

Remixing Modernism

Stephen Emmerson

BERG
SCHOENBERG
BARTÓK

(1908-1909)

move



1 Alban Berg Piano Sonata Opus 1 13'45"

Arnold Schoenberg Three Piano Pieces Opus 11

2 Mässige 4'35"

3 Mässige 9'46"

4 Bewegte 3'08"

Béla Bartók Fourteen Bagatelles Opus 6

5 1) Allegro giocoso 1'25"

6 2) Andante 0'46"

7 3) Grave 0'45"

8 4) Vivo 1'03"

9 5) Lento 1'15"

10 6) Allegretto molto capriccioso 1'43"

11 7) Andante sostenuto 2'02"

12 8) Andante grazioso 1'58"

13 9) Allegro 2'21"

14 10) Allegro molto rubato 2'31"

15 11) Molto sostenuto 2'07"

16 12) Rubato 3'32"

17 13) Lento funebre ("Elle est morte") 2'28"

18 14) Valse ("Ma mie qui danse") 2'16"

Remixing Modernism

Stephen Emmerson, piano

Recorded, produced and mixed by **Paul Draper** in the IMERSD studio QCGU.

Recorded in the Conservatorium Theatre, Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University, December 2008.

Mastered by Dave Neil (Modern Mastering)

Cover picture: Benjamin Thomas

This project is supported by the Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre.



A UNIQUE EXPERIMENT

This package contains 2 CDs - both presenting the same repertoire but with contrasting styles of mixing and sound production. The first "Horizontal" disc is a conventional edited piano recording. The second "Vertical" disc brings the music forward 100 years by employing a multi-track approach to the mix. The recording setup involved various microphones placed close to the piano, on stage, and out in the hall. By switching and mixing these different perspectives the music is creatively re-interpreted through a wide range of timbral and spacial effects.

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Background to the music

This recording presents three works from the years 1908 and 1909. Each represents a major landmark both in the career of each individual composer as well as in the history of European Modernism. Alban Berg's Piano Sonata was a culmination of his four years of study with Schoenberg in Vienna. During those years he had witnessed the remarkable transformation of Schoenberg's own compositional style from essentially one of late-Romanticism through to works such as the First Chamber Symphony (1906) where the role of traditional tonality had been seriously undermined. Berg had had negligible experience in composition before he had begun he began studying with Schoenberg in 1904. But by 1908, it is clear that both Berg was not just following his teacher's lead but was well on the way to developing his own highly distinctive and original musical language.

Berg's Sonata is a highly advanced and sophisticated work for its time, extraordinarily so for an Opus 1. It is in one continuous movement and, despite extended passages of tonal ambiguity, the traditional structure of sonata form is clearly evident (including a repeat of the Exposition.) It is a work of intense contrapuntal complexity, highly unified through a dense web of motivic relationships. But beyond its technical assurance, it has that passionate intensity of expression so characteristic of all his music. One might say that it pushes Romanticism to its limits. In



Alban Berg
by Arnold
Schoenberg 1910

the following year, Schoenberg was to take a further step, to push beyond such boundaries and make a decisive break with the past.

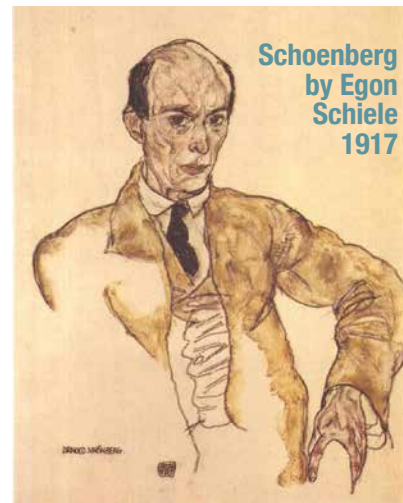
1908 was a crucial year for Schoenberg's creative development. It was in this year that he took up painting, not just as a hobby, but as an alternative outlet for his creative expression

Schoenberg was keenly aware of the leading painters of the day – such as Kandinsky, Klimt, Kokoshka, Gerstl and others – though he had no formal training as a painter but was merely guided by his instincts. It proved to be a potent creative stimulus for his musical development. In a remarkable series of works composed through 1908-1909 including these Three Piano Pieces Opus 11, he would finally achieve what he called “the emancipation of dissonance”, creating music for the first time that was atonal, thus breaking free of an underlying principle which had governed music for centuries. (It is no coincidence that Kandinsky's breakthrough in creating the first abstract art occurred at the same time that Schoenberg's first atonal compositions.)

Some years later in an interview, Schoenberg commented:

What painting meant – means – to me ... [was] the same as making music. It was to me a way of expressing myself, of presenting emotions, ideas, and other feelings; and this is perhaps the way to understand these paintings – or not to understand them. ... I never was very capable of expressing my feelings or emotions in words. I don't know whether this is the cause why I did it in music and also why I did it in painting. Or vice versa: That I had this way as an outlet. I could renounce expressing something in words.

1908 was also however a painful year emotionally for Schoenberg. In the summer of that year, his wife Mathilde left him and their children to live with his friend - their neighbour in fact - the painter Richard Gerstl. She returned to Schoenberg a few months later but shortly after that (on the night of a premiere performance of a Schoenberg work!), Gerstl committed suicide by both stabbing and hanging himself naked in front of a mirror. He was 25 years old (Schoenberg was to dramatise some aspects of these events in



Schoenberg
by Egon
Schiele
1917

Die Glückliche Hand some years later). The Three Piano Pieces Opus 11 however were composed within a few months of these events and it is not difficult to imagine their impact on the intensely dark, nightmarish world they inhabit.

One must remember of course that this music came from 'Freud's Vienna' where the exploration of the dark subconscious impulses beneath trivial, superficial exteriors had become the primary concern of many artists. The outcomes in Schoenberg's case were works that explored the extremes of human experience in music of unprecedented emotional intensity.

In 1907 Béla Bartók was appointed Professor in Piano at the Budapest Academy of Music. The position provided economic security while also permitting him to pursue his collection and study of Hungarian folk music. Also in that year, his friend Zoltan Kodaly introduced him to the music of Debussy. He was acquainted at the time with some of Schoenberg's music (though not the opus 11 pieces until some years later). These various influences are all discernable in the Fourteen Bagatelles he composed in 1908. However,



they are largely subsumed within a language of remarkable originality. As Bartók himself wrote:

In these, a new piano style appears as a reaction to the exuberance of the Romantic piano music of the nineteenth century; a style stripped of all unessential decorative elements, deliberately using only the most restricted technical means. As later developments show, the Bagatelles inaugurate a new trend of piano writing in my career.

They were to be a major turning point in his compositional development. To quote from Bartók's obituary in *The Musical Times* (November 1945):

With the Fourteen Bagatelles, op. 6, for piano, Bartók sacrificed popularity and became the most advanced composer of the day. These short pieces are a landmark in his career and a complete dictionary of modern music. In them can be found all the devices which Bartók has since exploited. They are the testament of his whole development. Their characteristics are economy to the point of starkness, the use of Magyar scales for both melody and harmony, great freedom in the use of subsidiary notes, rhapsodic and insistent rhythms. They are lyrical and dramatic statements, like Beethoven's Bagatelles.

Though the originality of Bartók's Bagatelles are widely recognised, their reputation has far exceeded their popularity with pianists or the frequency with which

they are presented in concert programmes. They have often been viewed as a series of experimental pieces, each exploring a particular compositional technique including bi-tonality (no.1), symmetrical structures (no.2), ostinatos (no.3), parallel chords (nos. 3 and 4), black notes against white notes (no.7), unisons (no.9), and quartal harmony (no.11). However, the pieces are in fact far from dry technical experiments but were composed in response to a personal crisis – the rejection of his love by the young violinist Stefi Geyer. Bartók had composed a Violin Concerto for her in the previous year and the Bagatelles are shot through with concealed allusions to that work. These are most explicit in the last two pieces – one an elegiac funeral march (apparently written on the day of their separation), the other an ironic and grotesque waltz which parodies the opening theme from the Violin Concerto. Though seemingly from such a different world to the music by Berg and Schoenberg, the composers represented on this recording were all concerned to expand the vocabulary of music to widen their music's expressive range and heighten its intensity.

Stephen Emmerson

Why two discs?

A case for intervention

“If there is any excuse to do a recording, it is to do it differently – as it has never been done before.” Glenn Gould

“Technology, in my view, is not primarily a conveyor belt for the dissemination of information; ... it is not primarily a memory bank in whose vaults are deposited the achievements and shortcomings, the creative credits and documented deficits, of man. It is, of course, or can be, any of those things if required, and perhaps you will remind me that “the camera does not lie,” to which I can only respond, “Then the camera must be taught to forthwith.” For technology should not, in my view, be treated as a noncommittal, noncommitted voyeur; its capacity for dissection, for analysis - above all, perhaps, for the idealisation of an impression - must be exploited, and no area with which it is currently occupied better demonstrates the philosophical conflicts with which its practitioners and theorists have been too long preoccupied than the aims and techniques of recording. ... I believe in “the intrusion” of technology because, essentially, that intrusion imposes upon art a notion of morality which transcends the idea of art itself.” Glenn Gould from “Music and Technology” (1975)

I remember well the conversation when the concept of these recordings began to take

shape. I had approached my colleague Paul Draper to see if he would be willing to do a recording of solo piano music together. Paul and I have been colleagues at Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University (QCGU) for many years but had never collaborated closely on an artistic project together. We come from very different musical backgrounds – myself, a pianist involved with Classical music while Paul’s background was as a jazz guitarist, recording engineer and sound producer. Beyond building the music technology department at the Conservatorium, in 2004 he had set up a state-of-the art recording studio at the Conservatorium: IMERSD (Intermedia, Music Education & Research Design). With such facilities linked to the fine acoustic of the Conservatorium Theatre and the excellent Steinway grand piano there, circumstances seemed ideal for us to do a recording project together. I knew what music I wanted to play though I had no idea whether the programme would attract his interest or attention. Schoenberg isn’t widely in favour these days! This was in 2008 and I was preparing a recital to mark the centenary of some music from 1908-1909 with some landmark piano works of European Modernism. It was not a programme to attract the crowds but it was one I really wanted to do and the time seemed right.

On approaching Paul, I was greatly heartened by his immediate enthusiasm for the project despite the repertoire being outside his usual musical interests. Initially I had envisaged a fairly standard studio recording of the repertoire. I had hoped that Paul would record the recital but wanted to follow that

up with a recording in the studio that would remove the inevitable imperfections of live performance. In line with good Modernist ideology, I felt this could serve the works better or at least ensure that the outcome would capture my concept of what I wanted the music to say. But, as we talked, a different sort of recording project emerged.

Inevitably I suppose, the conversation turned to Glenn Gould – inevitable not only because of my attraction to his ideas but for their enduring relevance. Gould was a true pioneer in articulating a coherent philosophy about recordings and many of his ideas still resonate strongly today – they certainly do with me and, as I was to discover, with Paul. As both pianist and spokesman, Gould of course remains controversial – people who know his work seem to either worship or loathe him. He was deliberately provocative for sure but was the first to promote widely the realisation that a performance and recording are fundamentally separate and distinct processes each with their own premises, priorities, ethics and possibilities. Of course Gould famously gave up his concert career in the 1960s to focus exclusively on recordings which he believed served better not only musical works but also listeners (and, actually, performers as well!) While he conceded that concerts might be suitable for some Romantic repertoire, he believed that certain types of music, especially music designed for contemplation was best served by private, concentrated and repeated listening afforded by recordings. Schoenberg’s music for example ...



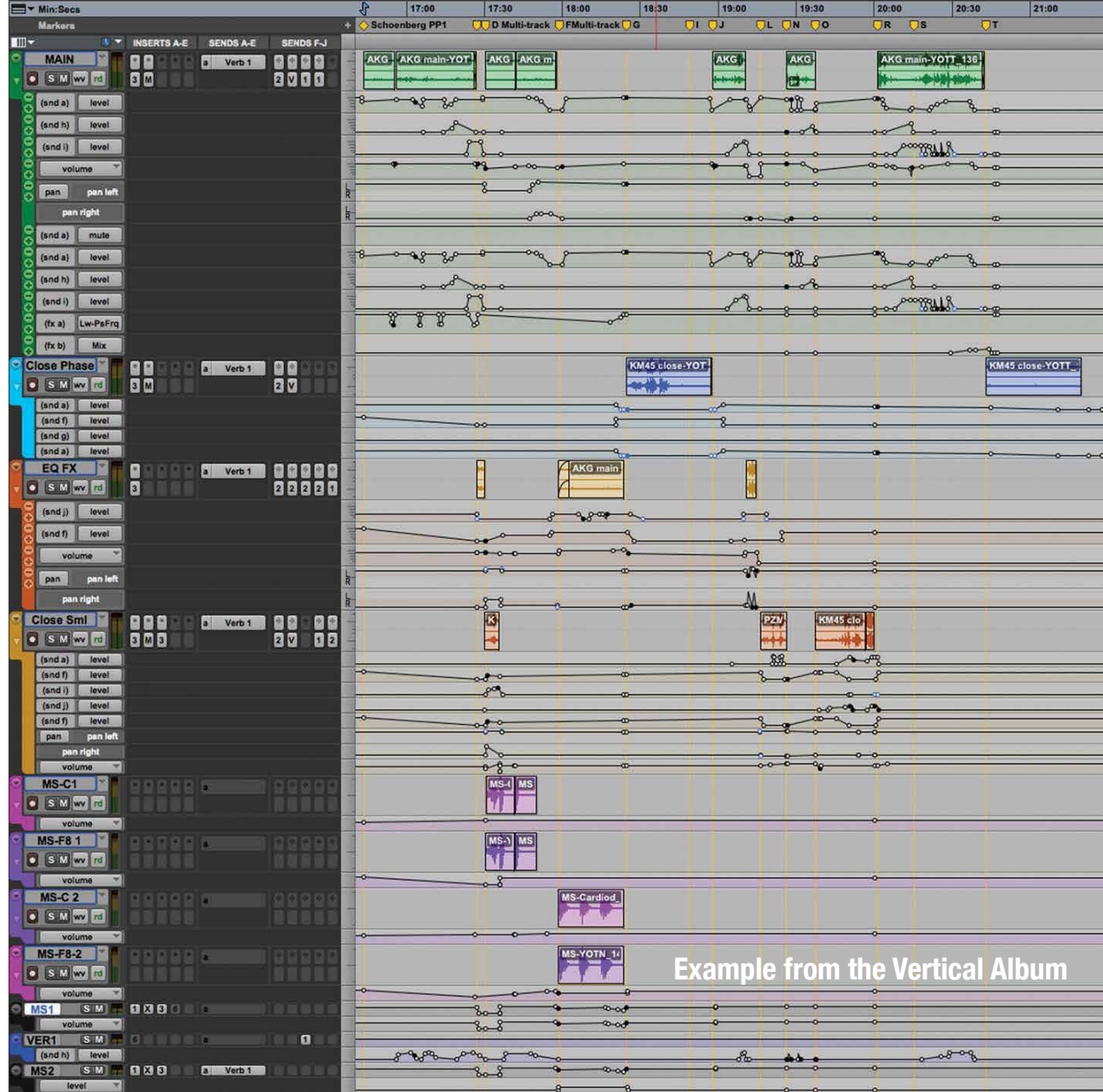
Example from the Horizontal Album

As Paul was quick to remind me, Gould's finished his concert career around the same time that The Beatles announced that they would give no more live concerts but continue solely as a studio band. And in both cases, the recordings they went on to make deliberately transcended what would be possible in live performance. (Think of Sgt. Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band ...) They were no longer merely trying to capture what might be heard in a concert but, though close artistic collaborations between performers and sound producers, they were using contemporary technological possibilities to construct something fundamentally different. Gould liked the fact that a recording was assembled outside of real-time which encouraged a view of a work as an independent

structure standing apart from the historical circumstances of its creation and the frantic decision-making of the concert situation.

Despite obvious intervention in the production of popular music sound recordings and videos, the culture of classical music and its recording industry still continue to promote the illusion that listening to a recording of a musical work is analogous to a experiencing a performance of it. In general, recordings of Classical music aim to sound "natural", to make any interference from the production processes imperceptible. Very much in line with Modernist attitudes where the performer serves the work by becoming transparent - preferably invisible - so too does the traditional Classical recording aim to offer direct appreciation of the work while providing

unnatural relief from the distractions of wrong notes or human imperfections from the performer. Most people know that recordings of Classical music may have involved some editing (though not the extent of it in any particular case) but how the sounds have been manipulated through the recording and editing process is less widely appreciated and is rarely acknowledged. This may involve altering the quality of the sound itself as well as adjustments of clarity, balance, texture, dynamic range and acoustic space, even in some cases intonation. Though relatively subtle, all of these are factors that profoundly influence the aesthetic effect. As the quotation at the top underlines, it was Gould's contention that the intervention of technology should not be minimised or denied but that its



possibilities should be explored and exploited openly and unashamedly.

As the project developed we decided to present the music in two forms – one being a traditional recording, the other is what

would be described as a “remix” in which the interventions are made explicitly. The first disc essentially maintains a consistent sound quality through each piece with selected takes edited together essentially along the horizontal

timeline, as represented on the figure below. We have called this the **Horizontal Album**. Though the sonic outcome may seem to be a natural piano sound, this is largely an illusion as, apart from the editing, the sound of the instrument and the sense of space around it has been refined to attain the optimal sound quality we desired. It is a small conceit that this disc is hardly less artificial than the other.

The other disc by comparison was constructed by mixing and processing many layers of sound - the different coloured rectangles in the figure below show the wave forms from multiple microphones which have been combined creatively to respond to the musical gestures. In a way the practice resembles a form of orchestration where an expanded palette of sounds is used to reinterpret the music. The recordings mixed and processed in this way are on what we have called the **Vertical Album**.

The initial concept for this Vertical Album in fact grew from Gould’s experiments with “acoustic choreography” where a piece would be recorded using multiple microphones and the final mix could “orchestrate” the recording spatially by moving between close and more distant perspectives. Similarly we recorded with multiple microphones - with eight pairs in fact - strategically placed in different positions around the hall and stage. (A pair of microphones was even attached to the soundboard of the piano.) But Gould’s concept was just the starting point for an intervention that far exceeded anything he may have conceived. The processes used in the Vertical Album to process and mix these

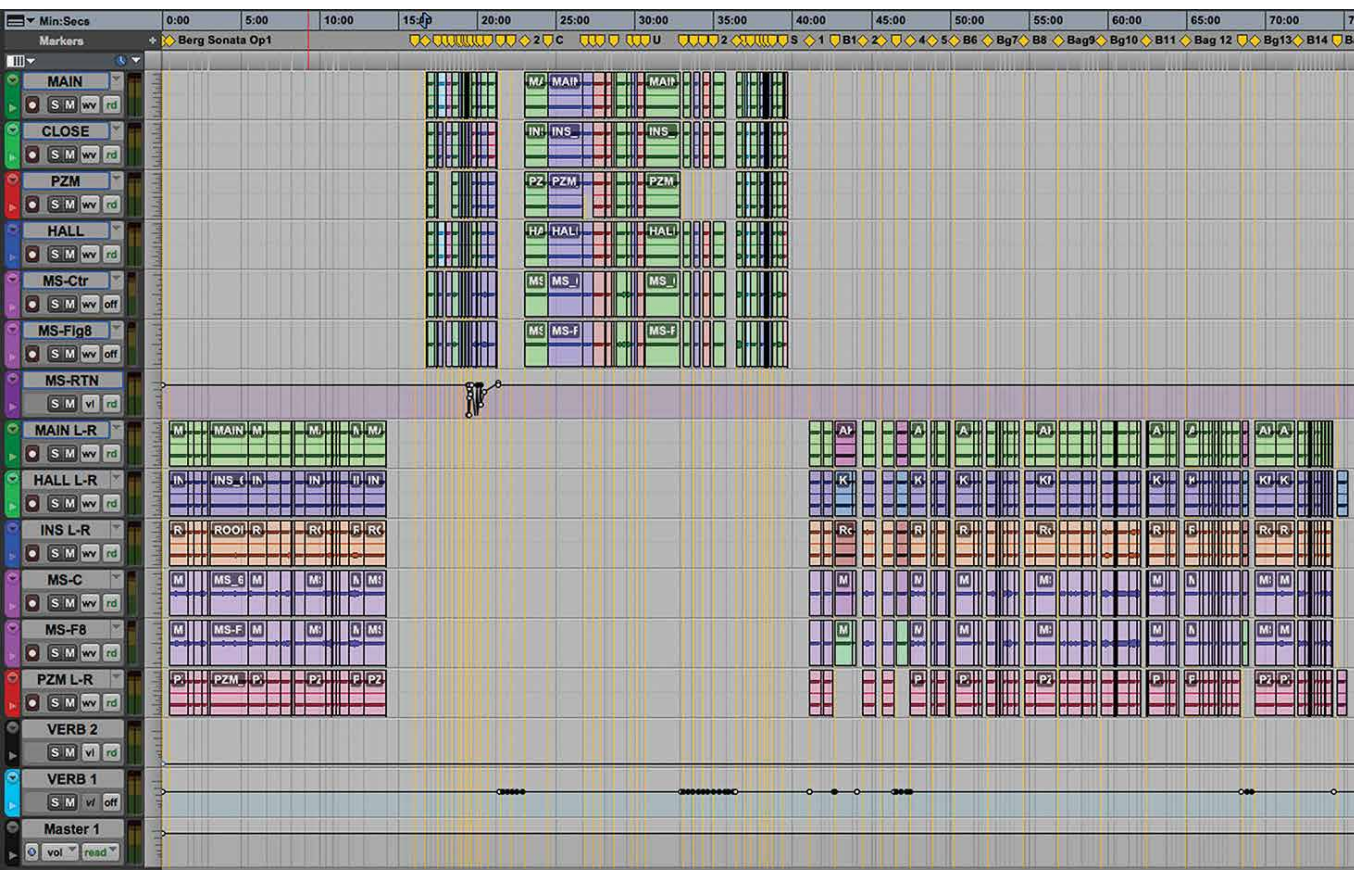
range of sounds in fact is essentially that of a “remix”. This is a widespread practice in many areas of contemporary popular music where new interpretations of ‘old’ songs are assembled by cutting up tracks and adding DSP or other forms of sound processing, thereby transforming the original into a distinctly contemporary form. The practice is deeply Post-modern but we were intrigued to explore its application to some of these landmark works of Modernism. This music has been notoriously difficult for most music-lovers since it was first composed. Despite the respect and prestige it held for much of the 20th century - at least in academic circles – its aesthetic remains forbidding for many, and in

fact largely irrelevant for recent generations. The idea of exposing seminal turn of the century music to new generations in a form they might recognise and respond to certainly seemed worth exploring.

As with Gould, the intention was never to impose cheap sound effects merely to add interest or variety for its own sake. My goal was always to exploit current possibilities to reflect and enhance qualities and relationships embedded in the music itself. For example, it seemed to me that the Schoenberg pieces strongly suggested metaphors of space. An extreme range of dynamics is called for in the scores of these pieces but, beyond merely reflecting relative

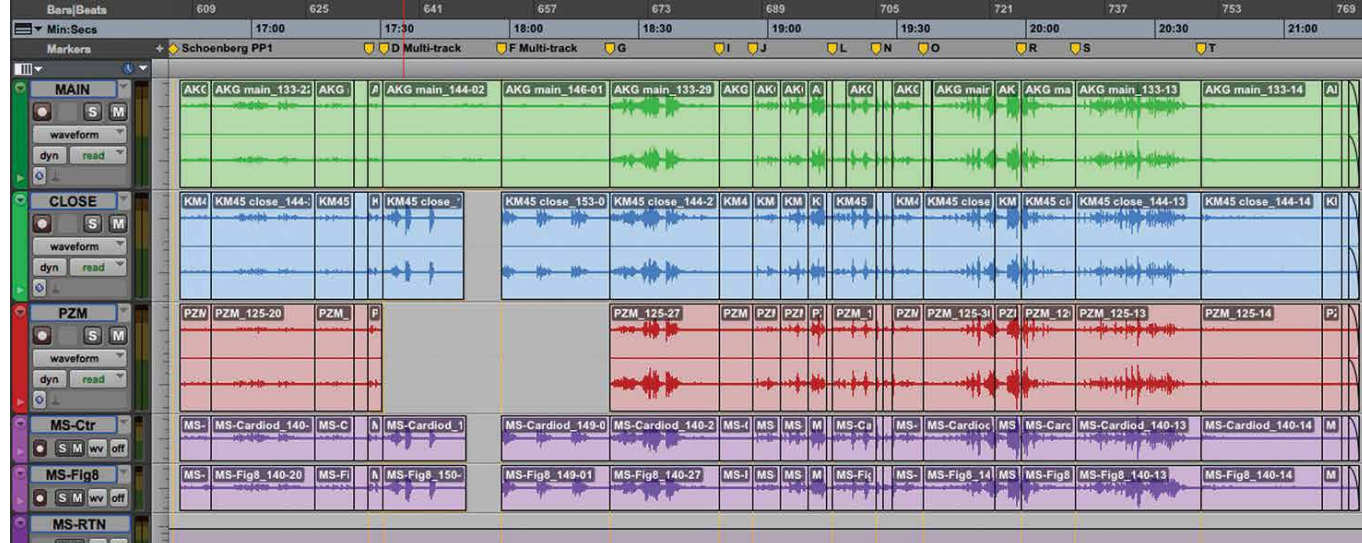
loud and soft dynamics, these contrasts suggested a sense of space and distance. It seemed to me that, for example, some of the pianissimo sections could seem a long way away in the distance while others should be as intimate as if someone is up close whispering something precious in your ear. Some of the loud dynamics should be imposing in their proximity, perhaps uncomfortably ‘in your face’ at times, while others would be more grand and broad in a large acoustic space (like an organ in a huge cathedral). Before we began mixing in the studio, I went through the score of these pieces marking in what I perceived to be several contrasting perspectives – I heard the pieces in terms of four distinct sounds that might equate with four different microphone mixes. In the end, by responding closely to the mercurial nature of this music, many more than four were employed.

Beyond metaphors of distance, to me these Schoenberg pieces had always been strong in visual imagery. Given his involvement with painting and painters at this time this is no surprise. When I gave the public recital of this repertoire at the Conservatorium I projected a range of images from his own paintings (and animated them subtly) to underline the parallels between these two areas of his creativity and, more specifically, to enhance the sense of visual imagery that, to me, seems so strongly suggested by their musical language. It is gratifying to us that our version of these pieces on the Vertical Album seems to capture a palpable sense of moving through and around a space – as Paul observed, not unlike contemporary film music.



The technology also allowed an infinite range of ways to adjust the timbre of the sound. Again, the idea of tone colour has resonances with the visual arts. Even though a piano may seem limited in its tonal range, compared for example to an orchestra, an enduring concern of pianists in playing such repertoire is to suggest a wide range of colours. One might even argue that broadening the range of timbre available through a process such as DSP (Digital Signal Processing) is an extension of what one is aiming for on the instrument. One might recall also that it was precisely in this period that Schoenberg was exploring with the idea of *klangfarbenmelodie* – literally “sound-colour-melody” – whereby the musical shape is contoured not by changes of pitch but gradations of timbre or colours. (His orchestral work that most fully explores this idea – “Farben” from the Five Orchestral Pieces Opus 16 – was composed some months after the Opus 11 pieces in 1909.) Enhancing the range of available colours and building structures from contrasting timbres again seems not incongruous within Schoenberg’s atonal sound world at this time.

Similarly, each of Bartók’s 14 Bagatelles has its distinct character, texture and sound quality. Articulating those differences is certainly something I explicitly try to achieve in performance of these pieces – hopefully that it audible on the Horizontal Album – but I was keen to explore how the technology available may enhance this aspect to serve the musical outcome. For example some pieces, starting with the 2nd Bagatelle, seem to call



for a dry rather brittle sound. More obviously, the 14th Bagatelle requires a sound to match the sarcastic nature of its expression. As a grotesque distortion of the ‘Ideal’ theme with which he had opened his Violin Concerto of the previous year, an abrasive, almost unpleasant, sound would seem appropriate for the expression of these bitter-and-twisted sentiments.

Some of the Bagatelles maintain a consistent sound quality throughout (such as the no. 13) where as others such as no. 7 seem to imply continual changes in texture and sound. Some call for an intimate, precious sound (no. 6), some for a grand expansive quality (no. 4) while others (such as no.11) some suggest deeply ironic humour. I do hope others will enjoy the 6th bagatelle on the Vertical Album as much as we do. Relative to forward-looking ones elsewhere in the set, it is such a conservative little piece that such an anachronistic treatment seemed appropriate.

Interestingly, a couple of them call for contrasting sound qualities simultaneously,

where each hand is given different material. In such cases for the Vertical album, each part was recorded separately and then combined. Again, multi-track recordings combining separate layers of the music are common in popular music but I know of no example where it has been used in recordings of Classical piano music. However I believe there is a strong case to justify its use in these cases. For example, the first Bagatelle is famous as an early example of bitonality where the two staves are notated in different key signatures – four sharps for the right hand and four flats for the left. But, beyond this technical feature of the notation, the character of the piece clearly delineates between a right-hand part full of rising contours (marked *mezzoforte* with frequent crescendos) and a despondent-sounding left hand part that continually falls as if in resignation (marked *piano* and always diminuendoing through each phrase.) Clearly the point of the piece is to contrast these contradictory characters. On a piano, one can underline this through the dynamics and

touch indications marked by the composer (legato lines in the right hand and semi-detached notes in the left) but multi-track recording allows the two parts to be delineated effectively through other means. In this case, a bright clear close sound was used to project the right hand part while the left hand part is set in a distant, reverberant space. The effect is quite different from what could be achieved in concert but, I would argue, one that is completely in line with the composer's boldly original conception.

The 3rd Bagatelle similarly gives completely different material to the pianist's two hands – a swirling ostinato in the right (marked *piano*) and a confidently projected melody in the left (marked *forte*.) I like to imagine that spiralling right-hand ostinato as a cloud through which the left hand melody

pierces sharply. On the piano, I would like to pedal through the ostinato to achieve that cloud-like effect but, one can't do that because that pedalling doesn't work for the left-hand line. But by recording the two layers on different tracks, that concept of the piece can be realised in a way impossible to achieve on the instrument.

There are also a few other cases where multi-tracking was used for short sections in the Vertical disc in the Schoenberg pieces as well as in a couple of other Bagatelles. The listener is invited to listen out for them and hopefully enjoy them. (My favourite is in the 12th Bagatelle where, for a few seconds, the metaphor of sound coming from far, far away is evoked – perhaps my favourite moment on either disc). Again I hope the artistic outcome in all these cases is convincing in musical

terms.

The recordings were the result of a close collaboration in the studio. After the Horizontal Album was edited, Paul and I spent many hours over several months together in the studio exploring the possibilities and refining our concept

of the sonic landscape for each piece. As figure 2 demonstrates the work was extremely detailed. A recurring issue was deciding how subtle/subliminal or obvious/dramatic an intervention should be. We did not always agree. Often differences in aesthetic taste became apparent though, over time, most were resolved easily enough as the Vertical Album became ever more polished and refined. In general, the guiding principle was that we should respond to the nature of the music and, as a consequence, each of the three works required its own treatment. Interventions in the Berg Sonata are relatively subtle with changes of sound transforming gradually. But we felt that the extreme nature of Schoenberg pieces and the great variety in the Bartók Bagatelles deserved a correspondingly bold and provocative approach. We hoped to recapture some of the ground-breaking quality that must have distinguished such music a century ago while reinterpreting them in contemporary terms.

We do not expect that all listeners will share our aesthetic taste and respond approvingly of the interventions on the Vertical Album. Hopefully the Horizontal Album will provide some compensation for such listeners but, if not, there remains a good number of other recordings of this music to which they can safely turn. But, following the centenary of this seminal music of the 20th century, the Vertical Album is offered as a contemporary creative response which allows this music to be heard and experienced afresh.

Stephen Emmerson

Paul Draper and Stephen Emmerson, IMERSD studio, QCGU



STEPHEN EMMERSON studied at University of Queensland graduating in 1980 with a first class honours and a University medal. During that time he studied piano with Pamela Page and viola with Elizabeth Morgan. In 1980, he won the Commonwealth Finals of the ABC's Instrumental and Vocal Competition in the keyboard division. In the following year, he was a full-time member of the viola section of the Queensland Symphony Orchestra. In late 1981 he took up a Commonwealth Scholarship to study at New College, Oxford and graduated with a Master of Philosophy in Music in 1983. He remained in England till 1987 and continued to study piano with Peter Wallfisch. He received an ARCM in performance in 1986 and a Doctor of Philosophy from Oxford University in 1989.

He has been on full-time staff at the Queensland Conservatorium since 1987 where he teaches various music literature and performance-related courses and is a member of the Conservatorium Research Centre. As a pianist, he has performed widely around

Australia, New Zealand, Asia and the Pacific. In addition to solo performances on piano and fortepiano, the focus of his performance career in recent years has been within various chamber ensembles including the Griffith Trio (Ensemble-in-residence at QCGU since 1998)

and Dean-Emmerson-Dean. Recordings of his playing in collaboration with a variety of performers have been released by ABC Classics, Move Records, The Anthology of Australian Music on Disc, CPO, Tall Poppies, Contact and Melba.



**Paul Draper and Stephen Emmerson,
Queensland Conservatorium Theatre, December 2008**