

## Approaching the Silence of Patterns: The Music of Michael Blake

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Michael Blake was born in Cape Town in 1951. He was awarded a BMus by the University of the Witwatersrand (South Africa), MMus by Goldsmiths College (England), and a doctorate in music composition from Rhodes University (South Africa). 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). In 2000 Michael Blake established the New Music Indaba, a South African festival of contemporary music, with masterclasses for young composers. He has taught courses in composition, contemporary music, and analysis at Goldsmiths College London and Rhodes University Grahamstown and currently lectures in the Department of Art History, Visual Arts and Musicology at the University of South Africa. He currently resides in Johannesburg, South Africa, with his wife Christine Lucia, an eminent musicologist at the University of the Witwatersrand.

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 Bryars, 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" (in 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 recasts 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 colors 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 measures spanning the octave. This phrase is echoed in a disconcerting approximation (m.6 ff., see figure 1). 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 (m.11, see figure 2), 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* measure of the opening five measure 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

parallelisms 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 enamored of its own lack of orientation the composer suddenly introduces dramatic changes (an inexplicable pounding on the hitherto neglected pitch class A in m. 84 ff., for example, see figure 3) 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 contrapuntal lines are never fully aligned with one another. Time signatures are constantly shifting to produce measures of different length, 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 dialectic-in-reverse. Here we find the gradual emptying out of a saturated melodic field of thirty-second notes, which, on encountering a fistful of false 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 center 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 quarters to dotted quarters, and then to abbreviated dotted eighths), 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-centered oboe line is isolated in various intervening measures that cut into the texture of the continuum in unexpected places (eg. mm. 7, 13-15, 17, 25, etc., see figure 4). 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 (3+3+2+2+2 in m.7, for example, or 3+3+3+3+3+2+2+2+3 in m.17, see figure 5) recall the intricate cross-rhythmic patterns of western African drum ensembles. As the music progresses, the complexity of these interludes increases (in m.25, for example, variously articulated patterns grounded in a dotted eighth-note pulse in the guitar run agilely against the oboe's motivic movement in eighth notes), but this development is itself held in check by yet further interruptions, such as the pulsing walking bass section in mm.53 ff., which recalls Zulu music for the guitar (see figure 6). 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 mm. 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 color 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 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.

## REFERENCES

Muller, Stephanus. "Michael Blake 50," 119-126