesting that musical communication can take place without the aid of signs.

Another American composer, named John Anthony Lennon, has stated that complex music is inhuman because it has "limited its immediacy and accessibility" (23). Like Rochberg he claims that by reappropriating the tonal system we can put 'humanity' back into music, and by doing so, the "audience will return in droves" (24). Combined with an argument for the naturalness of the tonal system Lennon's thrust is nothing short of delusional. And, as far as one can tell, the 'droves' don't go to concerts in concert halls they go to amphitheaters and stadiums. In this regard the difference between the audience for John Lennon and John Anthony Lennon is vast. No doubt the latter composer's audience is not a mass but a specialized collection of economically privileged, highly educated listeners.

The term 'New Complexity' indicates a contrary trend to some of the sentiments just described. It can be viewed as part of a larger cultural move toward radical and extreme types of expression, risk taking, and ever-faster forms of artistic signification. The 'New Complexity' is like an etching by Giovanni Piranesi. It approaches infinity but always stops short, throwing its trajectories beyond the frame, boundary, or border of the musical work. It stands in marked contrast to the 'New Simplicity' much in the same way that composers from southern France in the late fourteenth-century differed from the composers of the Ars Nova period. And if there is an 'Old Complexity' it must surely be like an etching by E. C. Escher. It exhibits the infinite through tricks of the trade like serialism, while appearing falsely autonomous.

Of the standard objections to Ferneyhough's music and notational usage, perhaps the most common is the vehemently held belief that the whole endeavor is pointless because much of the music is inaudible. As many writers point out (e.g. Dahlhaus and Kramer) what is audible is often illusive and in no way absolute. There are many degrees of audibility, each dependent upon psychological, physiological, and aesthetic factors. It may be very difficult to tell the difference between what is completely inaudible and what is barely perceptible. Richard Strauss was once asked if he could hear an inner voice in a

loud, orchestral tutti that he had composed. His response was no, but he could tell if it were absent. Some sounds are intentionally pushed to the periphery of consciousness to do their work.

There are those who claim that the relationships in Ferneyhough's music are merely conceptual (e.g. Marsh). For the most part they are speaking about the complex rhythms he uses, some containing up to four levels of nested tuplets. Clearly they are impossible to sightread, but are they also impossible to perform or hear? To answer this question one must separate the physically impossible from the merely difficult. According to Henry Cowell, any three-level nested tuplet could be accurately produced if a performer would simply devote fifteen minutes a day, for five months to such matters (64). One might locate similar rhythms in the performances of the finest free improvisers. So it would appear that, although extremely difficult to produce, multilevel, nested tuplets are not impossible to play. Okay they're possible, but (so the argument goes) why bother notating them in detail when, a) they will in all likelihood be performed inexactly, and b) performers could (simply) improvise them without having to do all that mental gesticulation.

In regards to the first issue every performance will differ; indeed, that is entirely the point. No form of notation, from the most complex to the simplest, will ever exactly represent a sonic result. In this sense all scores can be called 'paper' or 'eye' music. The accusation that artworks contained superfluous intentions, it is interesting to note, was originally part of Classicism's polemic against Baroque or mannered art (Dahlhaus 54). Symbols that could simply illustrate were praised, whereas allegory was rejected. For Ferneyhough, an aesthetically adequate performance of his music depends upon, "the extent to which the performer is technically and spiritually able to recognize and embody the demands of fidelity (*not* 'exactitude'!)" (1990, 19).

As for performers being able to improvise the same rhythms - this may be true but only in very rare and exceptional cases. Even then, whether they are truly "the same," or can be produced on demand, are open questions. It is true that some performers of Ferneyhough's music are also accomplished improvisers. Perhaps their improvisatory skills help them deal with the quick changes of material and the cutting edge attitude required. But, as 'cellist Taco Kooistra puts it, when he's asked to improvise (on demand

as it were) he "usually ends up doing more or less the same things" (27). It is precisely the pressure to realize a Ferneyhough score that makes Kooistra's performances so intense and alive. "By making even the subtlest musical decisions visible through notation, Ferneyhough renders the unconscious conscious. Once a player is forced to think about everything he or she previously took for granted, a new region for interpretation and virtuosity opens up" (Carl 47).

Ferneyhough's performers face many hurdles. The multilayered, rhythmically complex, and radically unfamiliar gestural profiles do much to slow down the process of decoding. His notation (or overnotation if you will) embodies the notion of "too muchness" (see Ferneyhough 1995). One of its purposes is to entice performers into developing unique strategies as they attempt to overcome their initial disorientation. Besides the use of unconventional rhythms Ferneyhough, like most serial composers, tends to compose by separating out the basic parameters of sound. The performers' reintegration of these parameters presents them with both performance and conceptual difficulties, including at a most basic level: physical coordination. Performance difficulty is an inherent component of Ferneyhough's aesthetic, as it was for many late nineteenth-century composers. The difference is that he doesn't wish to mask the sense of difficulty.

There are many performers who have developed very personal ways of approaching his music. Percussionist Steven Schick and others (e.g. Kooistra) have remarked that the effort to work through and execute Ferneyhough's music results in intense, razor-sharp performances. The gap between score and result, a fact of all live performance, is up-close and personal in Ferneyhough's music.

In preparing *Bone Alphabet* (1991), a work for solo percussion, Schick went through various intermediate stages before he was able to turn the intellectual energy of the score into "meaningful physicality." For Schick, a positive attribute of learning this piece was that "the extreme complexity and performative difficulty... enforce (d) a slower pace of learning and allow(ed) the natural growth of an interpretive context" (132).

Not surprisingly, performers who rely upon their ability to quickly assimilate a large quantity of pieces in order to pay their bills tend to shy away from Ferneyhough's music. However, there are a growing number of performers who are attracted, as Schick was, to virtuosity which foregrounds their struggle with difficulty. The spectacle

involved is markedly different from Paganini-style virtuosity where difficulty is made to look easy.

Bone Alphabet has already been performed by at least a dozen percussionists. Ferneyhough's work is receiving more attention and performances than ever before. Perhaps this is because his music foregrounds many important issues of relevance to the contemporary musician, such as: the status of the score, the role of notation, the significance of closed-form composition to performance freedom, and the role of difficulty. The formal principles in his music define an environment in which informal, spontaneous generation can reengage the formal in a meaningful dialogue. His work emphasizes the human agent not only as the generator of systems, but also as the catalyst for the system's demise and subsequent regeneration. This is what Robert Carl was getting at when he wrote that Ferneyhough's music "exudes a human, volatile, surrealistic quality missing from both random and totally rationalized music... his music is an evocation of the cognitive structures we have created for ourselves and with which we now struggle in an increasingly complex world" (47).

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