

MAD DANCE: two voyages into electronic music

Personal background

In June 2014 I finished the long task of realising and putting out all my earlier music, which had lain unheard for decades. So it was perhaps not strange – especially already having had more than “three score years and ten” - that I should have been uncertain whether I had anything more to say in music. I certainly wondered if it was perhaps time to end that long creative journey.

Such thoughts were particularly pressing because I have always been interested in following the edge of the wave, and because I have long felt that the work of any artist, to be of quality, must change in response to the inevitable inner changes which living brings. I am not the same person I was when I set out in my teens, in Nottingham, on my musical journey. Indeed, I have changed so much in some of my attitudes, that those who knew me then, and indeed later, in Oxford and Cambridge, would be very unhappy to see where I now stand.

But my fears were groundless. Though the world must judge whether this new music has any quality, it is undoubtedly a new phase for me. I came to realise that when I created the *Bonny Street* CD (see edwardlee.bandcamp.com) all those years ago, I had been asking myself some fundamental questions about what music was, at least for me – its aims, its techniques and forms. So I thought and wrote about this – the results can be seen in the Blog (<http://www.elmvillagearts.co.uk./blog/>).

All this led me to revisit music which I had brushed up against in the past, and to come to know what was for me new music. In particular I was drawn to electronic composers, notably Luciano Berio, Paul Lansky and Vladimir Ussachevsky.

At the same time I found myself greatly responsive to modern Dance music, which manages to combine the most basic rhythmic impulses with highly imaginative and subtly finished sorties into the world of sound.

From the recording techniques used in this field, greatly aided and inspired by various excellent articles in *Computer Music*, I found new sound colours, new definitions of what can constitute rhythm and new possibilities for creating aural spaces and for generating power.

It became clear that I was extending and redefining what the sources and output of music could be for me. Paul Lansky says: *Speech and song are commonly thought of as different and distinct – as oranges and apples. It is my feeling, however, that they are more usefully thought of as occupying opposite ends of a wide spectrum of musical potential* (jacket notes for *Six Fantasies on a Poem by Thomas Campion*, New York: CRI Records (SD456)). I have long thought this was an inspiring view of the voice. And more generally, it seems to me that any sound source is potentially a source of music.

Yet I have also recognised that my interest is not only in music as an abstract form. For me music must, at least at times, express ideas which are capable of articulation. In particular, I wish and need it to express my current view of the world, which is a mixture of alarm and pessimism. So in this music, what I hope are beautiful moments are constantly offset by ugly or destructive forces.

SECTION 1 - THE PURCELL BASSES

As a one-time string bass player and later bass guitarist, the creation of a series of pieces derived from bass lines was probably inevitable. Having a father who loved and played boogie woogie instilled in me a love for the bass riff, or to give it its traditional title, *ostinato*, or *ground bass*. This was a favourite technique of Henry Purcell, which he used to great creative effect. Years ago, I collected some of these, first to study, but also with a view to using them at some point. Finally, in 2014, this moment arrived! I felt that the basses seemed a very good point from which to begin to explore the sounds and techniques which were attracting me.

The effect and mood created by these pieces must be judged by the listener. I would only advise that this music is not meant to be a recreation of development of Purcell's music. It is a response, expressing my view of the world created by repeated bass lines.

Appreciation of the music does not presuppose any musical knowledge or acquaintance with the music of Purcell and the preceding century or so. However, the listener who does have such knowledge may find interest in looking for such techniques as polyphony, counter-melodies, diminution, augmentation, and binary form, which occur at various points. Also, at times organ and harpsichord patches are used, in acknowledgement of Purcell's own instruments.

Similarly this music is not to be judged as an attempt to fit any particular genre of Dance music, unless it helps to consider it as a form of "IDM" (Intelligent Dance Music). Instead, it takes the most basic approaches of Dance music as a starting point. These are (for me), above all, a solid, intense rhythmic base. Next is a fascination with unusual sounds and timbres, which for me at times create very imaginative scenarios. Finally, there is an important role for sound outside the range which can be created with fixed pitches.

The titles do not have any special relation to the music, which suggests emotions but not images to me; they are just a means of acknowledging the great master.

1 St Ann's Lane

Where Purcell was born, though his family moved when he was very young to Westminster.

The basses:

The image shows two musical staves. The first staff is in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time, starting with a treble clef. It contains a sequence of notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4, G2, B1, A1, G1. The second staff is in D minor (no sharps or flats) and 4/4 time, starting with a bass clef. It contains a sequence of notes: G2, F2, E2, D2, C2, B1, A1, G1, F1, E1, D1, C2, B1, A1, G1. Both staves have a common time signature of 4/4 and a key signature of one sharp (G major for the first, D minor for the second).

The second theme is transposed down to D minor in the recording.

The style evolves from something like the original through jazz and into rock. In this and all the other pieces, there is a substantial use of riffs.

2 Leicester Fields

The place (now Leicester Square) where the first performance of *Dido and Aeneas* was given.

The bass:



A traditional polyphonic technique is used at certain points, when the riff is set against the above line at double and quadruple the tempo. Purcell's approach of constructing a contrasting melody over the ground bass is used. The style is loosely his, but unlike in his work, the theme is introduced in fragments which gradually combine,

3 The Old Bachelor

The title of a very successful collaboration with playwright William Congreve, which includes the attractive *Hornpipe*, often used as material for teaching novice pianists.

The basses:



This is taken slowly, with a two-in-a-bar feel.

In the middle there is an apparently out of tempo passage which is in fact a "breakdown" (i.e. rhythm section omitted) using very free rhythms.

4 Seeing for Miles

Chosen because Pete Townshend said The Who were inspired by Purcell's harmonies in *I can see for miles*, long a favourite of mine. Hopefully, my piece has some of the vitality of that song.

The basses:



This is taken slowly, with a two-in-a-bar feel. It launches at once into lively piano and vibraphone solos.



This is transposed to Cm

SECTION 2 – CANONS DANCE

These are five related pieces called *Canons Dance*. This is a play on words. Partly it is meant to evoke a set of corpulent clergymen letting their hair down – at least metaphorically. [A canon is a Christian priest with special duties in a cathedral].

However, the title really refers to the musical techniques which are used.

“Dance “will be familiar, at least to younger listeners, as the name for a network of forms which share the characteristics of being usually electronically created, having a very solid beat (often “four to the floor”) and being played loud. So if you can, turn up the volume. Despite any intellectual content, this album is meant first to get to the listener by a direct physical impact.

So my starting point in the *Canons Dance* pieces was to take a characteristic pattern of a genre and to build on that foundation. These are indicated in the relevant part of the notes. But it should be noted that the aim is definitely not to create within that genre, only to take its basic rhythm as a starting point. This approach has an honourable ancestry, as the classical composers routinely took dance forms as their starting point – among the noted examples are the use of the sarabande and minuet. The results were not meant to be a contribution to an evening of dancing.

A *canon* is a contrapuntal musical form which was much used in the Medieval and Renaissance periods, but has been a device used by composers right up to the present day. More detail about this technique can be found in Appendix 1.

I originally intended to work with strict forms, as I believe that Dance music’s use of short, impactful, memorable themes or motifs is very suited to this.

However, whether I was wrong, or just not insightful enough (I tend to believe the latter) I found that a greater flexibility was needed. So the music (and words) are often imitative, but not always with the strictness found in some Classical forms.

Track 5: Canons Dance - Hip Hop: *Five to midnight*

The journey starts in a relatively light conventional mood, with a swingy rhythm and memorable riffs. The interest lies in variations of rhythm, which are much more frequent than in Dance music, variations of timbres, and a range of contrapuntal treatments of the riffs. Though the latter can be analysed intellectually, their first effect, like combined big band riffs, is intended to be emotional. I am therefore giving no indication of the techniques – it is better that the listener should become aware of their presence over time.

Gradually the piece becomes darker, as the use of noise increases. At the end these noises are recognised as street noises, which lead to the second piece.

Track 6 Canons Dance – Trance: *Motorway Night*

The next section is based on the Trance technique of a four to the floor kick drum to which is contrasted a bass line on the offbeat quavers (eighths). But whereas an important element of

Trance is the use of anthemic lines, in this piece the lines are angular and dissonant. And the other sounds are driven especially by a sound like a hard pushed car. The contrapuntal approach can even be found in these sounds, though once again the emotional effect is paramount. The aim is a growing intensity toward the next section, which will be the high point of the Canon Dance pieces.

Track 7 Canons Dance - Drum and Bass: *Dark nebula*

The sense of the piece is a personality at breaking point or in the grips of terrifying or diabolic forces. Dissonance, disturbing sounds, and the constant assault on the basic beat by rhythmic fragments all lead to a great sense of unease. The beat is on the boundary of a phenomenon which grabs our innermost senses and one which is disturbingly mechanical.

The effect is obtained partly by using techniques which are definitely not found in the genre. One is that the phrases are irregular in length, rather than fitting the clear pattern of multiples of two bars which is a part of Dance music (however would people dance to the music otherwise?). Phrases may start in unexpected places – thus when the drums enter, one realises that the bass is not starting on beat 1 of the bar – the effect is jolting and disturbing.

Another technique is the use of a twelve tone series created by Webern (for *Three Songs*, Opus 23, 1934). This dictates the order of notes in the bass line, again giving tension, and a sense of an oppressive, mechanical dimension. Further information about this can be found in Appendix 2.

The title is also a reference to my words and music piece *Stars Blindly Run*, which presents a view of a universe which is mechanical in its organisation and has no purpose for human beings of the sort claimed by religions. (This piece can be heard at wordsandmusic.bandcamp.com)

Track 8 Canons Dance - a Breakdown: *Wild Bells*

Properly speaking, a breakdown in dance music may take several forms. Those who know the music well and are passionate about it can argue at length about the meaning of the terms *breakdown* and *drop*. It is suggested that the original breakdown was invented by Tom Moulton in the Disco genre, when to separate and yet link two sections he included a section only containing a drum rhythm. In many Dance tracks, the breakdown has most of the pitched instruments taken out, and also the percussion, and noise and other sounds are added.

But there is a general principle, first observed in the “breaks” of traditional jazz, which is as follows. The piece is built over a strong rhythm, but at a certain point many of the elements are taken away. The artistic skill consists in removing many of the elements of the music, thus creating a strong contrast, whilst not entirely losing momentum.

At the end of this interlude the music comes back with renewed impact over a strong rhythm. This is often called a “drop” - the composer drops back into the basic rhythm. (Again specialists will argue about what exactly is needed in a drop).

Above all the breakdown is a point of comparative relaxation and freedom.

Here, as throughout the album, the concept is taken as a starting point. The piece takes us into ambiguous territory. Our canons are deeply confused and move rapidly between various elements which echo the music heard so far. Storms, explosions, organ music, dance rhythm, even the

Webern series all make brief appearances. Contrasting and irregular rhythms generate a sense of tension and unease. Yet there are hints of something more optimistic and beautiful.

The title is taken from the musical links to the section "Ring out wild bells", in *Stars Blindly Run*.

Track 9 Canons Dance - Trance – again: *The lady dances*

This piece is the nearest to something which would be acceptable to fans of the genre. There is a somewhat anthemic line to end. But unlike authentic recordings it uses a contrapuntal approach in which contrasting lines are set against each other, with hints of imitation

Nevertheless, after what has gone before the listener may well be surprised, as the piece is light in mood and dancey. For me, it illustrates the point very well, that artists at work don't ultimately rely on planning and mechanical procedures – insights and inspirations come unbidden and from we know not where. In this case it was during a swim at the Oasis Pool in Camden. The feel and basic idea came, and it was possible to create the draft very quickly.

I'm not sure why it works. One possibility is that the ambiguity of the previous piece is then resolved into optimism. My other thought is that the idea comes from the ending of tragedies in Shakespeare's time with a jig. This piece is then a relief after the intensity of all that has gone before, and the relief is expressed through the most fundamental of musical activities – the dance.

"The lady" is the one I have lived with for so many years, to whom this album, like most of my other work, is dedicated.

APPENDIX 1: CANON

Canon is a form of *counterpoint*, that is, the use of musical lines ('voices') which have distinct rhythms which interact. These may be deployed in *imitation*, which is the repetition of a line or phrase shortly after its appearance in a different line. We are all familiar with *rounds* such as *Frere Jacques*; the round is a compositional form which uses imitation. In such cases the repetition is exact, but in contrapuntal music more generally this need not be so. The imitation needs only to be clearly related to and to copy the original line in important respects. The interval of time between the first phrase and its imitation is not fixed and depends on the aims of the composer.

In this type of music various other techniques are often used, such as *sequence* (the repetition of ideas at another pitch, augmentation (all the notes of the phrase are lengthened, e.g. doubled in length), *diminution* (all the notes of the phrase are shortened, e.g. halved in length) and *stretto* (the ideas follow each other at a very short interval of time).

It has at times been a very complex and intellectual form – perhaps the most extreme of which is the *crab canon*. The latter, sometimes referred to as *canon cancrizans*, has two musical lines that are complementary and reversed. In this respect it is similar to a palindrome, which a word or words which read the same, both forwards and backwards. (e.g. the old story of what Adam first said when he met Eve: "Madam I'm Adam"). The situation may be made even more complex: for example in his work *The Musical Offering* J S Bach included a canon ("Quaerendo invenietis") in which the line which works backwards is also inverted, i.e. the notes go down where the first line goes up, and so on.

It should be noted that the above description involves only two lines, for the purpose of explanation; in fact there may be any number of phrases, though typically there are between two and five.

APPENDIX 2: USE OF WEBERN'S SERIES

In Twelve Tone music, the composer typically starts by arranging the twelve notes of the chromatic scale into an order known as a series. The Original (O) form is then inverted (I), written backwards (as in a palindrome) (R form) and this is then also inverted (RI form). These four options are the starting materials for the composition.

Here is the Webern series, and the riffs which were created out of it:

Webern Opus 23 Series

Original Row

Original Row

8

13 Inversion

Inversion

Inversion

19

25 Retrograde

Retrograde

31 Retrograde inversion

40