

THE PRESENT-DAY COMPOSER REFUSES TO BUDGE: CASE STUDIES IN NEW SOUTH AFRICAN ORCHESTRAL MUSIC¹

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Three Meditations (2004) by Stefans Grové, *A Mandela Portrait* (2004) by Michael Hankinson, *Sinfonia Africana* (2004) by Hendrik Hofmeyr, *Three Paintings of Irma Stern* (2005) by Peter Klatzow, *Concerto for Double Orchestra* (2002) by Kevin Volans (Black Sheep Edition), and *Lifecycle* (2003) by Jeanne Zaidel-Rudolph.²

Theodor Adorno's complaint that the history of modern music between the two World Wars was 'nothing more than the history of decline, a retrogression into the traditional' (1994, 5) was directed at the aesthetic of neo-classicism, the tendency composers in the 1920s thru '40s had of looking for compositional solutions to the last part of the 18th-century or some kind of (re)invented 'folk' past. It was borne partly out of Adorno's critique of what he called the 'new conformism' of composers such as Stravinsky, Bartók and especially Hindemith, whose music was undemanding for listeners grown accustomed to 'artistic trash and compromised cultural values' (6). The music such composers wrote was hopelessly compromised by such conformism, 'feigning unabashed pretensions of 'modernity' and 'seriousness' [that had] adjusted to mass culture by means of calculated feeble-mindedness' (Ibid).

Strong words, and (in)famous ones, about new music more than half a century ago. But Adorno was not the first critic of the 'new' nor were Stravinsky, Bartók and Hindemith the first composers to be 'neo' – at least in terms of writing that broke from the immediate past (even as, in their case, it went further back into that past to find a voice). The title alone, for example, of Caccini's 1602 collection *Nuove Musiche* encapsulates the music's intention to rid itself of the excesses of late 16th-century polyphony; and he too had his detractors, including Giovanni Maria Artusi, 'a canon of San Salvatore in Bologna, [who] launched a violent campaign against the 'new school' [Caccini, Peri, and Monteverdi], entitling his diatribes *A Dissertation about the Imperfections of Modern Music*' (Lang 1941, 326). In the 19th century Schumann, Wagner, and Liszt among others sought very different ways to bring radical change to musical language. They thought of themselves as progressive, even revolutionary, and demanded a radical critique of music that often fell far short of their ideals: 'should I demand in a [new] work, poetic depth and originality throughout [I] would have a long search ahead of me', wrote Schumann in the late 1830s; 'hardly any music that has recently appeared would satisfy me' (quoted in Plantinga 1967, 184). Liszt in turn found Schumann conservative, noting the academicism of works such as Schumann's *Piano Quintet* (1842), which for Liszt had 'too much of Leipzig about it' (quoted in Boucourechliev 1959, 130).

In the 1970s and '80s composer Tom Johnson's reviews in the *Village Voice* championed much that was new in New York at that time. His piece on Steve Reich's *Drumming* (premiered at the Museum of Modern Art on 3 December 1971) was 'probably the first occasion that any of the minimalist composers were taken seriously by any of the New York press' and the work itself marked 'the real beginning of Steve Reich's composing career' (1989, 27). In his review of a John Cage concert (1972) given in the appropriately named New School auditorium, Johnson warned against getting too cosy with Cage, since

¹ With apologies to Edgard Varèse's famous dictum 'the modern composer refuses to die'.

² Dates are those of first performance. I am extremely grateful to the six composers for allowing me to peruse scores, most of which are self-published, and for lending me recordings of (in most cases) the first performance.

twenty years hence he would 'no doubt have found new ways of offending our senses, of bringing our values into question, and making us think' (39).

Thus when David Smith observed in *SAMUS* more than a decade ago that 'a great deal of South African composition suffers from a sense of re-running parts of the past century' (1995, 60), his criticism came within a long and complex debate about tradition and newness. Smith's comment was made in a very different context however from Adorno's in post-war Europe, Schumann's in mid 19th-century Germany, or Johnson's in Nixon-era NYC. Smith's comment reflected on a particular work written at a particular time and place: early post-apartheid South Africa. Although not a comment made on the general context of new works but rather on the aesthetic of one work in particular (Hans Roosenschoon's *Timbila*), the fact that Smith's remark revisits a problem of tradition versus originality within a 'new' context itself raises the question of newness in relation to tradition afresh. For in the history of new music over many decades, what is recognised as new, original, radical, progressive, or challenging, is as much a function of the compositional culture such recognition emerges from, as it is of the aesthetic of new work.

South African contexts for the reception and critical consumption of new music have not matched up at any point in history to those in which Johnson, Adorno, or even Schumann lived, but there has been no lack of new 'art music' compositions, especially in the past few decades, and at various times there has been good public or private support for genres both intimate (solo piano/chamber) and grand (symphony/opera); and there have been very good works. South Africa nevertheless has its own brands of parochialism, its own sense of where the cutting edge is, and more diverse notions of the 'traditional' than Adorno could have imagined. The context for reviewing new South African composition in the early 2000s is different both from that of the 1990s and (especially) from that of the apartheid years, 1960 to 1990. If one thinks for example of the kinds of new composition produced in the 1970s and '80s, the context – on the face of it potentially un-conducive to avant-garde work that offended or challenged, or 'brought values into question' (especially the values of the ruling Nationalist Party) – was nevertheless in many ways more supportive, I suggest, than it is now. In an era when *Black Beauty* and *Return of the Native* were banned books and many of South Africa's best jazz musicians went into exile in order to survive, new composition seemed to flourish. Works such as Arnold van Wyk's *Primavera: Symphonic Suite* (1960), Hubert du Plessis' *Suid Afrika: Nag en Daeraad* (1966) or Gideon Fagan's *Een Vaderland* (1978) were given generous state sponsorship and acclaimed in the press. But what is more interesting is that in an era dominated by minority privilege, controlled by a regime that was fascist and reactionary, a great deal of new composition was *far* from conformist, far from reactionary. It hung on much the same kind of compositional edge as the music Tom Johnson heard in New York during the 1970s. It espoused the late modernism of Paris and Darmstadt and for the most part it was *musically* radical, often challenging in its dissonance. One thinks for example of Peter Klatzow's *Phoenix Symphony* (1972), or Graham Newcater's *Temple Music* (1973).

Compare this anomalous situation, too, with the repression of musical radicalism in another dictatorship at a slightly earlier time, communist Hungary, where the last of György Ligeti's *Six Bagatelles for Wind Quintet* was not performed in 1956 because it 'still contained too many minor seconds' (Ligeti 1998a). The response, as Ligeti noted in respect to his string quartet *Métamorphoses Nocturnes* (1953-54) was that such pieces were 'intended only for my bottom drawer ... [T]he fact that everything 'modern' was banned (just as it had once been banned in Nazi Germany) merely served to increase the attractiveness of the concept of modernity for non-conformist artists ... To work for one's bottom drawer was regarded as an honour' (Ligeti 1998b). It can be said that the situation was the opposite in Poland at the same time (viz. Lutoslawski, Penderecki et al) and

therefore Hungary was the anomaly under communism, rather than South Africa under apartheid, but then there is the case of the USSR and the treatment of great composers like Shostakovich, which further complicates this argument.

At any rate, it did not seem necessary for composers to have a 'bottom drawer' in apartheid South Africa; but that aside, my present evidence does rest on works aired rather than suppressed, and I stand corrected if there *were* examples of conscious self-censorship, in 'European' art music at least. Perhaps – and this is my point – composers were more free in South Africa during our dictatorship to espouse a modernist avant-garde aesthetic *because* art music was the purview of a small handful, the prerogative of a charmed circle of adherents able to explore the cutting edge, not despite, but because of South Africa's internal and external modes of isolation. Perhaps a dissenting voice in such works even mattered more then than it does now, was more *possible* then? Perhaps composers were encouraged to be 'new' (and we know that conductor Anton Hartman played a significant role in such encouragement) because such dissent did not really matter, or indeed gave the regime a radicalism in art that it lacked politically, which helped to mask the Calvinist underbelly?

For whom did works composed in 1960s thru '80s South Africa matter, then? They mattered to the composers obviously, and they mattered to institutions supporting them, such as the SABC. But this condition came at a price. Writing on the twentieth anniversary of one of several major (white) new music events in Johannesburg in the early 1980s – the First SABC Contemporary Music Festival at which the presiding genius was one of the most radical composers of the age, Morton Feldman – Mary Rörich slammed the earlier music's elitism:

1983 was not a good time to bring 'new music' to South Africa: we were too white, too blinkered, too needy, too up our own fundamental orifices. It is a different matter in 2003. There is no longer a South African 'international avant-garde' in music. It is, thankfully, quite dead. Its inability to engage with context and change, its lack of generosity and elitism are the final nails in its coffin (2003, 11).

Whatever the reason for the international avant-garde and however inward-looking it might now appear, it was nevertheless acknowledged to exist. But, as David Smith observed, it was fast disappearing in 1995. So where is it now? Although good craftsmanship is still the hallmark of South African composition, the aesthetic edge manifest in new work seems – from recent orchestral music that has emerged – to have shifted considerably. One of the major tendencies in new composition today is still what Smith noted: re-running (or in Adorno's harsher terms 'regressing into') the past, or into the 'traditional'; but now reinvented in a post-apartheid context. One reason for this might be that a decade after the new South African democracy the context composers write in is less conducive to the radical edge that dominated the '70s and '80s; orchestral culture, especially, is now more threatened, and thus works written for orchestra are perhaps likely to be more accommodating to the public ear. The change is also perhaps due to an obligation some composers feel towards their post-1990 role as what Stefans Grové calls 'Afrika-mens' (1997); so one could argue that the flavour of new South African orchestral music is due to the exposure of composition to new racial and cultural imperatives and new market forces. As Adorno noted, though, the danger this brings with it is a new aesthetic of conformity. It can obviously be argued that Stravinsky's neo-classicism for example might be read as an act of critique, rather than a form of atavism. But whereas that may be the case, my reading of the works discussed here does not reveal any kind of ambivalence: their intention appears quite straightforward. These composers are not reacting against an existing musical order like Stravinsky was when sharpening his anti-romantic critique of Mahler.

It is against the background of such questions that I turn, with some trepidation, to examine half a dozen new South African scores for orchestra or chamber orchestra written during the past four years.³ What is immediately clear from a first glance at these scores is the healthy state of the art. There is no shortage of good craftswo/men, composers immersed in techniques summoned up with no apparent effort to write anything from a pastiche film score to a large-scale symphonic work, from a solo song to a massive choral work. This continues to put indigenous composition in the strong position it had reached some fifty years ago, according to Hartman. Writing about the emergence of this position in the early 20th century he notes, '[t]he performing arts have developed very slowly in our country... during the 19th-century dozens of amateurs and music teachers wrote and published large quantities of insignificant little compositions, but there is no artistic value to speak of ... [I]t took until the 1930s before music existed that could truly be called art' (Hartman 2004/5[1954], 10). It took until the 1970s and '80s though, as we have seen, to create a climate of internationalism in new South African music. Also a healthy sign, and continuing in the 2000s, is the range of aesthetics or idioms playing on the South African compositional stage. Two traditions still predominate – neo-romanticism and modernism – but we can also find aspects of impressionism, neoclassicism, folklorism and cross-culturalism on one side, and minimalism, reductionism, experimentalism and postmodernism on the other. The once predominant idioms such as serialism and aleatoricism as represented by Boulez and Cage have taken a back seat. A 'mere discussion of categories' is less important, however, than discussing 'the concrete crystallization of such categories in the structure of the music itself' as Adorno puts it (1994, 4); so it is to the 'music itself' that I now turn.

Reviving earlier 20th-century styles: the cases of Peter Klatzow and Hendrik Hofmeyr

While Klatzow was probably *the* 'enfant terrible' of the South African music establishment of the 1970s, his most recent orchestral essay *Three Paintings of Irma Stern* (2004-5) is located far away from the dissonant sound-world of *Interactions I* (1971) or the *Phoenix Symphony* (1972), the former premiered in Johannesburg in 1973 and the latter in 1974 (I was present at both performances). The earlier works referenced pointillism, tone clusters, 'found objects' such as tonal quotations, and other avant-garde techniques of the time; and although no-one publicly expressed distaste for the music (as far as I am aware) it did seriously challenge audiences, and players too. In recent years Klatzow has talked openly about the conscious decision he made as he approached the age of fifty to write music that was more consciously audience-friendly. He does so, in large part, by going back into the past. What is immediately striking about *Three Paintings of Irma Stern* is the use of a language reminiscent of the French school of the early 20th-century – for example the exquisite soundworld of Charles Koechlin (1867-1950) as exemplified in orientalist-inflected works like *Les Bandar-log* from the *Jungle Book* cycle – to paint impressions of Stern's canvases in sound. The pieces are keenly orchestrated using fairly small forces (single wind, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, trombone, strings, and an array of percussion instruments), but the instruments are used transparently as they reflect on the paintings. They espouse a language or syntax that reflects the new listener, the current market, as I have suggested above. They look unashamedly back at the past: in the preface Klatzow speaks of the Irma Stern Museum in Rosebank (Cape Town) as a 'place of very fond musical memories', a place from which he looks at himself in the past as well as at Stern's paintings. This is beautiful, reflective, often ravishing music, but its very act of wooing leaves behind a more challenging intellectual realm.

³ Regrettably a seventh work, Phelani Mnomyi's *Zizu Lethu!* (2004) for soprano and tenor soloists, choir and orchestra, orchestrated by John Simon and Christopher James, had to be omitted from this review as the score could not be obtained from the composer.

Such a reaction against the avant-garde and a search for a more listener-friendly approach was not uncommon in other international music in the later years of the 20th-century. For example formerly avant-garde Australian composer Richard Meale, now in his seventies, recently wrote a work called *Three Miró Pieces*, recalling the language of French Impressionism, played at the 2005 ISCM World Music Days in Zagreb. Other examples long before this could include Americans Henry Cowell who abandoned dissonant chord clusters and playing on the strings of the piano for a more folksy American style, (exemplified in his *Fuguing Tunes* of the 1950s and '60s), George Antheil – ‘bad boy of American music’ – who abandoned aeroplane propellers and drumming on the piano for something more tuneful, and former serialist George Rochberg, whose monumental *Third String Quartet* (1965) was cast in the language of the late Beethoven Quartets. The antithesis of all these composers would be Stravinsky (!) and Copland, who, in their later years, abandoned neo-classicism and the American ‘prairie style’ respectively, for serialism. It is worth noting that Stravinsky and Copland have outlasted the others.

The representation of painting in sound has been one of Klatzow’s ongoing concerns: *Still Life with Moonbeams* for orchestra, his cello concerto *The Temptation of St Anthony* and *The World of Paul Klee* span several centuries in terms of source of inspiration, but all used the language of the 1970s. The Sterns are also paintings of a bygone era, but unlike these three earlier works the musical language of *Three Paintings* has here regressed to a period almost contemporary with the canvasses themselves. Perhaps this is a deliberately stylised gesture, the move to a language concomitant with its medium of inspiration. The first piece, *Arab Priest*, is awash like the painting with orientalism: the declamatory style, the synthesised sound of the sitar and the melodic lines with widely-spaced doublings recalling early 20th-century French composers’ impressions of the Orient. The use of an African-inflected flute melody at the opening and close of the second piece, *Congo River*, and the expansive violin melody which follows the opening and precedes the close, puts this listener in mind of another river portrait, Smetana’s *Vltava*. A faster more percussive middle section provides contrast along the river’s journey, although anyone who has seen the Congo River while flying over the DRC might find the Stern-Klatzow portrait somewhat rarefied. Klatzow describes the final piece, *Peach Blossom*, as ‘an opportunity [to] create a little study in orchestral texture which also demonstrates the exuberance of nature in full flower’ (Klatzow 2005), a statement that affirms the link between music and programme in the work as a whole. Indeed it is no affront to the music to describe the whole set as music driven by the narrativity inherent in the paintings. This requires a kind of ‘translation’ as Klatzow puts it, which ‘poses special problems. A painting is a frozen moment in time; a piece of music is an ongoing temporal flow which begins and ends. A painting may only imply a narrative; a piece of music approximates it’ (Ibid). The music tends towards an episodic, film-music approach to composition (reinforced in *Arab Priest*, for example, by the way strings and synthesiser provide the musical foundation), but is certainly not intended as film music.

One of the greatest ‘Soviet’ composers of the 20th-century, Alfred Schnittke, divided his career between writing film music and art music, and typically drew on the film experience when writing for the concert hall. He became known for an approach he dubbed ‘polystylism’, a conscious eclecticism first used in *Violin Sonata No 2 ‘quasi una sonata’* (1968). David Fanning suggests that Schnittke’s ‘interest in the tension between styles was further nourished by his admiration for Mahler (‘because he refrained from the stylistic purism of the time’) and Stravinsky (especially the ‘paradoxical musical logic’ of his neo-classicism)’ (Fanning and Schnittke quoted in Fanning 1986, 3).

If Klatzow’s music borrows eclectically from earlier languages, Mahler’s is not one of them. For Hendrik Hofmeyr it definitely is. His *Sinfonia Africana* for soprano solo, chorus

and large orchestra is cast in three movements and lasts about three-quarters of an hour. It was first performed on 19 August 2004 by the Cape Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Leslie Dunner, with soprano soloist Sabina Mossolow and the Stellenbosch University Choir. From the very first notes this work must strike anyone familiar with the symphonic repertoire as a homage to Gustav Mahler and other early 20th-century composers. It, too, has a narrative, but one driven by the ideology and language of the three Afrikaans poems used (Marais, Opperman, van den Heever) rather than by visual imagery. It is scored for a fairly large orchestra including specified string numbers (12,10,8,6,6) to balance the battery of winds and percussion. In the composer's words it 'is conceived as a single trajectory, leading from a vision of sorrow and despair to one of hope and spiritual renaissance' (Hofmeyr 2004). The reference to other styles not only articulates that trajectory but also reinforces Hofmeyr's passion for late romantic music and his relative disinterest in post-war European developments. Unlike Schnittke's polystylism in which musics grind abundantly and almost haphazardly against each other, Hofmeyr's referencing of earlier styles is far more limited and introverted, almost obsessive, and I feel that this works against the use of intertextuality as a technique (if that indeed is the intention of the piece).

An insistent military motif reminiscent of the main motif in the 1st movement of Mahler's *Sixth Symphony*, pervades much of Hofmeyr's 1st movement – *Quasi marcia funebre* – and underscores the pessimism of Eugene Marais' *The Song of South Africa*, set in this movement (see Example 1).

Quasi marcia funebre ♩ = c.58-63

Cts (rhythm doubled by snare & field drums)

Tpt. *f*

ppp

Timp 6

Pno (rhythm doubled by tenor & bass drums)

pp

poco accel.

cresc. poco a poco

Strings, Piano, Timpani & Drums continue

+ Tpt, Picc, Obs

+ Bsns

a tempo

Tpt.

+ Hrn, Tpt, Tbn, *f*

Hrp gliss

Strings continue

fp

Ex 1 Hofmeyr *Sinfonia Africana* 1st movt. bars 3-9.

The saturation of the tritone both as a melodic interval and as the basis of much of the harmony is sometimes wearying, especially in a movement with a preponderance of fairly unvaried tonality and with the pitch E used repeatedly in the bass, even given a few brief excursions to other keys. The sense of defeat over the individual this work projects is represented musically in the 2nd movement by the soprano soloist's struggle to be heard above the orchestra (on the recording of the première). Here a lighter accompaniment might have worked well – the Mahlerian chamber music quality? – but this movement does provide relief after the onslaught of the 1st, where the (perhaps deliberately) bottom-heavy orchestration places enormous demands on the listener's ability to connect: it puts one in mind of several of the songs in Mahler's *Das Knaben Wunderhorn – Revelge, Der Tambours' sell* and *Wo die schönen Trompetten blasen. Revelge* of course also has a link to the *Nachtmusik I* movement in Mahler's *Seventh Symphony*, another militaristic type of soundworld invoked.

In the 3rd movement both soprano soloist and choir join the orchestra. Here, surprisingly it is the choir that is more often overpowered. Generally it is hard to hear the sung text in any of the movements (although those who know the poems well wouldn't be fazed). This may partly be the difficulty of projecting an Afrikaans text in a musical language more suited to German or Italian words, but is largely the need to project above such a dense orchestral sound. Though peppered with modern-sounding harmonies – in terms of texture, orchestration, one senses Mahler looking over Hofmeyr's shoulder, while the angular melodic writing coupled with the block movement of harmonies often summons up the soundworld of Olivier Messiaen – and modern orchestral effects such as string glissandi, the soprano line at bar 56 puts us firmly back in the world of Mahler, as does the accompaniment here; and the militaristic nature of the closing music with chorus recalls the 1st movement though without the tritone feature.

There is something forbidding about this aesthetic and the way it is presented orchestrally. This serves the narrative but brings with it a sense of exclusion, a lack of openness, foreign to Mahler and other early 20th-century composers for whom Hofmeyr has such an affinity. It is not a sonic environment that seduces. Grant Olwage, reviewing Hofmeyr's *Flute and Piano Concertos* wrote, '[i]n the end, what left me unsatisfied [was] an absence of any personal voice' (2002/3, 26); and in the same way here too I found the music more generalised ideological statement than personal expression; here is a public rather than idiolectic voice. It challenged my receptivity, then, but not in the sense Tom Johnson used of Cage's work – of bringing musical values into question, of making me (re)think the force of music in contemporary South Africa. It had, rather, the effect of reinforcing a sense of alienation (a word Adorno might approve although I think he too would find the style retrogressive). Hofmeyr's work is totally sincere and the scale of the conception is admirable and the execution formidable, but a contemporary (21st-century) listener might balk at the level of control, structural pre-planning and dense orchestration.

What about the title? What (whose) 'Africa' is being evoked? The 'surging gesture evolved from an evocation of African drumming' (Hofmeyr 2004) is the only indigenous musical clue to the title. It may have been a useful starting point for the composer but once brought to the prospective listener as intention it could too easily be read as tokenism. For me this does not resonate with the larger agenda of *Sinfonia Africana*, the 'spiritual renaissance'. Nor does it relate to the use of conservative Afrikaans texts from a bygone era or the use of an Italian title for the symphony. The impression is of a broad conception, but *Sinfonia Africana* is surprisingly short, shorter than the shortest Mahler symphony at any rate. Its density gives it the feeling of an epic, and this is largely because there is little respite in the use of certain instrumental combinations. Hofmeyr's tribute to Mahler, especially at the level of orchestral writing, is in marked contrast for example to Berio's homage to Mahler

in the 3rd movement of *Sinfonia* (1968), where he literally superimposes the Scherzo of Mahler's *Second Symphony* over extracts from Beethoven, Berlioz, Bruckner, Ravel, Strauss, Debussy, the Second Viennese School, Stravinsky, and Stockhausen. No-one can repeat the same trick of course, which is in a sense an extension of the deceit of neo-classicism deplored by Adorno, but at the same time, drawing on an earlier composer without any irony at all forces confrontation with the issue of 're-running the past century'. Whereas literature and the fine arts (including perhaps film) are concerned nowadays almost entirely with new discourses, it seems odd that new music is shackled to the classics, especially by its referentiality. That is where the discourse tends to lie, and perhaps that is because it is where the listeners want it to lie: in the context of old music against which new orchestral music is often performed but at some level cannot compete. Contemporary *musical* issues of how music challenges, offends, or critiques are far away; as far away, perhaps, as the musical language of *Sinfonia Africana* itself. To take us back to one of my earlier points: the question of newness is not in the music only, but in its context.

Cross-cultural composition in a pluralist culture: the cases of Jeanne Zaidel-Rudolph and Stefans Grové

In terms of world trends the appropriation of African musical material as a compositional resource is to be expected in South Africa. There have been many ways of doing this in the 20th-century, many models for local composers to follow: the influence of Indonesian culture on American and Australian composers pioneered by Debussy and Colin McPhee; the return to East European folk musics by East European composers pioneered by Bartók; and the incorporation of Mexican, Cuban and other South American musics by indigenous composers such as Revueltas, Chavéz, Ginastera, and Villa-Lobos.

Two composers who have followed the cross-cultural path in South Africa more consistently than others are Jeanne Zaidel-Rudolph and Stefans Grové. Both work in the Gauteng area (as opposed to the Western Cape of Klatzow and Hofmeyr). Grové produces four or five pieces a year while Zaidel-Rudolph as a full-time composition teacher is able to write far fewer. Nevertheless one that stands out in the last few years is her exploration of cross-culturalism through material generated by the Ngqoko singers/composers of Lady Frere in the Eastern Cape. While the most legendary of these, Nofinishi Dywili, died in 2002, a year before the composition of *Lifecycle* for choir and chamber ensemble, the tradition in which Nofinishi worked is sufficiently strong and well enough researched (especially by ethnomusicologist David Dargie) for it to be presented in Zaidel-Rudolph's piece on almost equal terms with the newly-composed material.

A precursor of *Lifecycle*, where a group of orchestral players enfold a group of 'traditional' African performers and plays notated musical material drawn from that source, is Hans Roosenschoon's *Timbila* (1985). The earlier work places a Chopi *timbila* (xylophone) orchestra within the ranks of a symphony orchestra and subjects the Mozambican ensemble's material to twelve-note and other procedures, drawing out from it at the climax of the orchestral discourse a symbolic parallel to the children's song 'Frère Jacques'. Zaidel-Rudolph's work on the other hand is no showpiece: it uses small and discreet instrumental forces, chosen to balance the voices of the Ngqoko singers, who as soloists are traditionally accompanied by the very quiet *uhadi* – as quiet as the Western clavichord. Despite the delicacy of the writing however at least one reviewer of the first performance discerned an imbalance: 'the soft-grained dynamics of the primordial sound of the solo-singer's voice could hardly stand up against the Western instruments' evocation of nature's sounds' (Boekkooi 2003). Boekkooi speculated that this was not the intention of the work: '[c]ould it be that the Eastern Cape women felt slightly inhibited by the

discipline of the Western traditions?’ (Ibid). What he says implies ‘power’ of the traditions, since *uhadi* music itself hardly lack discipline. His comment however – including even his raising of this issue – speaks to the issue at the heart of cross-cultural exchange collaboration: balance of power.

The balance of creative power, also economic power (fees, royalties, etc.), is invariably weighted in favour of the Western composer. (These imbalances were there in *Timbila*, as in Rahbari’s *Half Moon* in the 1980s.) The Ngqoko ladies are no pushovers – they are composers in their own right and well travelled musicians – but their intellectual property has been adapted and incorporated in *Lifecycle* into a much larger musical canvas and along with this, despite perhaps every intention of the composer, there is a political appropriation. Evidence for this comes partly from the treatment of their music but also from the fact that they are not credited on the title page of the score (as is the case with *Timbila*). Very little of the Xhosa text is given in the score although it is clear from the recording of the première that a good deal of the original has been retained. I understand that Zaidel-Rudolph did pre-compositional work in *Lady Frere*, listening to performances and transcribing the Ngqoko music from videos and sound recordings; but the integration of material is fairly unprocessed, quite ‘hands-off’ – perhaps out of a sense of respect, perhaps from lack of time to assimilate it.

The incorporative strategy mostly adopted towards the Xhosa material is that of treating the Ngqoko singers as a separate group, performing their music while the orchestra plays repeated bars ‘till ready’ to come in with newly-composed material. This might be read as a somewhat minimalist approach, which one would not normally associate with Zaidel-Rudolph, in the light of sumptuous works such as *Tempus Fugit* (1986) – with its echoes of Messiaen – and *Sefirot Symphony* (1992) – a programmatic work evoking the kabbalistic spheres in Jewish mysticism. But here is a work based on musical sources that are themselves cyclic and which has the title *Lifecycle*. This inevitably perhaps creates a space in which to tease out the basic tenets of what I prefer to call repetitive or systemic music. Classic minimalism as exemplified in the pioneering work of Reich, Riley, and Glass from the 1960s and ’70s, has been considerably misunderstood in South Africa. Repeat a chord more than three times – as even Stravinsky frequently did – and you’re categorised ‘minimalist’ (I too have been). When Kevin Volans’ *Mbira*, *Matepe* and *White Man Sleeps* were first heard in London, critic Keith Potter described them as ‘Steve Reich entangled in the African bush’ (1982) probably because, to this scholar of American minimalism they repeat patterns in much the same way as Reich or Glass. But what we have in Zaidel-Rudolph is rather a sequence of minimalist structures, each with a different character and different repeated patterns without the monolithic repetitiveness of Reich and Glass. It is this difference, too, that allows the music its narrativity, necessary for the notion of ‘lifecycle’ embedded in the texts.

There are moments when Zaidel-Rudolph’s harmonic structures are at odds with the minimalist framework however: for example in the opening oboe solo (reminiscent of Edgard Varèse – the opening of *Octandre*), or the instrumental section with side drum around letter P, two thirds of the way into the work (evoking Satie’s music for the Dadaist film *Cinema*). It is as if one had literally eavesdropped on the culture of rural South Africa through the lens of modernist Europe. There is an unlikely point at which the worlds of the 1960s ‘avant-garde’ and the ‘ancient’ (but in this context no less avant-garde) music of *Lady Frere* do meet: the recycling of the mid-century European technique of ‘freely repeated’ bars or phrases in a systemic environment. Very often the repeated patterns are performed as a compositional device by the Ngqoko performers while the Western instrumentalists embellish or elaborate, often in a contrapuntal fashion. The result is sometimes a heterophony not uncharacteristic of Xhosa music, or, indeed, of much that is

postmodern in European contemporary music. The passage shown in Example 2 begins at letter S on the score, from the penultimate section called 'Mother's Song', a setting of *Latshon'ilanga (The sun has set)/Malingatshoni (May it not set)*. It clearly shows some of the aleatoric options available to the musicians.

* NB: Several more cycles occur using figures I, III and IV combined with figure II. Instruments can choose ANY previous figures to play, or tacet.

x 3

Cycles 8, 9, 10
After ca. 2 mins (+/- 7 cycles) Winds 3 cycles only

[S]

The musical score is for 'Mother's Song' and is divided into three cycles. It features the following parts and instructions:

- Flute:** Starts with a box labeled 'S'. Dynamics include *ppp* and *pp*. Performance instruction: "Ad lib Flute No. 11".
- Bass Clarinet:** Dynamics include *pp*. Performance instruction: "Continue ad lib with breaks".
- Marimba:** Dynamics include *pp*.
- Perc.** Performance instruction: "Continue ad lib with breaks".
- Violins:** Performance instructions: "ord." and "sul pont.".
- Cello:** Performance instructions: "ord." and "sul pont.".
- Choir:** No specific performance instructions are noted.

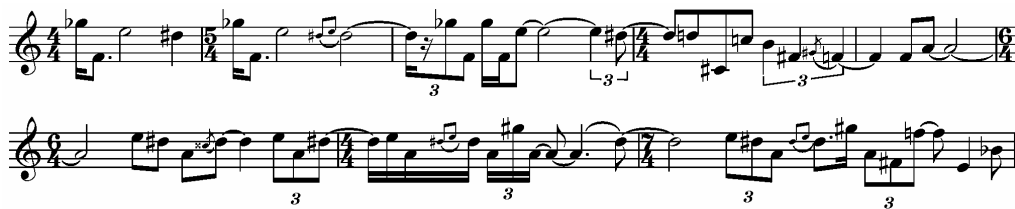
Ex 2 Zaidel-Rudolph *Lifecycle* Fig. S

It is here that an important compositional and aesthetic issue arises, concerning the way a composer relinquishes control. I imagine that the notation of the vocal parts – an ethnomusicological exercise more than anything – is there for the convenience of the instrumental performers rather than for the Xhosa singers (in whose tradition material is not usually repeated exactly the same). Thus structural control is ceded to them at such points; similarly in the 'ad lib' repetitions of the instrumentalists, who may do more or less what they want with the phrases given to them. The conductor may exercise some control, but ultimately what we are left with here is a semi-controlled aleatoricism, such as that often found in mid 20th-century music.

Stefans Grové's *Three Meditations* (No 29 in his ongoing project *Music from Africa*) is also written for a small orchestra. Listening, for comparison, to some of Grové's earlier works like *Dansrapsodie – 'n Kosmopolitiese Stad* (1985), a musical portrait of Pretoria, I was reminded of Gershwin's *An American in Paris* and similar orchestral impressions: not surprising given that Grové spent a good deal of his early professional life in the US. But he has now lived in South Africa for many more years and *Music from Africa* is clear evidence of his constantly shifting relationship with the continent. The *Three Meditations* are entitled 'Tranquillity of Being', 'Nocturnal Invocations', and 'Distant Music'. Each is scored for a different combination of alto flute, bass clarinet, percussion, harp and strings –

beautiful combinations of colours and idiomatic uses of instruments although there is not a great deal to distinguish the character of one piece from another, and even the titles seem in some ways interchangeable.

Each movement opens with a falling declamatory solo or duo for wind. Several composers reviewed here share a fondness for this gesture, one that recalls Varèse, as I have pointed out. For Grové it is one of the links to African tradition; maybe it is also for Zaidel-Rudolph. What I suggest here is that it is from Varèse (who was probably not trying to sound African) that this 'striking opening' was learnt (see Exs. 3a, 3b, and 3c).



Ex 3a Varèse *Octandre* I, bars 1-8, oboe solo

Ex 3b Zaidel-Rudolph *Lifecycle* Prelude, bars 1-6, oboe solo

Ex 3c Grové *Meditations* I, bars 1-8, bass clarinet solo

What these and many similar examples in the works under discussion articulate is a kind of modernist national collective memory. This continues to inform the work of South African composers several decades after it ceased to be the European lingua franca. Is it simply a case of 'refusing to budge' or is there some deeper meaning? This is the language that composers listened to, were taught in, and were encouraged to use fifty or more years ago. The way that this language is now used is not ironic, not pastiche or quotation, but unconscious reliance on signifiers that gave music a cutting edge when that language was current. It is an aesthetic nostalgia, perhaps, one that chimes with early 20th-century neo-classicism and can thus be negatively interpreted as retrogressive (in Adorno's terms). There is also something in it akin to Schoenberg's hankering after tonality, even (or particularly) when he had adopted the twelve-note system, or his longing to be 'popular', as Peter Franklin has argued (2000, 148-54).

Composition is a lonely space, and South Africa a brave new world. Perhaps for a new nation seeking (and not having yet found) a new identity, such aesthetic regression is not surprising; perhaps it is a quest for a new nationalism, a new sense of belonging. But compare, for example, what happened in America in the early 20th-century when, dominated until that time by European musical language, Charles Ives pioneered an experimental tradition (also partly by using indigenous music) that became America's new 'vernacular' art music (a more mainstream, but also vernacular, music was pioneered by Bernstein, Barber, Copland and others). Taken up by some composers who became the 20th-century's greats – Cowell, Crawford Seeger, Cage, Feldman, Reich, Riley among others – this radical new aesthetic travelled back to Europe in the 1970s and successfully challenged the modernist tradition there. Is it too much to ask of a country to expect a new radicalism rather than a new conservatism? Or is a world that once recognised avant-garde composition and provided the context without composers fearing spiritual or artistic death, simply not there any more?

In comparison with *Lifecycle*, which like Hofmeyr's Mahler, wears Africa on its sleeve, Grové's *Meditations* show that, as with most of Grové's works of the last two decades or so, references to Africa are more in the composer's imagination and titles than in its 'concrete crystallization' in the music. I was told a few years ago that Grové spends a lot of time listening to recordings of African music as preparatory work for composition (Gerrit Jordaan, pers. comm. 1998). He had been interested in this subject since at least 1952, when he argued that 'since we have revealed a paucity among our own [Afrikaans] folk songs, if we want to achieve a national idiom in its primary essence, we will have to turn to our indigenous [African] culture' (1952, 74; my translation). He was conscious enough of the pitfalls however to ask, even then, 'is it *possible* and at the same time *desirable* that we, who have so far maintained a policy of social segregation between white and non-white in the preservation of our Western culture, now suddenly want to create a national idiom with the help of the black nation?' (Ibid).

It is a question that has resounded down the decades. One can however now argue that 'the black nation' has itself created a national idiom – choral music – and the difference between 1952 and 2002 is evident in the way dramatised choral presentation (the new 'operatic' music of Khumalo or the Tirisano competition) has become the new national voice, with (wonderful irony) 'the help of the white nation' in the form of arrangers such as Christopher James, Robert Maxym, and Michael Hankinson. Fifty years ago Grové felt African music melodically offered 'few possibilities for development in our highly organised Western music [although] the rhythmic impulse [is] interesting and perhaps distinctive enough to provide a stimulus for our art music' (Ibid). This was thirty years before his oft-quoted Damascus Road experience that saw the beginning of the *Music from Africa* project. And in fact as several commentators have pointed out it is the melodic surface of African music that Grové seems to use the most (see Rörich 1987, James 1992, Muller 2000). It is notable that Australia's grand old man of composition (Peter Sculthorpe) went through a similar experience in relation to aboriginal music, going on to win new audiences internationally as a result of his new intercultural aesthetic.

While not necessarily equating Grové's substantial pieces with something as lightweight as Leopold Godowsky's *Triakontameron: 30 Stimmungen und Bilder* (completed in 1920) whose titles include 'Nacht in Tangier' and 'Äthiopische Serenade', the issue of African representation is uncannily the same. Grové has already produced a set of piano pieces *Songs and Dances from Africa* (1988/91) with titles like 'Night Song in the Distance', 'Quiet Song in the Twilight' and 'Mbira Song Carried by the Night Breezes' – titles that speak to more consciousness of distance than Godowsky's but with the same symbolic intent. It is equally hard to hear Africa in either composer, were it not for the titles, which signify a romance rather than a representation. In a sense, then, we are back to the aesthetic

of programme music, with descriptive titles denoting an imagined cultural space. Above all, while Grové's music is honest and beautifully crafted and his intentions sincere, this is not music that speaks innovatively for our time. The boundaries are not pushed much further forward musically than Varèse had pushed them in the 1920s. It is music distinguished for its grace of acceptance, rather than for its radicalism.

Not trying to change the world: the case of Michael Hankinson

Michael Hankinson's half-hour long *A Mandela Portrait* (2004), written to mark the tenth anniversary of democracy in South Africa is cross-cultural in a very different vein. British-born Hankinson is a naturalised South African, and what he wears on his sleeve most conspicuously is a new patriotism. Peppered with extracts from the speeches of Nelson Mandela, the heart of this music is decidedly on its sleeve. It is well written, well orchestrated light music, colourful, unashamedly opportunistic, programmatic, and populist. Where Klatzow's work only hints at the world of the cinema, Hankinson's might be read as music for an imaginary documentary (alluded to in a DVD recording lent to me by the composer which includes film clips of Mandela projected above the orchestra). The music's main purpose is to evoke atmosphere and to underscore and illustrate the text – speeches of Nelson Mandela selected by librettist Welcome Msomi, narrator in the first performance.

As an arranger and film composer this is a natural path for Hankinson to take in a concert work. The only other such work of his I have come across is the orchestral-choral *Music for the Republic Festival 1981* where I sensed an Elgarian influence perhaps in the choral writing (not surprising for someone who began life as a choral scholar in an English cathedral). Hankinson writes in the programme note for *A Mandela Portrait*: '[t]he creation of this piece was part of my ongoing desire to develop a musical style that is identifiably South African whilst incorporating the practices of Western music' (2004). He mentions Copland's *Lincoln Portrait* (1945) as a model in its use of political speeches, and his own piece is indeed greatly reliant on the language of Copland's earlier work – the 'prairie style', pressed into service by various South African composers striving to find a national idiom. After the opening orchestral music, the orchestration scales down to a few repeated woodwind figures and an 'African drum' is introduced as the narrator begins the first speech: 'From the hills and valleys of the Eastern Cape, sounds of the magical instrument herald the beginning of a long walk'. The orchestra continues with similar music to the opening, but Hollywood is only an un-African modulation away. The listener is brought back to African earth by a prettily harmonized tune for flute and harp which then turns into something like a Viennese waltz. Then the next speech about Mandela's youth is underscored by plaintive 'Transkei-hills-and-valleys' music for oboe and lower strings, while later speeches are accompanied by vamp-till-ready repeated bars. The text as indicated in the score does not always line up with the music in the recorded performance that I have, so I guess the narrator got lost sometimes. And in a sense it doesn't matter in this wonderful heterophony of signifiers.

Part 1 ends with a bombastic, brass-dominated chorale following the words 'but if it needs be it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die' and Part 2 opens with interlocking 6/8 pentatonic melodies for flute and clarinet, more 'oriental' than African. So what makes all of this sound South African? As with many musical allusions, title is the main signifier, in tandem with some parallel fourths. But such musical codes – pentatonicism, fourths – are dangerous for they can mean entirely different things in different contexts. As Carl Dahlhaus has pointed out, the idea that national character resides in its folk music is questionable, since many so-called 'essential' national qualities are in fact trans-national, 'seen as 'national' [only] because the study of [that particular] folk music was carried out

[at] a national level' (1980, 95). Bagpipe drones and sharpened 4ths can sound 'typically Polish when they occur in Chopin and typically Norwegian when they occur in Grieg' (Ibid); so just as what is recognised as progressive or challenging in new music is a function of context, so too is what is recognised as national.

Hankinson's opening material and the way in which he deploys it sounds 'African' in the same way that Kevin Volans's early work did, through certain melodic patterns and quasi-interlocking techniques. And just as Volans's transition from the two-harpsichord to string-quartet version of *White Man Sleeps* made the music sound more European (the medium as message), so too does the orchestral sonority of *A Mandela Portrait* make Hankinson's Africanisms sound American. I'm not convinced that the composer has succeeded in his avowed intent to 'lay to rest the 'hoary old chestnut' that [the symphony] orchestra is 'Eurocentric'' (Hankinson 2004) Its use in this work is, more than anything, 'Hollywood-centric'. I accept the composer's point that 'I'm not trying to change the world; I leave that to you guys' (pers. comm., 2005); but he *is* forced at some level to reference what the other guys do, the materials they use, and the public space in which they do it.

Painting the surface: the case of Kevin Volans

Completing the half dozen, we come to a work that refers little to the early 20th-century and not at all to Africa. Kevin Volans's use of indigenous African material in his earlier work put both himself and South Africa on the international compositional map in the 1980s. But this music – and indeed some of his more recent – was as much indebted to the language of Stravinsky and Debussy, even more to Feldman. The peculiar mix that defines Volans's voice is apparent in *Concerto for Double Orchestra* (2002). He eschews the word 'style' yet his music is almost always instantly recognisable, mostly from its striking quality, the uncompromisingness of its repetitions, and the repository of quite familiar pitch aggregates upon which he draws. His syntax is different from any of the composers so far considered, and also quite distinct in the global marketplace of new composition. There are several reasons for this. One is a technique of composing 'at the surface' of the sound, not in its 'layers'. Another is the context of his work. Based in Ireland (and secondarily in South Africa) Volans has the advantage of receiving commissions from European orchestras such as the BBC Symphony, the Ulster Orchestra, and the Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra; and *Concerto for Double Orchestra* was premièred by the BBC Symphony Orchestra in the Barbican Centre London in March 2002. So the virtuosity of the performers he writes for and the sophistication of his audiences and critics immediately permits a more radical approach, one might argue, than a composer working in South Africa.

Volans's increasing concerns have been 'getting rid of form' and 'getting rid of content', eschewing 'style'. But obviously all three persist, more so 'content' in the sense of 'sound'. Form may be more instinctive than it was in Volans's post-serial phase in the 1980s, but it is there. However, it is not narrative form, and certainly not highly controlled. While all the foregoing works in this discussion are distinctly narrative in construction, Volans's *Concerto for Double Orchestra* is quite the contrary. The surface is relatively simple – a flat surface, without the conventional foreground and background that makes Schenkerian analysis possible. It consists almost entirely of simple chords made up of fourths and fifths, sometimes with added sevenths, ninths above the bass. This belies the ingenuity of the conception, however, and even more so the difficulty of the piece. It received a fairly perfunctory première according to the composer, for the very reason that the conductor was deceived by the 'simplicity' of that surface (Volans, pers. comm.).

It is scored for a fairly large orchestra: triple woodwind, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, 2 percussionists, piano, harp and strings (8,8,8,8,4). The orchestra is divided into two:

A on the left and B on the right with a gap between the two (Berio and Boulez also experimented with such arrangements from the 1950s onwards). The opposition between two forces is exploited by passing chords back and forth rather like echoes, since the chords are for the most part alternately loud and soft. Occasionally as for example between letters B and C, there are melodic fragments of four notes, but these are arpeggiations of the chords themselves. Sometimes, for example between letters C and D, the surface is emptier, with straightforward repetitions and a constant (soft) dynamic. At other times, for example between letters G and H, the strings adopt a very sparse texture of single notes while the woodwinds and brass take on a denser texture. Between letters H and J the strings are virtually silent; between letter P and the final bar the woodwinds and brass are virtually silent. The prevailing dynamic in the second half of the piece is softer, and the rhythmic units that articulate repetitions of the chords grow from two per chord at the start to three, four and even five. As in other works of Volans (and in Feldman), the form of the piece is not hugely pre-determined; the composer has found his solutions intuitively in the process of writing. Appropriately for an orchestral piece, it is thus orchestration that gives strongest shape to the unfolding direction of the music. The tuning of open strings forms the basis for much of the harmony. Volans is concerned with saturating a very limited range of harmonies rather than continually inventing new ones. So timbre and register are very important parameters of this composition, and it is in this sense that the music parallels techniques of painting. In the opening bars of the piece, for example, the first of each pair of chords is 'arco' for the strings and the second 'pizzicato'; the arco strings are doubled by bassoons, horns and bowed cymbal, the pizzicato strings by all the woodwinds and piano (see Example 4).

Ex 4 Volans *Concerto for Double Orchestra* bars 1-6

Feldman once wrote, '[w]hat I picked up from painting [is] called the picture plane. I substituted for my ears the aural plane and it's a kind of balance but it has nothing to do with foreground and background. It has to do with how do I keep it on the plane from falling off, from having the sound fall on the floor' (1984, 168). Very little of what either Feldman or Volans wrote would have been possible without the New York abstract artists of the later 20th-century – Guston, de Kooning, Johns, Rauschenberg. The difference between Volans and Klatzow however is that there is nothing in the title *Concerto for Double Orchestra* or in its writing that denotes painting, only in the way he 'paints' a surface. And this is perhaps where his music differs so markedly from that of the other five pieces. Klatzow uses the three paintings of Irma Stern to represent musically the landscape she inhabited artistically. Volans does not represent. Each new piece pushes some kind of boundary (some more than others), but there is something unfamiliar, new, challenging in what he writes. We are not talking two extremes like those identified by Adorno in Schoenberg and Stravinsky's work in the 1920s and '30s – radical retreat into serialism in the one and regressive traditionalism in the other; progress on one hand and restoration on the other; innovation versus 'innervation' (Adorno 1994, 135). Neither Volans nor Klatzow are at either end of a polarity; both are somewhere in the middle, although Volans is towards the radical end. Indeed, the polarity itself is perhaps irrelevant, one might argue, in

an age where ‘postmodernism has progressively eroded the frontiers between minority art and its mass or popular counterparts’ (Eagleton 2000, 71). Although he superficially shares a technique of ‘systematic-ism’ with Zaidel-Rudolph, Volans is far more controlled, far bolder. There is no message, no ideology (as with Hofmeyr), no nostalgia for the past (as with Klatzow or Grové), no sense of having to write a new tune for a new kind of piper (as with Hankinson). And despite the other five composers’ bows to commercialism in various ways, the Volans ironically has far more chance of commercial success (in terms of CDs sold, airtime, reviews) simply because of where it was written and its international *context*. Yet it is also the most uncompromising piece, more free of determinisms thrust upon it from narrative, ideology, or reinvented tradition. It is thus, I suggest, more free to challenge the way we think rather than reflect the way we are. At the same time, it is true that Volans’s semi-emigré status – spending half the year in Ireland, the other half in the Karoo – not only sets him apart from the other five in terms of international exposure, but leaves him freer to do just that: challenge the way we think rather than reflect the way we are.

Concerto for Double Orchestra is not a profoundly original work – some of the basic tenets of this piece were already explored in *String Quartet No 6 for Double String Quartet* (2000) or even as far back as *Cicada* for two pianos (1994). It is not even Volans’s best work of the past decade, which would be one of the two works just mentioned or the *Concerto for Piano and Wind Instruments* (1995). Yet what it is free of are the ‘conservative values of prudence, anti-innovation and a nervousness of being disruptive’ as Terry Eagleton puts it (Ibid), values that characterise much cultural production in an era driven not just by the market but by capitalist priorities emanating from the state.

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SUMMARY

Adorno's complaint that the history of modern music between the two World Wars was 'nothing more than the history of decline, a retrogression into the traditional' was directed at the aesthetic of neo-classicism, and Stravinsky in particular. Thus when David Smith observed in *The Southern African Journal of Musicology* in 1995 that 'a great deal of South African composition suffers from a sense of re-running parts of the past century', his criticism was a continuation of a debate that is still relevant today. Examining six orchestral (and choral-orchestral) scores completed between 2002 and 2005, this article observes wide-ranging aesthetics at play including the revival of representational styles, cross-cultural composition, the aesthetics of opportunity, and the aesthetics of the surface. It concludes that the most uncompromising recent South African orchestral music, that which is most free of determinisms thrust upon it from narrative, ideology, or reinvented tradition, is also the most free to challenge the way we think, rather than reflect the way we are.

