

How do I compose? (Reflections on *Wagner Dream*) Comment je compose - Réflexions sur *Wagner Dream*

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Article abstract

Written in May of 2007, in this text Jonathan Harvey reflects on his compositional method by returning to the genesis of his opera *Wagner Dream*. He notably addresses such things as: the personal associations connected to the first note played by the horn; the conceptual logic behind the two main harmonic spaces; the effect of a heavy storm in one of the places he composed; and what he drew from Wagner's work and ideas for his own opera.

et l'unicité du métier, à la fois sur le plan administratif et sur celui de la formation universitaire (voir notamment <http://rim2007.ircam.fr/>).

2. Master d'«Acoustique, Traitement du signal, Informatique, Appliqués à la Musique» délivré par l'Université Pierre et Marie Curie (Paris-6) et coordonné par l'Ircam, en collaboration avec d'autres établissements (voir <http://recherche.ircam.fr/equipes/repmus/webatiam/index.html>), depuis 1994.

3. *Delights* pour 8 voix, ensemble et électronique. Commande de l'Ircam, création à la Cité de la Musique (Paris) le 24 mai 2007 par l'Ensemble InterContemporain (dir. Susanna Mälkki) et les Jeunes Solistes (dir. Rachid Safir).

4. A corrélérer avec ce qu'écrit le compositeur dans la note de programme du concert : «Habituellement, je suis des pistes poétiques bien avant l'émergence de toute piste strictement musicale. Mais cette fois, j'ai fait l'inverse. Je suis resté en deçà de toute trace textuelle, de toute structure poétique, pour explorer d'abord des sons électroniques. Avec Gilbert Nouno, nous avons axé nos recherches en studio sur l'élaboration d'une grande quantité de modèles de résonance instrumentale servant de filtres à du bruit blanc contrôlé en temps réel par les huit chanteurs. Puis seulement est venue la quête du texte chanté (...)».

5. Modalys est un logiciel de synthèse par modèles physiques conçu et développé par l'équipe de recherche Acoustique instrumentale à l'Ircam.

6. *Vienna Symphonic Library* (base de donnée d'échantillons de sons instrumentaux), <http://www.vsl.co.at/>

7. Les événements sont les états successifs du système permettant les différents traitements du son prévus les uns après les autres en fonction de l'œuvre. Les *cues* – ou la *cue-list* – sont les itérations (le plus souvent déclenchées à la main par l'assistant musical au cours de l'exécution de l'œuvre) permettant de passer d'une configuration à la suivante.

8. *Wagner Dream* (2007), commande du Nederlandse Oper en association avec le Grand Théâtre de Luxembourg, le Holland Festival et l'Ircam.

9. Œuvre pour orchestre et électronique, commande du BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, de l'Ircam et de Radio France. Création prévue en juin 2008 à Paris et Glasgow.

10. Xavier Rodet mène de nombreux travaux de recherche en analyse et synthèse des sons, essentiellement à l'Ircam (voir www.ircam.fr/anasyn.html), depuis une trentaine d'années.

11. Voir Gilbert Nouno, « Les sons peuvent-ils survivre aux machines à sons? », *Cahiers de médiologie*, n° 18, p. 179-184.



HOW DO I COMPOSE? (Reflections on *Wagner Dream*)

JONATHAN HARVEY

How do I compose, precisely? Let's start by narrowing the beam of focus. We will take the first note of my new opera, *Wagner Dream*. Then see what happens...

It is an E flat played by the horn (fig. 1). There is an ensemble of 22 players and a cast of 17 actors and singers. The ensemble sits onstage in Pierre Audi's production, reversing Wagner's magical Bayreuth hidden

orchestra. We see the conductor standing very near Wagner, as if they are bonded, one the embodiment of the other's mind – the orchestra offering no illusion about magical, unprovoked sound.

This note is a realistic boat siren evoking the Grand Canal on the gloomy, misty morning of Wagner's death in Venice. There is a soft note, plus its reverberation through the electronic system, then silence.

This E flat reminded me, as I wrote it, of my mentor Benjamin Britten's opera *Death in Venice*, based on Thomas Mann's novella, itself inspired by Wagner's death. (Mann was fascinated by the connection between

WAGNER DREAM

1

An empty room in the Palazzo Vendramin in Venice. It's raining outside. From time to time we hear the siren of a boat.

start at the discretion of the stage director

Horn
↓ c. 3"
mf
play this note at about every 25"

Upper Keyboard
↓
c. 15"

Sampler Keyboard
Prog 43 soundfiles
: p (distort)
c. 4"
play this note at about every 35"

5101 Horn → REVERB (4") START

Betty the housemaid enters. She brings in a breakfast tray (coffee-pot, sugar-pot, milk-pot etc.)

Suddenly there's lightning and simultaneously a violent clap of thunder.

Horn
continues

Upper Keyboard

Krqb.
THUNDERCLAP
continue as before

Betty gives a start. The pots on the tray knock and some milk is spilled out.

Music © 2006 by Faber Music Ltd
Libretto © 2006 by Jean-Claude Carrière

FIGURE 1. First page of *Wagner Dream* (published score), © Faber and Faber, London

genius, suffering and disease.) It is the note and timbre used for the Traveller's seductive and sinister invitation to Venice, to sunlight and death, which he extends to Aschenbach. Britten developed it to be the principal note of the motif of the cholera, which Aschenbach catches there. And it flares to an obsessive climax at the height of Aschenbach's nightmarish dream of Dionysus. Desire and death lurk in that boat horn, and in my mind at that compositional moment there were also memories of the fatal boat horns of *Peter Grimes*, in the scene where he drowns himself.

Shortly after, there is a low A played by a sampled trombone, set at a distance by the spatialiser; another, more distant, canal boat. This repeats at 35 second intervals, as opposed to the E flat's 25 second intervals. A sort of slow ostinato, background to the actors' entrance and dramatic encounter.



FIGURE 2. Harmonic spaces for Wagner and Buddha, conceived in August, 2003. (This document: February, 2007)

Both notes are used to build a 'Wagner space' – a harmonic field of 19 pitches which are fixed (fig. 2). This 'space' contains all 12 possible pitch classes, and in its middle register the 'Tristan chord' A/E flat/G/C. There are in fact 3 E flats in the 'space' and 3 A's – obsessive pitches... This harmonic field will dominate much of the opera, I decide; at times the Tristan chord will be audible, but rarely alone and clear. As the opera proceeds to Wagner's destruction, as his identity dies, so will the field become changed. I wanted Wagner to haunt the opera like a ghost, present but not full-bodied. What better way to haunt than through harmonic nuance (particularly for Wagner)?

At the same time I wanted an opposing culture; the future, not the High Romantic past. This desire came out of a dissatisfaction with Wagner, or more exactly with myself as Wagnerian. One composes oneself. A Buddhist is what I would like to be. That too is an illusory label, ultimately empty of meaning. But at least it helps to compose, to start on the Way.

What could mediate such a desire? It must be another 'space'. A harmonic field which has a certain flavour, or 'soul'. Perhaps it must be pentatonic-based, the sound Rudolf Steiner considered basic to pure spirit, innocent of the diatonic subjectivity. The space that was then constructed was composed of pentatonic sets piled on top of each other, forming a fairly 'objective' sound, but atonal in its totality over 6 octaves. So it related also to Wagner's atonal (tonal) space, yet sounded radically different. The Buddha character sings to this space normally. Both spaces have important common pitches – of course always kept at the same octave – that boat-horn E flat, for instance.

Three more spaces were constructed over the next composition periods, each mediating between the first two. With these spaces I was able to move freely, concentrating on a small area and the dominant cell making up the space, or moving over larger areas in more complex harmony. The inner mirror symmetry around an axis, present in each space, can be gently floated on or concealed from sight. The drastically limited interval structure can be articulated or obscured, depending on the density. These five spaces are (with small exceptions) the entire pitch content of the opera. The lines, the polyphonies, move through the fixed repertoire of available notes in dynamic ways, but always fundamentally going nowhere but where they already are...

Following on the boat horns there is the ill-tempered entry of Wagner and Cosima, which issues out of a clap of thunder (sampled especially in Wagner's beloved Alps). During the quarrel two high drums imitate the speech rhythms of the actors – this necessarily is improvised by the listening percussionist, and will be different every time the actors make variations. Later these rhythms on two high drums become formalised and structured. Meanwhile the Wagner space begins to be articulated by half-harmonics in the strings. Played with exaggerated vibrato, their ambiguous pitch reflects the inner tremors of Cosima's jealous premonitions about the impending visit of Carrie Pringle, the object of Wagner's desire. Wagner's psychic influence begins to form with these quasi-notes. After the quarrel Cosima goes offstage to play Schubert's *Lob der Tränen* on the piano, an emblem of the weeping spirit of the victimised wife. This historically factual musical

event is integrated into Wagner's overwhelming space-personality by the harp, who plays only notes that are at the same time common to both the Schubert and the Wagner space. Schubert is pressed through a grid of Wagner. Distorted fragments of *Lob der Tränen* associate with Cosima throughout.

Incidentally, when I arrived high in the Alps above Chamonix to work with Carl Faia on the electronics of the Interludes at his family chalet (fig. 3), I stepped off the train into the most magnificent and terrifying thunderstorm, spatialised by the huge mountain faces echoing all around. The role of thunder is striking not only in *Der Ring* but also in the Tibetan *Book of the Dead*. This text is quoted in the libretto: "from the midst of that light, the natural sound of your own self will come, reverberating like a thousand thunders". The guidance given to Wagner by Vairochana and the chorus, like the guidance to the dying person given by the lamas, is represented in the opera by these spatialised thunder recordings, treated by progressive filterings. In fact, everything in the opera, is in some way 'the natural

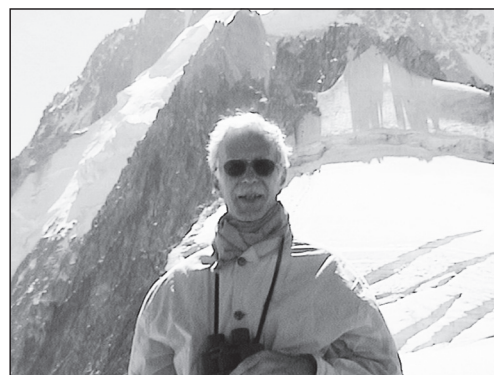


FIGURE 3. The composer in Chamonix (August 23, 2003); photo: Carl Faia

sound of [Wagner's] own self', because the whole opera is Wagner's deathbed dream, his creation; he 'appears' the world, in Buddhist parlance.

This, then, is how I came to choose the later sounds of the first Interlude; first came the sequences of filtered thunder, then came the idea to use the brass playing 'Wagner-space' chords, brass being the only instruments powerful enough to match the imperious thunder. Moreover, the brass were multiplied by harmonisation, the four players playing overwhelming 18-part chords.

Although the E flat was the first note of the opera, I had already composed the Interludes, passages without text, before receiving the libretto from Jean-Claude Carrière. This first Interlude was composed around the Wagner space by means of workshop improvisation. The London Sinfonietta (who commissioned the Interludes) allowed me some sessions to work with the live electronics and the players. Basing the work on the harmonic field I tried to represent atmospheres of intense stillness and light and turbulent thunder, by means of instrumental-electronic texture improvisation. The 6 looping rhythms of the spatialiser were imposed controlling structures pulling the improvisational magma into forms and architectures. The movement around the hall was highly structured and highly repetitive. I later notated the improvisation-type material. The treatments, ones that Gilbert Nouno had shown me when working on my 4th *Quartet* in 2002, repeated, expanded, granulated, harmonised, ring-modulated, amplitude-modulated, chorused and filtered the instrumental sounds in echoing consequences of the sound just played. It was, at times, as if the instruments

were initiating a river of sound with each note. Or, my thought was more that the instruments possessed a karmic shadow; an indissoluble, connected world of events followed all actions.

After the Interlude, Vairochana, a Buddha-psycho-pomp, calms the terrified Wagner, reassures him, and even tells him that his growing obsession with the Buddha story is not necessary for him now. (Wagner and Cosima apparently talked together more and more about Buddhism in the last years). For this moment, IRCAM's Gilbert Nouno, with whom I did the entire rest of the opera – he was an inspiration – had shown me the chorusing patch in Max/MSP. This has many parameters concerning width of pitch expansion, speed of oscillation, etc. We had played simple polyphony into the patch to test it. In fact, we had been working on an electronic spatialisation of Palestrina's *Stabat Mater* together for Les Jeunes Solistes, and this fed into our thinking about the opera. The four singers comprising the pit chorus would be used to accompany the gentle, wise Vairochana. Their music would be written as simple, harmonious polyphony within the pentatonic 'Buddha-space', treated with 'Buddhist' pentatonic harmonisation (5 part chords for each voice, making 20 voices in total) and then fed through the choruser, set with quite wide and 'blurring' pitch-change. The mystical vastness of this sound was exactly right for Vairochana, messenger of another world. It moves slowly all round the theatre space (fig. 4).

And so began the first moments of composing *Wagner Dream*. Of course, for 10 years there were thoughts and ideas jotted down in preparation. A crucial moment

was the morning I suddenly thought: not only will I set the beautiful Buddhist legend, which was almost too remote from today, but I will include the dying Wagner at the moment he was writing *about* the legend. I knew full well that the Buddhists believe that the last thought before death is the most critical one in one's whole life. That lent a certain urgency ('most critical in a whole lifetime!') to the Wagner-Buddha conjunction... From then on it was hard to resist the call of this work to be written. And it happened rather quickly.

The electronics, of course, took longer, and were finished about a year after the score. That's not to say they were composed later, but the very new nature of there being such a lot of real-time treatment (21 instruments individually treated), meant that the realisation was an enormous task, only just becoming practical with the new generation of computers. Initially, and also when doing the *4th Quartet*, Gilbert Nouno showed me many possibilities, and improvised and guided me through the parameters of the patches. I would take my notes from these sessions home and write some score using those parameter possibilities on my own home system as required, then bring it back for Gilbert to realise and test against our aesthetic judgements. I wanted, and Gilbert was in agreement with this aesthetic, to stay very related to the instrumental sound, so that ambiguity can be heard, not difference: ambiguity of timbre, identity, spatial position, harmony and polyphony. Music is made of intervals, not otherness.

Real-time treatment means that the performance is like improvisation, different each time, according to the unique musicality of the moment, the ambiguity of performers' time.

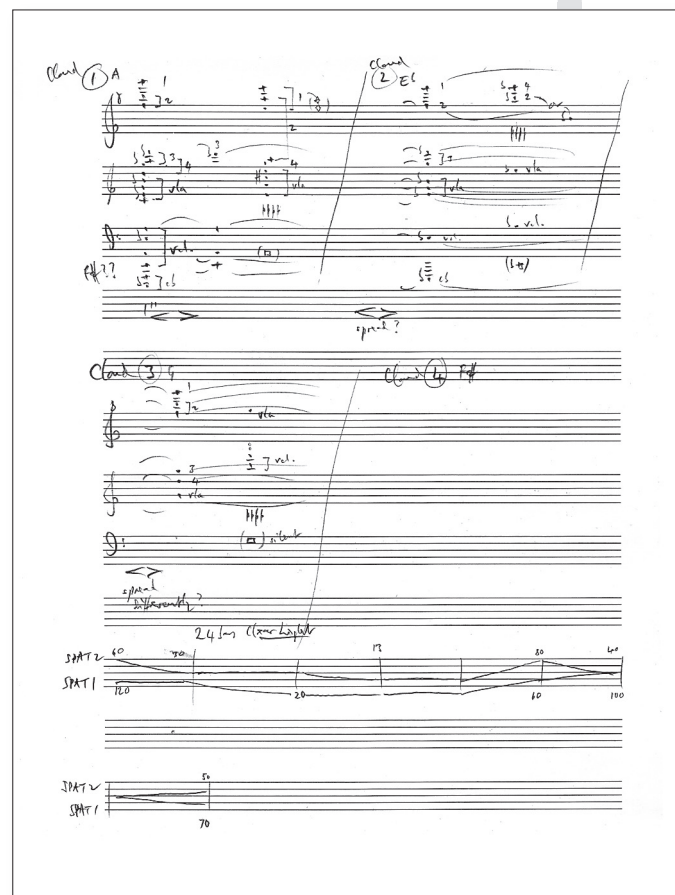


FIGURE 4. *Wagner Dream*, sketch of Scene 2 (approx. September, 2003) showing the "spectralisation" of the Wagner Space – spectres on A, E flat and G extracted from the Space. The spatialisation graph of how the spatial rhythms speed up or slow down via the metronome markings.

Ambiguity suggests dream – things seem to be which are not. Jean-Claude Carrière, Gilbert Nouno and I dreamed Wagner dreaming Buddha, who suggested that *all* life is of the nature of a dream.