

**Toxic Triads, or Breaking Through to
Composition:
Michael Blake's Teaching at Unisa**

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Aaron Dworkin, founder of the Sphinx organization which supports the development of young Black and Latino classical musicians, quoted these words from American civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. when interviewed for the *Harvard Gazette* earlier this year: 'Change does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability but comes through continuous struggle. ... Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter' (Walsh 2011).

When Michael Blake joined the Department of Art History, Visual Arts and Musicology at Unisa in early 2007 to spend two years as a senior lecturer on contract it soon became clear he was determined to challenge his students and colleagues to think hard about what they were studying and teaching, and not to blindly accept received opinion at face value. During those two years he taught modules in three subjects that were then called Composition Theory, History of Music, and Music in World Cultures Today. To each of his allotted modules Michael brought a stimulating combination of knowledge, experience, iconoclasm and wit. I don't know anything about his previous teaching career at Goldsmith's in the 1980s, or of his work at Rhodes or later at Wits. So it's largely about his contribution to our musicology programme at Unisa that I want to focus today.

Michael's keen grasp of the importance of understanding the cultural context of musical activities and the need for students to think critically about how they should approach a topic and write about it is illustrated in his comments to students in the form of follow-up tutorial letters, as we have no contact

classes at Unisa. Like all good music teachers, he constantly challenged his students not only to *listen* and experience the music for themselves but and to see the connections between events and to stimulate their interest beyond the dry textbook facts.

Commenting, for example, on one essay topic in which students were required to assess the role of the Viennese concert organizations of the nineteenth century in a module on urban musicology, he points out that these institutions not only 'grew out of a need for the composition, performance and reception of music' (Blake 2007b: 2) but in themselves influenced these aspects. He admonishes them for not giving enough attention to the vital role played by conductors and institutions who were responsible for putting on new works, and pushes them towards an awareness of the liveliness and creativity that has for so long characterized what is after all a relatively small European city, comparing it with the staleness of the classical music scene in our own country:

Although it's true that much of Vienna's musical life now depends on keeping the existing repertoire going (partly in order to fuel the tourist trade), it's *new work* that keeps musical institutions and orchestras alive, and audiences and critics on the edge of discovery - perhaps this is why classical music is so moribund in this country. (Blake 2007b: 3)

And he's always game for taking a swipe at preconceived notions about supposedly popular classical music in Vienna and the ethics of the classical music world. He cites the annual New Years' Day concert from Vienna as being one of the biggest money-spinning events in classical music today, adding:

... that prompts the question: does the music still matter, and does it matter that classical music is still the preserve of the well-heeled?

If you can get hold of it, take a look at Norman Lebrecht's gripping book *When the Music Stops* for fascinating 'inside' information on the Musikverein and other concert halls,

Viennese music publishers and especially Viennese concert agents. The opening chapter discusses New Year's Day concert halls in some detail. (Blake 2007b: 3-4)

Michael's main impact on the Unisa BMus curriculum, and one that will directly influence students for the next few years, came from happening to be with us, by sheer chance, at the right time. During his first year with us the university decided it was time to review the Programme and Qualifications Mix or PQM – the range of qualifications offered throughout the institution. As one of the constraints of this review was to rationalize the number of music modules offered within our three-year Bachelor of Musicology programme, we took the opportunity to restructure and streamline the entire BMus curriculum.

Over the previous six or seven years, largely because of enforced rationalizations along the way, the new curriculum we'd introduced in 2000 had become something of an untidy rag bag of modules in a less than coherent programme. In particular, the Composition Theory modules were in dire need of an overhaul. A throwback to confused and unadventurous thinking in the previous decade, they were little more than fairly standard 'theory of music' and analysis modules that did not speak to the needs of today's burgeoning musician or musicologist.¹

The upshot, following a good deal of discussion in staff meetings about the best course to take in terms of the challenges facing distance learning in music, was a reduction in the major subjects we offered from three to two. Out went the name Composition Theory, as well as the subjects History of Music and Music in World Cultures Today. We called the new subjects Composition Studies and Music in History and Society, although we retained most of the former modules in these new configurations.

¹ Lucia (2007: 168) argues for a useful distinction between the terms *theory of music* and *music theory*, defining *theory of music* as 'a body of knowledge that is seen as a prerequisite for both practice and speculation', while she sees *music theory* as 'synonymous with the critical activity of music analysis'.

The new subject called Composition Studies embraced the most changes. From the many vigorous discussions among the lecturers involved came new ideas, the most far-reaching of them from Michael, including the name Composition Studies itself. Among the innovations - for Unisa and no doubt for tertiary education in South Africa as a whole - were two completely new third-year modules, African Composition Resources (originally intended to include Asian composition resources) and Free Composition. Last year we contracted Michael to write the study material for these new modules, and students will encounter them next year for the first time. They are both quite brief, but they pack a wealth of ideas and food for thought within their covers - and of course they include a great many music examples from real compositions.

In the study material for African composition sources Michael begins by pointing out that substantial Africanised 'art' music traditions are found in most parts of the continent, with the balance in this music tending to be weighted towards Western music. Some South African composers, he writes, like Stefans Grové and Jeanne Zaidel-Rudolph, treat so-called African elements 'in a Prokofievian or Bartókian modernist [i.e. Western] manner'. Black choral composers in South African and Lesotho, like Reuben Caluza, Michael Moerane and Joshua Mohapeloa, 'use Western music as a basis, while drawing on folk or popular elements and adapting 18th-century models in ways that nod towards Stravinsky'. Intercultural composition, on the other hand, has come to be seen as 'an alternative or complement to modernism in its final decades' (Study unit 1, quoting Scherzinger 2004: 611). Michael quotes Steve Reich's account of his encounter with iron bells from West Africa: 'the more I tried to figure out what sort of piece I would be able to write for them, the more it became clear that the best use for these bells was simply to play the music for which they were intended ... When I pick up a gong-gong or an atoke it tells me that *it* plays a certain kind of music, that *it* has a certain history; and if I want to bend it to my musical purposes, I feel that I'm not entitled to do that' (Reich 1974: 57-58). So in encouraging his students to consider the possibilities of using traditional instruments, or incorporating some into the ensemble, or using western instruments only, Michael is suggesting that there are important aesthetic ethics that need to be kept in mind.

The study material offers students a wide variety of exemplars, ranging from figures such as Akin Euba, Nofinishi Dywili, Hamza el Din and Justinian Tamasuza, to György Ligeti, Steve Reich, Kevin Volans, Martin Scherzinger and Michael Blake, as well as some transcriptions of traditional African music. Besides serving as practical models, the selection of works neatly gives the lie to students brought up on a diet of mainly 19th-century Western composers, or for that matter of rock, bubblegum or hip-hop, that Africa is devoid of its own indigenous sophisticated art music.

In 2004 Michael wrote a short anthem for my choir at Christ Church Arcadia, using a modern English paraphrase of a text by the fourth-century North African theologian Clement of Alexandria. As Michael jokingly put it at the time, 'text by Clement of Alexandria, music by Michael of Killarney'. Listed in the Bardic Edition as BD0898, the work illustrates in a fairly simple yet engaging way several of the principles Michael discusses in his study material for this module: interlocking rhythms, a hexatonic scale that references the Mixolydian mode on A, and so on.

It's a bracingly new take on church choral music that could not have originated anywhere else in the world. Imitating neither the saccharine and tired meanderings that so often pass for contemporary choral art music (as you constantly hear on radio choral music programmes) nor the blisteringly dissonant styles of modernism that have for the most part never become mainstream, it stakes its claim - ironically for an atheist like Michael - for an integrity in sacred music that many of those who profess the faith seem unable to authenticate convincingly.

But it's mainly on Michael's innovative module on Free Composition that I want to focus now. During his time at Unisa, Michael and I often discussed the dilemma in tertiary music education music lecturers face when confronted with students brought up - usually at school or within some other formal system - on a diet of outdated and naive harmonic language: outdated in the sense that the music they are taught belongs to the so-called common practice period belonging to an obsolete

musical language, and naive in the mistaken but grimly held belief that this slice of Western musical praxis represents a kind of universal norm and therefore needs to be mastered before one can move on - what Lucia (2007: 184) calls 'an assumption of value in the rules of Western music composition of 200 years ago'. And in a book that Michael introduced me to soon after he arrived at Unisa, Kyle Gann (2006: 137) puts it more strongly, though here he is referring to those American composers working, as he puts it, 'within academia's ivied walls'. In Gann's view they are impossibly conservative, with students, he says, who 'possess an amazing mixture of sophistication and ignorance'. These composer-teachers, he continues, 'believe that the tenets of high modernism, like the Third Reich in 1933, are here to stay for a thousand years. My friends in other arts find this incomprehensible, for in no other field do academics insist that history has reached a stopping point.'

In his characteristically direct way Michael confronts the issue head-on in his Introduction to the study guide for the Free Composition module, and getting in a dig on the morality of complacency:

Music students study harmony and counterpoint, and compose style studies. They learn to use diatonic and chromatic harmony in the style of the 18th to 19th century and 18th-century contrapuntal style. They write compositional exercises such as inventions, fugues, chorales, minuets, and so on in the styles of the 'great masters' - in 'preparation' for composition. They are always told you have to learn the rules before you can break them. But are they ever encouraged to break them? Students often arrive at the end of the degree to discover they've only ever learnt the rules and cannot break through to composition. It would be right if they felt short-changed.

Is this a political statement? Well of course it is. In a recent newspaper interview with Gwen Ansell, Michael stated: 'I have always believed that composing (and performing) is a political act in the broadest sense ... I don't see any other reason for composing music' (Ansell 2011). Michael's constant challenging of the status quo and questioning of accepted norms, is typical

of his whole approach to composing and teaching. My attention was recently drawn in an essay by Clive James (2010: 148) to the comment by Pedro Henriquez Ureña, the early twentieth-century Dominican philologist and philosopher, that 'the one-time colonial countries [in South America] were not on the edge of the Spanish world, but at the centre - the centre of its future'. And if we take into account Martin Scherzinger's observation that 'African procedures and structures arguably lie at the heart of some of Europe's most ground-breaking musical production' (2004: 610), we can begin to see that Michael's admonishments to students, indeed his whole approach to creating music, implies that something new can yet come out of Africa. And it need not exist as an exotic Other on the fringe of anything in Europe or North America but can in itself embody a bracingly independent and artistically valid enterprise.

Pankaj Mishra (2011) reminds us in his review of three recently-published books on Britain's imperial past that the British ruled their empire through terror through much of its early history. I want to suggest that, in a similar way, the 'theory of music' examination regime has held its hegemonic position in the former colonies, including South Africa, through its own brand of tyranny. If, as Lucia (2007: 178) maintains, most South African school and university curriculums continue to fall under its influence even in post-apartheid times (Lucia 2007: 178), the wonder is that more music educationists have not yet challenged its outdated premises (though I know some have, albeit with ineffectual results). But a graded system offers both a false security and a false safety: the essentially dishonest security of a regulated system of assessment that never questions what is being assessed, nor why; and the misguided (and fraudulent) safety that comes from being closeted within a cocoon, oblivious to and never challenged by what is going on in the worlds of music outside.

Part of the problem with music education in this country, I believe, is that school and university music students tend, with a few notable exceptions, to be exposed to a fairly narrow range of musics. Those institutions that still purport to focus more or less exclusively on what they regard as Western art music generally approach it from either the long-discredited and

somewhat sterile perspective of style studies, or as a series of facts about composers and their works presented in a cultural vacuum (or some combination of these); they have in any case lost the plot in terms of what is going on musically in many western countries themselves.

In Pankaj Mishra's review I mentioned earlier we are reminded of George Orwell's astute observation in his famous essay of 1942 on Rudyard Kipling (reproduced at http://orwell.ru/library/reviews/kipling/english/e_rkip):

It is notable that Kipling does not seem to realize, any more than the average soldier or colonial administrator, that an empire is primarily a money-making concern. Imperialism as he sees it is a sort of forcible evangelizing. You turn a Gatling gun on a mob of unarmed 'natives', and then you establish 'the Law', which includes roads, railways and a court-house. He could not foresee, therefore, that the same motives which brought the Empire into existence would end by destroying it.

While it may be just a little unfair to compare the horror of colonial tyranny so clearly grasped and plainly denounced by Orwell with the conservative and rigidly-enforced examining system in music that was imposed on the colonies (and, it has to be said, on Britain itself), there are some striking parallels. From the strictly capitalistic business model of the enterprise - the rival examining authorities have been known to refer to one another as 'competitors' (Lucia 2007: 182)² - to the often restrictive and lacklustre syllabuses relating to an imaginary museum of invented music, the music examinations system is little more than a pernicious - and indeed a malicious - racket. Inflicted on an unsuspecting music profession that has been brainwashed into believing there is no other way to become initiated into the world of music, the system effectively excludes many music students in this country from a formal music education, though there are ways of overcoming this difficulty.

² I have personally heard this word used in meetings of Unisa's Directorate of Music, which is the body responsible for conducting graded music exams.

In his study material for African Composition Resources and Free Composition Michael has pinned his colours to the mast, especially as Unisa study guides are freely available as publications to anyone who wants to buy one. He charts a new direction in the studying and teaching of composition at undergraduate level. Let me remind you of that quote from his new study guide: 'Students often arrive at the end of the degree to discover they've only ever learnt the rules and cannot break through to composition.' I like his choice of image in that last phrase. It suggests both the act of overcoming of an obstacle or an obstruction and the promise of emerging into a new experience. It is a deliberate act of escape, demanding effort and determination, just as a chick has to peck away and break through its shell in order to emerge into the real world instead of safely remaining in the egg that nurtured it. To coin a phrase, they need to do this in order to get a life. And Michael believes students need to be encouraged to do so in order to gain their own musical life.

The outcomes of these new modules are unpredictable. How will our students take to these new and perhaps even bewildering challenges? Will they be mystified, rebellious or simply indifferent? We won't know for a while. Still, we can but hope that, starting in 2012, the eyes and ears of some of our BMus students will be opened to fresh, invigorating ideas, and weaned off the stultifying imitation of long-outworn and, in today's world, largely meaningless musical styles.

In his *Mail & Guardian* interview with Gwen Ansell, Michael admitted to having always had a 'rebellious nature'. I'd like to think that his rebellion against the trite norms prevailing in some music education in South Africa is given a positive turn in these two new modest little study guides. In this he is, surely, a rebel *with* a cause.

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