The Cry of the Double Bass:
A Chamber Opera

Vol. I

Analytical Commentary

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ABSTRACT

The aim of my research is to reflect on the complex relationship between double bass performers and their instrument, and to exploit in my creative process several musical and extra-musical issues. The outcome of this research is the composition of a chamber opera, *The Cry of the Double Bass*, featuring as main protagonists the double bass and its performer, and exploring through text and musical elements some aspects of my personal experience as both a double bassist and composer.

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This work is dedicated to all those people
who every day struggle to fulfil their dreams.

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INTRODUCTION

This research project stems from my personal experience as a double bassist, and shows how my performer side, combined with a creative process, has lead to the composition of a substantial operatic work, which explores and resolves some musical and extra-musical issues.

By placing instrumental practice at the centre of my research, I try to re-establish a connection between the historically separated roles of composer and performer. It was only in the early nineteenth century that being a 'musician' started to differ from being a 'composer', and in the twentieth century this separation further increased. Only in folk and popular music the two roles have kept walking hand in hand undisturbed for centuries until today. My approach to composition, like for a singer-songwriter, is strictly tied to a direct experience of the sound, exploring and improvising with my instrument. This personal self-reflective and practice-based research provides an insight into the creative process, from which other performers as well as composers can benefit.

The whole research project was also strongly informed by my personal experience as a music listener. The extreme complexity of some contemporary music has deepened the gap between composers and audiences, creating more tension among performers. I consider the conception of an innovative dramatic work aimed at public performance as a creative cathartic act, through which the composer-performer's frustrations and their resolution are conveyed to the audience, who, in turn, re-experience the same process transposed to their own personal experience.

Chapter 1 of this commentary presents the background and context of my research, and discusses the sources that provided inspiration to my musical journey. Patrick Süskind's play *The Double Bass* has been of paramount importance to reflect on three main quests that urged me to embark in this research project. First, the need as a performer to resolve some musical and technical issues on my instrument the double bass. The ever-present question

'How can I be a better performer?' made me reconsider the concept of virtuosity in light of the new needs of contemporary music performers. Secondly, the urge to create a significant piece of work, in which the performer's quest had to find a relevant position. The other ever-present question 'How can I be a better composer?' urged me to study and analyse (and at times borrow and reshape) existing music. The third quest relates to my need as a listener to be emotionally engaged with a musical work. I have gone through a process of self-reflection, which encompassed my early musical years, to understand what type of music I was deeply influenced by, and tried to reflect this into the composition of my new work. Some preliminary compositions essential to its creation are also described in Chapter 1, showing how some initial investigations produced relevant material for the final work.

Chapter 2 discusses the genesis and development of the main work, and how the initial idea of setting to music Patrick Süskind's *The Double Bass* turned into the composition of a new original opera. This chapter describes the conception and realisation of the libretto for *The Cry of the Double Bass* and the themes that arose out of it. In order to contextualise my compositional approach, a discussion on the structural and musical language that forms the opera foundations is also present in this chapter.

Chapter 3 describes the main work in a sequential order, to help the navigation and reading of the score, discussing in more detail some specific musical elements relevant to each section, and commenting on their relationship with the text and the dramaturgy of the work.

CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The Double Bass

"No self-respecting composer would write for double bass, he'd have more taste. And if he ever did, then it would be as a joke" (Süskind, 1988, p.32). This quote from Patrick Süskind's play *The Double Bass* not only contains the protagonist's personal point of view on the instrument and its repertoire, but also reflects a cultural perception of the double bass as an 'awkward' instrument. This has dissuaded many composers throughout history from writing for it. Consequentially, luminaries of the double bass were often "double bassists who out of frustration turned their hands to composition" (Süskind, 1988, p.32). *The Double Bass* was the main source of inspirational material at the start of this research project. Paradoxically written by a non-musician, the play presents a passionate monologue by a double bassist, the central character in the play, whose life (both within and outside the world of music) has been strongly influenced by the presence of the double bass, 'the damned object'. A sense of frustration pervades the whole narration, which arises from issues ranging from facing technical limitations of instrumental practice to the relationship between the classical double bassist of today and the masters of the past (both performers and composers). These important considerations constitute the base on which the book's plot evolves. Historical digressions and double bass technique demonstrations alternate with the protagonist's personal drama. The roots of Süskind's theatrical work can be found in the work of Harold Pinter. In an interview for *Vogue* magazine Pinter states: "Before you manage to adjust yourself to living alone in your room, you're not terribly fit and equipped to go out to fight battles" (Quigley, 2001, p.10). This is the environment and the only space around which the double bassist's monologue takes place: the solitude of his room. This aspect will become of paramount importance in the conception of the performance space in my own work.

Virtuosity

The meaning of virtuosity and the physical limits of the instrument are two main aspects emerging from Süskind's text that affect not only the fictional double bassist but real performers too. As Süskind's double bassist tells us:

> No one can play the double bass beautifully, not if the word is to mean anything. No one. Not the great soloist. It's a question of physics, not of ability, a double bass doesn't have the upper range, it just doesn't, and that's why solo playing on the double bass is so colossally stupid, even if playing techniques have kept improving over the last hundred and fifty years, and even if there are concertos for double bass, and sonatas, and suites, and even if one day some superman should come along and play Bach's chaconne on the double bass, or one of Paganini's capriccios – it is and always will be ghastly, because it's a ghastly noise, and that's all there is to it. (Süskind, 1988, p.31)

This short excerpt reflects the frustration of not being able to play in the high register of the instrument. The use of this extreme register contains a 'virtuosic' element, which composers/double bassists of the past exploited to show technical skills on the instrument (Dragonetti, Dittersdorf and Bottesini's concertos, among many others). These passages retain plenty of tension (both musical and physical) that sometimes comes across as an awkward attempt to imitate a high-register instrument such as a violin, or horns as in the Dittersdorf's *Concerto in E major*. 'The cadenza makes me die laughing' declares Süskind's double bassist referring to the latter concerto. This way of using virtuosity has found its climax in the Romantic period. As Jonathan Dunsby states "the virtuosity of some early Romantic music, in its purely physical demands, is more or less at the limits of possible human achievement and is never going to be significantly exceeded" (Dunsby, 1995, p.50). Moving to the twentieth century, Dunsby reminds us that "from a technical point of view the musical executant is not going to notice a significant difference in difficulty between difficult compositions of 1840 and 1940" (Dunsby, 1995, p.50). However, the exploration and use of new techniques in more recent twentieth-century instrumental music has led to redefine the concept of virtuosity. According to Blasius (2004), in some cases it is necessary to present new definitions of virtuosity, like for the music of the late Morton Feldman. Berio reminds us that "virtuosity often arises

out of a conflict, a tension between the music idea and the instrument" (Berio, 1985, p.90). A great level of performer-instrument tension has been achieved in the music of some contemporary composers. The quasi-impossibility to physically execute specific music material tends to create new frustrations in the performer of contemporary music. Moreover tension arises "when the novelty and complexity of musical thought […] imposes changes in the relationship with the instrument, where the interpreter is required to perform at an extremely high level of technical and intellectual virtuosity" (Berio, 1985, p.91). This finally leads me to what Berio defines as 'virtuosity of knowledge', where the new virtuoso "has to be a musician capable of moving within a broad historical perspective and of resolving the tension between the creativity of yesterday and today" (Berio, 1985, p.91). This type of virtuosity has been explored by Berio in his *Sequenzas*, where a great deal of attention has been drawn to the fact that musical instruments 'have a memory' and that one should not try to alter the nature of an instrument. In the specific case of the double bass, composer and double bassist Stefano Scodanibbio has contributed to the development of this concept of virtuosity (he has also worked with Berio to the adaptation of the *Sequenza XIV* for cello to the double bass, completed after Berio's death as *Sequenza XIVb* for double bass). In particular the first section of Scodanibbio's *Voyage that never ends* explores the harmonic sounds and some timbral resources of the double bass. This composition, together with my own work on the natural harmonics on the double bass, brings back Süskind's text:

> Now you'll say that's the limit, because you can't play a note that's off the end of the finger-board. That's what you think! What about this - … He plays harmonics. … and this? … He plays even higher. … and this? … He plays higher still. […] See! The instrument can do so much, physically, theoretically. Only practically and musically, it's never brought out. (Süskind, 1988, p.11)

This context, combined with my personal background as a double bassist, provided a strong motivation and a solid base on which to try to expand and develop some of the aforementioned fictional yet real conflicts into a number of preliminary compositions.

Preliminary Compositions

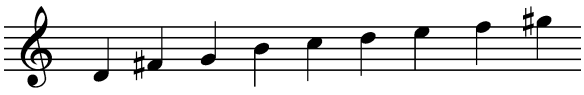
Very much informed and inspired by Süskind's text, each of these works aims at exploring a specific aspect of the double bass practice, which I found an intimate connection with, both from a technical and musical point of view. These preliminary compositions also provided seminal material that would find its place in some parts of the final work.

1. On D

This composition stems from the exploration on natural harmonics on the double bass that I pursued in older compositions of mine (*Walking and running*, *Triangles*, *Duets No.1* among others). Süskind's words on the harmonics had a strong impact on my desire to try to achieve a musically interesting sonority using the high register of the double bass in a different way from the more conventional 'virtuosic' fashion adopted by classical composers.

On D is an extension of the sonority obtained by playing harmonics on the double bass to a larger ensemble, constituted by strings (violin, viola, cello and double bass), guitar, clarinet, percussion, soprano, and electronics (with the double bass connected to a loop station).

The pitch material is formed by the following notes:



They are all natural harmonic notes played on the first two strings of the double bass. The starting point of these pitches is the D string (from which the title of the piece), although some harmonics on the G string are also used (G4, B4, F5) in order to form some contour lines and to give more variety and interest to the melodic development and the harmonic texture. Excluding the repetition of the D over two octaves (done intentionally to give the note D a primary role), there are eight pitches in the piece, which are gradually introduced by the double bassist through means of simple patterns, recorded and played back through the loop

station. Every new loop includes a new pitch, which is picked up and developed by the other instruments.

The structure of *On D* has three main sections: a very quiet start with some white noise moments (obtained by some instruments using extended techniques) followed by a development that leads through a crescendo to a final climax, when a rhythmical element becomes fundamental. This structure proves to be a good model for the first episode of *The Cry of the Double Bass*, and the sonorities and textures achieved with this composition will characterise some sections of the opera.

2. Noise

Another interesting aspect that stands out from the analysis of Süskind's text is the frustration deriving from the production of unwanted noise on the double bass. This is particularly true at an initial stage of instrumental practice. Nonetheless, it is an aspect that needs to be constantly kept under control when performing professionally. I decided to explore this aspect with the composition of *Noise*, in which I exploit different unpitched sounds that can be obtained on the double bass, in relation to the physical gestures needed to produce them. Trevor Wishart (1996) emphasises how some instruments are 'sensitive carriers of gestural information', and how this information is partially lost with the traditional notation system. In the composition of *Noise* I have tried to derive the final notation from the initial gestures that produce the sonic events (unpitched noises or pitched sounds). The constant switch between the two categories of sound, and their rhythmical variations, supports Wishart's idea of a 'continuum' of musical parameters, rather than a 'lattice' of finite values. The use of electronics in *Noise* aims at spreading the pitch and the rhythmical values across a continuum, mainly through the use of pitch shifters and delays.

The theatrical element is the other important feature that characterises *Noise*. Conceptually different from other double bass pieces that include theatrical elements (for example *Failing* by Tom Johnson), this piece is performed by both playing the double bass and reciting a text made up of sentences dealing with

noise production from Süskind's play. All the text fragments used were shuffled in a different order from the way they appear in the original work, forming a new dramatic narrative that focuses on the frustration of the performer in relation to the noises they produce in their practice. The text has also inspired the typology of gestures, hence sonorities that I have used in the composition. Here are a few sentences that I used in the piece to originate gestures and sounds:

> Don't mind the grating. It's like that. A clean tone, without the scratch of the bowing, purely the string vibrating, you won't get that anywhere. (Süskind, 1988, p.18)

And:

> Sometimes I feel like smashing it. Or sawing it into pieces. Taking an axe to it. Cut it into tiny pieces and grind it up fine and pulverise it. (Süskind, 1988, p.30)

Unpitched sounds include the scratching of the bow on the string, both in a horizontal and vertical way and percussive sounds obtained by tapping the instruments in different areas, and with different techniques. These unpitched sounds alternate with moments of pitched material, which include a natural harmonics section reminiscent of *On D*. It is a sonority enhanced by the scordatura (using a G# as first open string) and by the variable pitch shifter applied to this section of the piece. Some of the sonic features of *Noise* will also be exploited in a section of *The Cry of the Double Bass* scored for double bass quartet.

3. Sonatina for tuba and electronics

This piece stems from my interest in writing for historically neglected instruments, like the tuba, for which not much music was written before the twentieth century. Commissioned by Andy Johnson for his undergraduate major project at Birmingham Conservatoire, *Sonatina* is a composer-performer collaboration, with many ideas provided by the player during several exploratory sessions.

My interest in free improvisation and the study of Süskind's text provided some fresh ideas for the piece:

> I don't go for jazz myself, mind you, nor rock, or any of that stuff. As an artist who has been brought up in the classical tradition of the good and the true and the beautiful, there's nothing I distrust so much as the anarchy of free improvisation. (Süskind, 1988, p.7)

When I set off to start composing the *Sonatina* I was mixing a free improvisation work recently recorded with British saxophonist Paul Dunmall. Listening to the outtakes I started to transcribe some bass solos and other material that I found of interest. I decided to exploit the 'anarchy of free improvisation' into some material to be used in the *Sonatina*. In fact, the material in every movement of this piece comes from the transcription of several double bass solos I performed in that session. The material was then developed and given shape into a structured movement. A prelude was added to introduce the piece, which also contains a freely improvised interaction between tuba and live electronics and a free cadenza for the performer to improvise on (using melodic fragments from the piece or from existing tuba literature). The electronics were used as a contrapuntal element, complementary to the tuba part. All the samples used were pre-recorded by the tuba player, triggered and manipulated by a second performer on stage.

From the very beginning of the composition of *Sonatina*, I was aware that some material would have found its place into *The Cry of the Double Bass*. My initial plan was to re-transfer some of that material back to the double bass part. However, the lyricism and songlike nature of some of the material was translated into vocal lines for the characters or other situations in the opera.

CHAPTER 2: THE MAIN WORK

Genesis: going beyond Süskind

The intention to set Süskind's play to music led me to a thorough analysis of the text, its structure and its contents, themes and topics, some of which I started to explore in my preliminary compositions. However, this initial plan was halted by the refusal from Süskind's publishers to grant the permission to use the text in any form of adaptation or orchestration.

I decided to focus my research on the double bass, and was determined to exploit my compositional efforts into a theatrical work. I soon commissioned a new libretto, with the idea that it had to maintain some connections with Süskind's text. After having selected freelance writer and theatre director Mike Carter, we started a series of meetings to discuss the characteristic of the new work. It became very soon apparent to Mike that my motivation to write such a work was rooted beyond Süskind's work, and through a series of narrative questions, he started to build a new story that was based on my real personal experience, still keeping a connection with *The Double Bass* by Süskind. In the first draft of the libretto there was a direct reference to one of the characters being Süskind's double bassist. However, in later drafts this connection was partially lost, although the link to Süskind's work was kept in the title of the work (which refers to the climatic moment when the double bassist shouts 'SARAH!'), and in some vague references (for example the double bass 'image'). The meetings with Mike were also essential to opt for opera as the final medium of expression I wanted to explore, which I realised was subconsciously and firmly rooted in my past (my grandfather being the founding president of the first opera house in our home town Cagliari, in Sardinia). Moreover, the collaboration with Mike made the new project strongly rooted in the theatre world, which I was not very familiar with.

Libretto

The process that led to the final version of the libretto was long and at times difficult, presenting the old dilemma well expressed by poet Olivier and composer Flamand in Richard Strauss's opera *Capriccio*: 'Prima la musica, dopo le parole' ('First the music and then the words') as the composer maintains, or 'Prima le parole, dopo la musica' as the poet insists?

With no previous experience in writing an opera, my first intention was to have a libretto that would stand as a quality piece of literature, having always disliked most of the classic opera librettos. Hence my decision to commission the work from a writer with some experience as playwright. However, the choice turned out to be a difficult one, with both composer and librettist with strong opinions on important decisions such as what to cut, what to keep, which words could not be changed and so on. Most of the issues presented themselves as I went along with the composition, so the libretto changed form and length several times before reaching the final version. Although the process could have been shorter by taking some radical unilateral decisions, my respect towards Mike's point of view and his will to have a final text he would be happy with, led to a productive and positive collaboration (unlike many famous composer-librettist collaborations that ended abruptly).

1. Synopsis and Characters

The Cry of the Double Bass tells the story of an unnamed artist, charting his journey from childhood to being an accomplished musician and composer. The work explores his changing relationship to music and the double bass, as he battles to fulfil his soul's desire. Richly symbolic and told as a mythic 'folk tale', it blends comedy and pathos, as it grapples with challenges many artists will empathise with. It is divided into three acts: the first act portrays the BOY's childhood, focusing on the conflict between his musical dreams and the narrow expectations of his family and community; set years later, the second central act embodies the protagonist's (YOUNG MAN now) years as an undergraduate, focusing on the 'seismic shift' from the absence of music in his life to his decision

to learn the double bass and study music; the final act presents the YOUNG MAN's struggles as a mature music student, from his first double bass lessons to final recognition as a musician and composer (a more detailed version of the synopsis can be found in Appendix 1).

The main characters that orbit around the protagonist's life are: his MOTHER, his FATHER (also a DOCTOR), his GRANDFATHER, his GIRLFRIEND (in Act 2), the fantastical BIG C, and his PROFESSOR (in Act 3). Secondary characters are the PRIEST and the TEACHER (in Act 1), a WAITER (in Act 2), the YOUNG MAN's LANDLADY, his BOSS, a LOVER and an OLD MAN (in Act 3). Their vocal role will be illustrated in the paragraph on instrumentation and more details on their personality and behaviour will be expanded in the description of the work in Chapter 3.

2. Themes and topics

Most of the themes present in *The Cry of the Double Bass* come from my personal experience and from the analysis of Süskind's text. They were discussed beforehand with the librettist, who planned from the outset to include them in the new work. According to the nature of my research, it was clear from a preliminary stage that the work was going to engage with some themes rarely seen in an operatic context. Although there are works in which the story of a musician is told, the emphasis is generally put on other personal events such as love, affairs, murders and too many others to name them here. An interesting case lies in the work of Richard Strauss, who featured the role of a composer in several operas (*Ariadne auf Naxos*, *Intermezzo* and *Capriccio*), exploring a number of topics close to the operatic world. Even in Strauss though, the aspects related to musical experience often become secondary and are overshadowed by other events. It is even rarer to find performers featured as protagonists in operas, and as with composers, their professional role is never the main topic and often only a minor detail in the whole plot. One has to go as far back as 1607 to find in Claudio Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* the role of composer and performer as protagonist, and 'La Musica' featured as a physical character.

Strongly inspired and motivated by such a deficiency in the operatic world, my interest lay entirely on featuring the musician and their instrument as the main theme of *The Cry of the Double Bass*. In particular, inspired by Süskind's text, I was keen on exploring themes of frustration and struggle related to the musical practice. Barry Green (1987) identifies several causes of frustration among musicians, relating to musical education and performance. Inspired by Green's *The Inner Game of Music*, I wanted to explore the 'music lesson' and the 'concert' topics in *The Cry of the Double Bass*.

Mike's libretto inevitably brought about some new themes related to music, for example the topics of 'composition' and creativity, which gradually acquire more importance throughout the narration. Other themes that emerged are the way society perceives musicians and how internal voices of fear and self-doubt prevent musicians from performing at their best (a topic also addressed in Green's book).

The theme of the artist's inner and spiritual search is often reflected in *The Cry of the Double Bass* libretto and the stage directions often refer to the solitude of this process (evoking Pinter and Süskind's words). The staging envisages a fluid action space, which is often a confined space (a room, a classroom, a cave), reflecting the sense of constraint and 'entrapment' artists often feel.

Themes like love and death are present in *The Cry of the Double Bass*, but they never become the main focus of the story. In particular the sentimental bond between the protagonist and his girlfriend is presented with coolness, and it never gains any significance.

Structure

The Cry of the Double Bass has a complex episodic structure, which is clearly defined in the libretto. It is formally divided into three acts, preceded by a Prologue and followed by an Epilogue. Within each act, the narration is subdivided into a series of episodes of differing lengths, for a total of 29 episodes. Some extra divisions (scenes) are used, to better define some intermediate

structures that include several interconnected episodes. The overall structure of the opera is as follows (see also Appendix 3):

PROLOGUE

ACT ONE

- Scene One
  - 1: The Call
  - 2: Mother
  - 3: Big C
  - 4: Normal
- Scene Two
  - 5: Grandfather
  - 6: Lesson
  - 7: Climbing the Hill
  - 8: The Double Bass
- Scene Three
  - 9: Requiem for Grandpa
  - 10: Legacy
  - 11: Condolences
  - 12: Concert
  - 13: Let Go Your Dreams

ACT TWO

- Scene One
  - 14: Geology
  - 15: Little Flat
- Scene Two
  - 16: Seismic Activity
- Scene Three
  - 17: Restaurant
  - 18: Grandfather's Song
  - 19: My Life Has Got To Change

ACT THREE

- Scene One
  - 20: Lesson No.2
  - 21: Tendonitis
  - 22: Out of Control
  - 23: A Way Out
- Scene Two
  - 24: The Silent Struggle
  - 25: The Cave
  - 26: Composed
- Scene Three
  - 27: A Reunion
  - 28: Concert No.2
  - 29: And in the End

EPILOGUE

Each act represents a phase in the life of the protagonist, and the musical language and style used for each of the three acts is aimed at reflecting these phases. In each act the climax is located in the third scene, which usually shows a decisive moment in the protagonist's life (defeat at the end of Act 1, change at the end of Act 2, victory at the end of Act 3).

The scenes and episodes follow a cinematic model, rather than a typical operatic succession of numbers, with their length being very variable, as well as the ratio between dialogues and reflective monologues (more suitable for songs or arias). My intention to deviate from the classic models is reflected in the way I set out to compose the various episodes. The music often follows the action rather than developing on its own, with some similarities to film scoring, with the result that in some episodes the music can be undeveloped or abruptly cut. Only in some rare occasions I had to ask the librettist to provide extra lines, when I felt the music had to carry on further, in order to complete its natural development.

The music for each episode (especially the longer ones) often has a self-contained form, with an introduction, a core section, linking interludes and a coda. This approach was inspired by the study of the two operas by Alban Berg *Wozzeck* and *Lulu*. Both these works have a large number of episodes, often switching from and to very different settings, similarly to what happens in movies. Berg approached each episode (or scene) as a self-contained piece, often using classical forms (sonata, invention, variations, rondo), with the use of 'numbers' such as recitativi, aria, arioso, cavatina and others, anticipating "by some fifteen years Stravinsky's return to certain formal conventions of classical opera" (Perle, 1985, p.84). However, in my approach I have avoided the use of any classical form, and the composition has followed a more instinctive path, driven by the nature of the text, which often was already structured in short dialogues, songs using verses, refrains, or sections that I interpreted as recitativi. A closer influence in this sense has come from an analysis of Ligeti's *Le Grand Macabre*, where each scene is a series of short episodes, often with a very different character. In Ligeti's words: "My opera does not have the continuous musical texture of Wagner opera nor is divided into distinct formal sections as is the case with Italian operas or Mozart" (Ligeti, 1983, p.68). I have followed the

same type of approach, according to the text and the diverse dynamics associated with each character and context. Often I have used musical interludes and independent musical fragments to link the different episodes, and in one instance I specifically composed a new episode using Latin words from the Requiem mass, which were not in the original libretto, to link two episodes separated by an unspecified time span.

My interest in symmetries was exploited by the librettist when writing the libretto and planning the structure of the piece. The following is a list of symmetrical elements that can be identified:

- The acts are divided into three main scenes each.
- The mid-point of the opera, Episode 16 (Seismic Activity) is the symbolic turning point, when the YOUNG MAN's inner world gradually shifts from geology to music. The episode also has an internal symmetrical structure, with three main 'Call' sections.
- Some episodes from Act 1 are mirrored in Act 3: Episode 6 (Lesson) has its correspondent Episode 20 (Lesson No.2), and Episode 12 (Concert) is mirrored by Episode 28 (Concert No.2).
- The three scenes in Act 1 all have a BIG C appearance in the middle.
- BIG C presence in Act 1 is mirrored in Act 3 (so is the BOY).
- The choral Episode 4 (Normal) in Act 1 is mirrored by the choral Episode 22 (Out of Control) in Act 3.

Instrumentation and Symbolism

Süskind's *The Double Bass* had a strong influence also on the instrumentation choices I made for my work:

> [...] in the orchestra, there's no hope. There is the cruel hierarchy of ability, the terrible hierarchy of the decision once made, the appalling hierarchy of talent, and the absolute, physical hierarchy of tones and frequencies. (Süskind, 1988, p.36)

And:

> The other possibility is chamber music. Behave myself, be good, practise, a lot of patience, become first bass in a B-orchestra, a little chamber music group, an octet [...]. (Süskind, 1988, p.57)

The protagonist's negative view of the orchestral hierarchies versus the more human dimension of a chamber group guided my initial choice of writing for a chamber ensemble rather than a full orchestra. My personal taste, with a predilection for low and warm-sounding instruments, played an important role in guiding my choice of instrumentation. Initially I opted for an octet, a string quartet consisting of violin, viola, cello and double bass, mirrored by flute, clarinet, horn and tuba. I intentionally avoided instruments that I do not particularly like, with a too prominent voice like the oboe or the trumpet. Several other aspects taken from Süskind's text influenced this initial choice, for example the emphasis put on some historically neglected instruments, such as the double bass, the tuba and the horn.

In another important passage Süskind's double bassist recites:

> It's the tension between here and there, high and low, that gives music its significance, that's where the meaning of music originates from, and of life, yes, life itself. (Süskind, 1988, p.9)

This constant allegory to a polar opposition between the soprano with whom the protagonist is in love, and the double bass, was exploited in the instrumentation choices I made. When composing, I often thought in terms of 'couples' of high-low instruments, violin versus cello, or viola versus double bass, flute versus horn, or clarinet versus tuba, but also violin versus tuba, or flute versus double

bass. This same concept was applied to the initial choice of singers: a soprano (the BOY) and a mezzo-soprano (the MOTHER and LANDLADY) versus a baritone (the YOUNG MAN and the PRIEST) and a bass (the GRANDFATHER, the PROFESSOR and the OLD MAN). I decided not to use a tenor, a voice that to my taste has been overused in the Italian operatic tradition to often display heroes or 'macho' roles.

This core 'triple quartet' ensemble (4 strings, 4 winds and brass, 4 singers) was extended with the addition of percussion, a toy piano (to be played by some characters), another soprano (the GIRLFRIEND and the LOVER), and finally an actor (the FATHER, the DOCTOR and the BOSS) and a physical theatre actor (the BIG C and the WAITER) - these being two 'anti-musical' characters. Initially only one percussion player was included, then during the compositional phase an extra player was added both to enrich the range of possibilities and to specifically play the timpani in all the BIG C episodes, again inspired by a passage from *The Double Bass*:

> The only thing that theoretically comes after us are the tymps, but that's only theoretically, because in fact the tymps take up an elevated position on their own, so everyone can see them. And besides, they have even more volume than we do. So when the tympanist lets fly, you can hear that right at the back of the stalls, and everyone says, aha, the tymps. But no one says, aha, the double-bass, because I'm just one of a crowd. That's why, in practical terms, the tymps are really ahead of the double-bass. (Süskind, 1988, p.34)

This fictional point of view is confirmed in reality by James Holland, who affirms: "The timpanist has problems and difficulties with which no other orchestral principal has to contend. His responsibilities make this one of the most important positions in the modern symphony orchestra" (Holland, 1994, p.41).

Another important aspect is the variability of the string section throughout the opera. As already mentioned, the string section initially consisted of violin, viola, cello and bass. I consider this combination a 'perfect' string quartet, as the bright and sharp sonorities of violin and cello are balanced by the darker and more sombre tone of viola and double bass. My intention was also to experiment with some writing for double bass quartet, and eventually, in a sort of provocation, I

decided to add some extra strings and to reverse their hierarchy, by using a 1-2-3-4 combination, with one violin, two violas, three cellos and four double basses. Examples of atypical string sections can be found in Ligeti's *Le Grand Macabre*, where 3 violins, 2 violas, 6 cellos and 4 double basses are used, or in Gavin Bryars' *Medea*, which uses no violins, 10 violas, 8 or 10 cellos and 4 or 6 double basses.

Finally, it was only at an advanced stage of my work that I decided to include a real piano in the final line up. The reason for this choice was mainly symbolic and will be explained in the following paragraphs.

The final instrumentation is thus: 7 singers/actors (2 sopranos, 1 mezzo-soprano, 1 baritone, 1 bass, 2 actors), flute (doubling piccolo and bass flute), clarinet in Bb (doubling bass clarinet), horn, tuba, percussion (2 players), toy piano, piano, strings (1 violin, 2 violas, 3 cellos, 4 double basses).

An extra double bass is also used as a physical object in some sections of the opera (see Chapter 3), to be used by some characters (GRANDFATHER, YOUNG MAN), although never played for real. This is the GRANDFATHER's instrument that will become the YOUNG MAN's object of desire, put away in Act 1, silently crying to be played in Act 2, reunited to his legitimate owner and played again in Act 3.

The way the instrumentation changes throughout the opera has been dictated by the assumption that music and players are also characters of this work, and as such they should be flexible, variable and their behaviour at times unpredictable. The use of different combinations follows the narration, and assumes strong symbolic meanings as the story unfolds. Structure and instrumentation are strictly connected, as is the association between characters and instruments. Moreover, the physical position of the ensemble (or portions of it), onstage and offstage, is tactically and carefully designed to reinforce the metaphor of the ensemble and the music being characters in the narration.

In Act 1 the reduced version of the ensemble (with 1-1-1-1 strings and without the piano) is on stage, representing the BOY's musical imagination. From the very beginning there is a high level of interaction between the BOY and the

ensemble, which carries on throughout the three scenes of the act. This concept is also supported by the fact that the BOY's parents always remain oblivious to the musical actions and development, while the BOY is highly stimulated by the sonic events, somehow blurring the distinction between what is diegetic music and what is not. The toy piano in Act 1 functions as the BOY's means of expression (both instrumentally and creatively), and it is also played by MOTHER, providing some background information about her past. The timpani are mainly used as a solo instrument to accompany BIG C's episodes, and appear often with the ensemble to underline moments of frustration, which are associated with BIG C's negative function.

In Act 2 the ensemble has left the stage. Symbolically, music is not part of the BOY's life any more, and this important change is emphasised by the presence of the piano as main accompanist to the singers. As the BOY has grown up into a YOUNG MAN, so has the toy piano into a real piano, located onstage. This choice establishes a complete new sound world, bare, intimate and far from the rich and lively sonority of Act 1. However, there are a few exceptions: the two onstage small ensembles, which constitute instances of diegetic music (in episodes 14 and 17), the toy piano played in the restaurant by a boy, and the off-stage strings accompaniment to the GRANDFATHER's song (episode 18). It is only in the last episode of Act 2 that the full ensemble (offstage) will make its sudden, loud and dramatic entrance, to emphasise the return of music in the YOUNG MAN's life.

In Act 3 the ensemble is again on stage, representing the YOUNG MAN's engagement with music once again. The very first episode features the four double basses, and sets the mood for the whole first scene. The importance of the double bass in this act is also emphasised by the 'reversed' string section and finally by the soloistic episode 28, when the first double bass becomes protagonist, together with the YOUNG MAN and his GRANDFATHER's bass. In this final act there is also the YOUNG MAN's reconnection with his childhood, represented by the meeting with the BOY and the use of the toy piano to compose. Towards the end of the opera, the musicians gradually leave, as if a real performance is finished and everyone takes different times to pack their

instruments and go. As in the beginning of the opera (when they arrive and tune up), the musicians are an integral part of the narration.

I have shown how the instrumentation choices are strictly tied with the structural design of the opera. The next section describes the musical language used in my compositional approach, and how I made my musical choices according to the structure and nature of the text.

Musical language

1. Style

One of the most challenging aspects in the composition of *The Cry of the Double Bass* was whether to embrace a coherent musical style in accordance with the specific styles and techniques I have employed in my relatively short career as a composer, or whether to experiment with different styles, according to the needs of the medium I was exploring. There are several reasons that pushed me towards the second possibility, of embracing different musical styles, yet trying to keep a personal compositional voice and some sense of internal coherency.

A strong influence came from my desire to study a number of important references that shaped my musical mind, across different historical periods and genres. In the past few years my interest mainly focused on contemporary music, and my compositional output was narrowed to the exploration of some specific musical aspects. My interest in jazz and improvisation was initially kept out from this project, in order to avoid too different compositional approaches (for example with the use of free improvisation or partially-notated sections). However, I have mentioned how improvisation played an important role in the production of new material for this work. During the long period of time taken by the composition of this opera, I started to reflect on music I encountered during my childhood and early teens, and I could not ignore (although I did for many years) the impact that Italian opera and popular music had on me. As I tried to reconnect with some of these early influences, I found a good example of stylistic plurality in the late operas by Puccini, especially in *Turandot*, where a

Romantic style is alternated with a more modern style, which includes influences from Chinese, middle-Eastern and dissonant music. Davis opens an interesting question, when saying "Puccini's late music proceeds according to a series of discrete episodes, each articulated with a discrete style and each contrasting with neighboring episodes in such a way as to produce musical seams" (Davis, 2010, p.21). Aware that such seams may draw attention away from the drama, I nonetheless decided to experiment within several styles, taking particular care in the way they blended.

Another important influence on my stylistic decisions came more gradually from my reflections on opera as a medium. The initial plan of setting to music Patrick Süskind's *The Double Bass* was driven by the idea of composing a music theatre piece, influenced by avant-garde works such as Berio's *Un Re in Ascolto*. However, as soon as the new libretto conception and realisation began, it became clearer that the medium I wanted to explore was opera rather than music theatre. A similar process took place in Ligeti's initial intentions to write an anti-opera for *Le Grand Macabre* (which he then redefined as 'anti-anti-opera'). As Searby has pointed out:

> In spite of Ligeti's original radical intentions, *Le Grand Macabre* retains many characteristics of traditional opera, namely: a recognisable plot; clearly separated arias; music which reflects the meaning and moods of the text; a narrative which is set in a recitative-like fashion; and separate orchestral sections. (Searby, 2009, p.33)

The Italian architect Renzo Piano's words also had some resonance:

> I'm very diffident towards the word style. Style, not just for architects, for writers, for everybody, for musicians, is a kind of golden cage, you get trapped in the style and then you have to repeat your rubber stamp. (Piano, 2013)

With the intention of not adhering to a specific musical style within the same work, my choices were eventually guided by the very nature of *The Cry of the Double Bass* libretto, where music itself becomes a character, and varies behaviour according to the interaction with the other characters and the different situations. I adopted different styles, which not only reflect the stage

actions but also comment on the narrative, and establish a dialogue with the characters.

Although I find it difficult to classify my own material, I can *a posteriori* identify the main musical styles that occur in *The Cry of the Double Bass*:

- a textural type of writing, often used for background accompaniment, influenced by several composers, among which György Ligeti and Kaija Saariaho;

- a rhythmically and harmonically complex type of writing, often dissonant, used in fast moving sequences to let the action flow quickly, or to describe some complex characters, very much influenced by diverse composers such as Oliver Knussen, George Benjamin and my teachers Richard Causton and Edwin Roxburgh;

- a rhythmically and harmonically simpler style, more consonant and melodic, used to accompany some emotional and slow moments, very much informed by some classical composers from very diverse periods, such as Johann Sebastian Bach, the early Arnold Schoenberg, Béla Bartók, Alban Berg and Dmitri Shostakovich among others;

- an experimental style, which on some rare occasions exploits extended techniques to describe a specific situation in the opera;

- quotations and pastiches of existing music, both from my own compositions and from composers of the past, among which Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Giacomo Puccini, Paul McCartney and John Lennon.

2. Pitch Organisation

There is no unique compositional method or pitch organisation system behind the writing of *The Cry of the Double Bass*. The way I approached most of the composition was uniquely guided by the text and the writing of the vocal lines. The structure of the narrative, the dramatic tension and release curves, and the climactic moments also determined the pitch material I used. It was essential

that all the sung parts carried a strong melodic quality, different for each character, and that the words' intelligibility was always maintained. Only on rare occasions I wrote a vocal line on a pre-existing harmony; most of the times the opposite process was carried out, with the harmonisation of vocal lines (see Figure 1). This approach allowed me to be relatively free in the harmonic choices, yet preserving a natural character in most of the vocal parts. It was extremely challenging for me to set text in a foreign language to music, and I tried to preserve the natural way of pronouncing words in English, also minimising special treatment of the voice, such as broken words, repetitions, shuffled words or syllables, vocal gestures and utterances. Such a treatment would have not fitted the realistic character of the libretto.

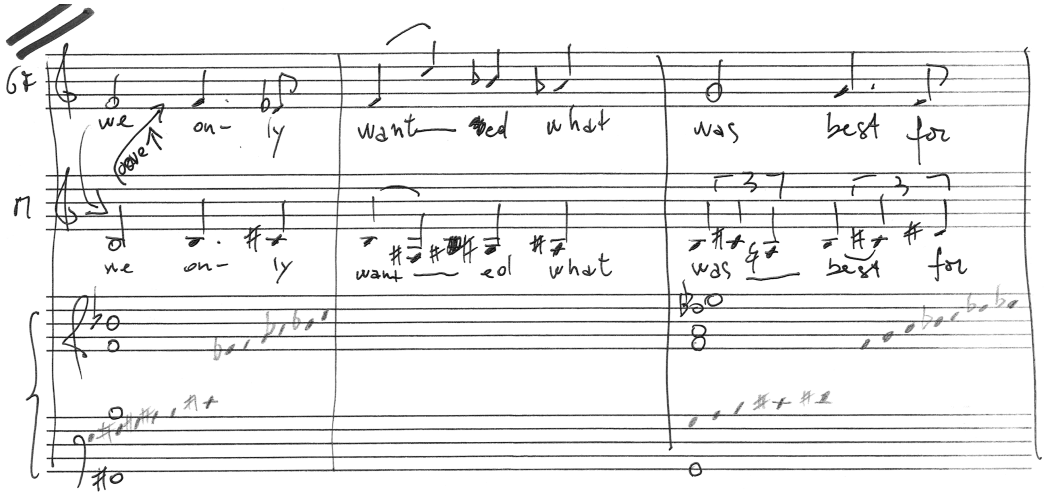


Figure 1: Draft showing some vocal lines (composed first) and some underlying harmonies with possible scalar material (composed after)

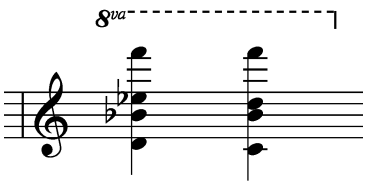
The decision to adopt different compositional styles was also coherent with the adoption of no specific pitch organisation system. However, two main frameworks had a deep influence on the way I approached the pitch content in my work, and often constituted the conceptual basis of my harmonic and melodic choices.

The first of these frameworks is George Russell's *Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organisation*. At the base of this theory are the Lydian scale and the concept of Vertical Tonal Gravity. Russell (1959) considers the Lydian scale as

the most stable mode, obtained by the first seven tones of a juxtaposition of fifths, and the Lydian Tonic (rather than the major scale tonic) as the note towards which all the tonal tensions resolve, driven by the Tonal Gravity Field, which organises all the twelve pitches in a vertical stack of fifths. In this way, the pitches can be classified in terms of distance from the Lydian Tonic, and they are organised to form the Lydian Chromatic Scale. From this scale, seven principal and four horizontal scales are derived, which harmonisation includes all the possible chords used in classical music. It is interesting to note that not only all the traditional Western harmonic systems fit Russell's system, but also more modern approaches such as twelve-tone atonal and contemporary composition. Russell's idea that there is no right or wrong note but only close or distant note to the Lydian Tonic had a profound impact on jazz musicians in the fifties and sixties, including Miles Davis and John Coltrane (who both studied and used Russell's method), and fit with my ideas of consonance and dissonance.

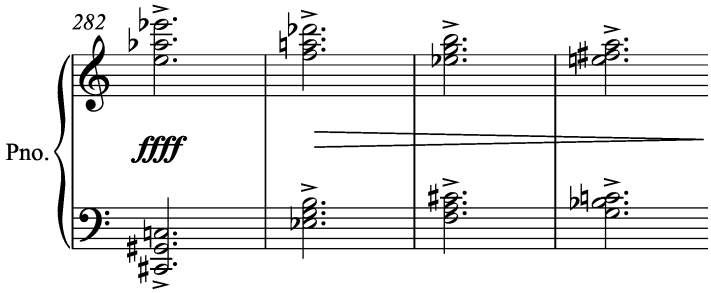
Although reticent to use many of the scales identified by Russell because of their strong modal character, or their jazz flavour, I nonetheless frequently used the Lydian scale for its folk flavour, sometimes as the 'arrival' of harmonic and melodic tensions, sometimes as a neutral starting point. I also adopted the concept of 'closeness or distance' to treat consonance and dissonance as two equal possibilities for describing specific situations or characters in the opera.

The second framework that influenced my work is constituted by the 'mirror' approach to harmony. Vincent Persichetti (1961) in his *Twentieth-Century Harmony* dedicates a chapter to the compound and mirror harmony. I came across this text when I was retrospectively analysing my own music and trying to find a system to define my chordal constructions. Persichetti defines as compound chords the superimposition of miscellaneous intervals, rather than just thirds, fourths and seconds (or their inversions). These chords may contain consonances and dissonances, in different ratios, and arranged in different positions (towards the bottom, middle or top portion of the chord). Many of the chords I have used can be defined as compound chords:



Example 1: Compound chords in Act 2, mm. 534-535

The other definition is that of mirror chord: "Any chord (tertian, quartal, secundal, polychordal, or compound) may be mirrored by adding below the original formation strictly inverted intervals in symmetrical reflection" (Persichetti, 1961, p.172). Simple consonant triads can generate dissonant chords when mirrored; polychords can generate even more dissonant chords and reflected compound chords generate complex structures. This is also a concept that I have been subconsciously applying to some of my compositions in recent years (for example in the *Mirror* series), and has become a technical device that I have used in *The Cry of the Double Bass*. With this method I have been able to obtain a very diverse range of chords, both consonant and dissonant (see Example 2). However, a richer variety was also obtained by not following the reflection rule strictly. Another application of the mirror technique has been used for most of the toy piano pieces and will be illustrated in Chapter 3.

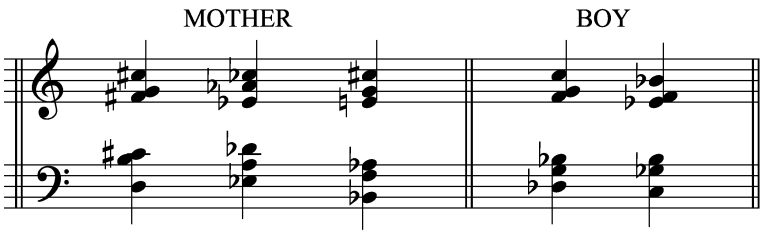


Example 2: harmonic progression using mirror chords, Act 2 mm. 282-285

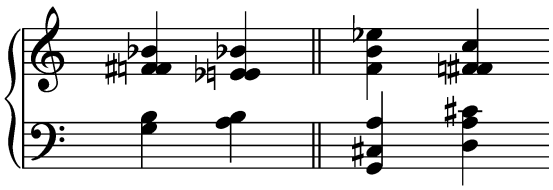
I have only partially based my pitch selection according to the aforementioned systems. Harmony is treated like a character, constantly oscillating between states of consonant and dissonant behaviour, within episodes and across scenes

and acts. At a very initial stage of planning my harmonic approach, I identified different characters for each act:

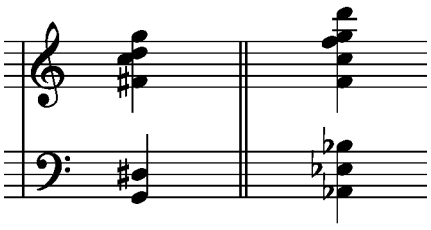
- in Act 1 (childhood): a constant oscillation between consonant and moderately dissonant harmony, reflecting the tension between the BOY's innocent attitude towards music and his family and society's aversion to it (see Example 3);
- in Act 2 (adulthood): an initial 'ambiguous' harmony, reflecting the YOUNG MAN's interior doubts, followed by some more consonant material towards the dramatic ending, reflecting his passionate reaction; (see Example 4);
- in Act 3 (musicianship): an initial strongly dissonant harmony, accompanying the YOUNG MAN's struggle, gradually resolving in a more consonant one towards the happy ending of the opera (see Example 5);.



Example 3: some chords used in Act 1, episode 2 mm. 75-89, moderately dissonant for MOTHER, more consonant for BOY



Example 4: some 'ambiguous' piano chords used in Act 2, mm. 115-17 and mm. 691-695



Example 5: chords used in Act 3, dissonant in m. 98 and consonant in m. 694

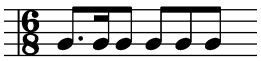
Most of the times I have intuitively harmonised the vocal lines according to my taste and to the sense of harmonic direction I wanted to achieve in a specific passage or episode. I have often used extended triadic harmonies, informed by my jazz background, as well as conventional major, minor and dominant chords, particularly when quoting or paraphrasing some existing music. I have used the alternation of chords with different degrees of consonance/dissonance to produce harmonic motion, and I have achieved more or less tension by varying the speed of the changes.

3. Rhythms and tempi

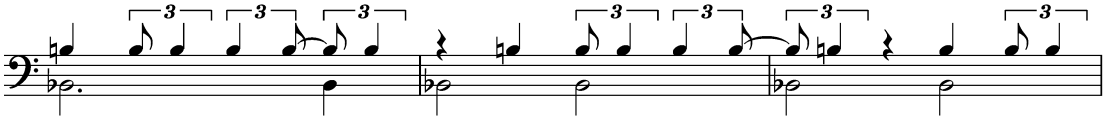
As well as the harmony, the rhythmical figures and tempi changes are often used to describe situations or characters. If the harmony at times reaches high levels of complexity, my treatment of the rhythms rarely does. In particular the vocal lines tend to use simpler rhythms, often contrasting with the underlying instrumental pace.

A few rhythms recur constantly throughout the opera, and most of the times in very recognisable and unmodified ways. The first of these rhythms was inspired by a section in Süskind's play, where the double bassist mentions with an envious tone the end of Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No.5* as an example of solo timpani's music. The fragment is taken from the timpani rhythmic pattern at the end of the third movement of the concerto (example 6). I have used it also in various modified forms, mainly in association with the timpani, to accompany

BIG C or related situations (instances are in Episodes 3, 13, 17, 22, 24, 29, see example 7).

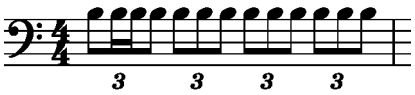


Example 6: timpani rhythmical fragment in Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No.5*



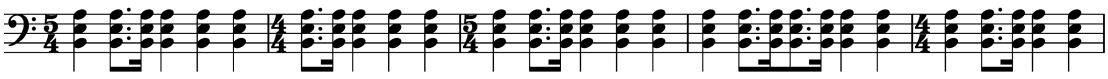
Example 7: modified timpani rhythm in Act 1, figure 134

A very similar rhythm (see Example 8), introduced in the 'Fanfare' in episode 12, is often associated with bright instruments, and describes the BOY's enthusiasm towards music. It will recur often without variations, to underline joyous moments. However, in one instance (figure 199), it is played by the timpani in the co-presence of YOUNG MAN and BOY to announce an imminent crisis.



Example 8: 'Fanfare' rhythmical fragment, at figure 105

A third rhythm is the 'funeral march-like' fragment used in Episode 10, after GRANDFATHER's death. This fragment is flexible in its meter (see example 9), and is associated with the BOY's longing feeling. It will reappear in a modified form later in the work (Episode 23) to recall that same feeling.



Example 9: Funeral march-like rhythm with metric variations, at figure 88

My approach to rhythm has been similar to the one towards harmony. I have often followed the rhythms imposed by the text and by the dramatic pace of the events succession, rather than planning specific rhythmical patterns or variations. However, I outlined three broad rhythmical characters I wanted to use for different situations, as I did with the harmony:

- complex rhythms, accompanied by frequent time signature changes, to describe difficult relationships between characters, or animated dialogues; their nature is guided mainly by the text articulation, the space between sentences, and associated with a specific character and their nervous behaviours (for example MOTHER);

- simple rhythms and isorhythmical patterns, to describe straightforward relationships (for example between BOY and GRANDFATHER), clear and definite situations, emotional moments or potent dramatic climaxes;

- textural rhythms that hide a sense of pulse, to describe quiet or dreamy situations (for example the YOUNG MAN's journey to the mountains, or the GRANDFATHER's song in Act 3).

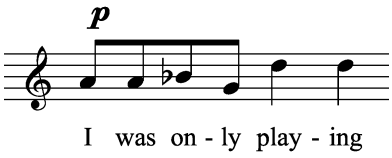
CHAPTER 3: THE MAIN WORK - DESCRIPTION OF EPISODES

PROLOGUE

The work starts with no music, very dim lights and the protagonist BOY walking timidly on stage. The very first sound that is heard at figure 1 is produced by the BOY on the double bass. This has a strong symbolic meaning, as the double bass is the leading thread embedded in the opera, both as a musical and a physical presence (or absence). Some simple gestures on the double bass reveal the naive character of the BOY, and produce three main musical elements which will recur throughout the opera: the harmonic resonance of the double bass' open strings, the power of percussion and the importance of instinctive vocal utterances.

The voice of BIG C from off-stage at figure 2 suddenly throws the audience into another dimension, which will become clearer later on in the opera: BIG C is the main antagonist in the story, the foe, his character played by a physical-theatre actor with slow and sinuous (and insidious) moves, his voice amplified and electronically modified, and later on (see Episode 3) accompanied by some sinister timpani music and a high-pitched hiss produced by string harmonics.

It is now that the very first hint of the BOY's character and naivety is expressed in music through use of a simple and melodic line, based on a minor triad, which will recur often in the work:



Example 10: BOY's melody in the Prologue

In the Prologue it also becomes clear that the musicians, now entering the stage and setting up for the performance, are not a mere musical accompaniment but an integral part of the narration. They constitute the BOY's musical imagination.

At figure 3 the BOY triggers the tuning of the ensemble by means of a tuning fork. This gesture reinforces his relationship with the ensemble. Symbolically, the A is given by the double bass and followed by all the other instruments. The tuning moment is entirely notated. I have always found the randomness of this moment very fascinating and beautiful, but I wanted to have some control over it, especially to allow some open string combinations. Several flourishing runs from the 'more agile' instruments (flute in bars 7-8, clarinet from bar 8, violin in bar 9) are sarcastically answered in bar 11 by the double bass, with a very short quotation of the opening of Dittersdorf's *Concerto in E major*.

ACT 1

SCENE 1

Episode 1: The Call

The ensemble tuning fades into the opening of Act 1. This first episode can be considered as an instrumental 'overture' (although the opera has already had its start), which was necessary to follow the detailed actions indicated in the stage directions.

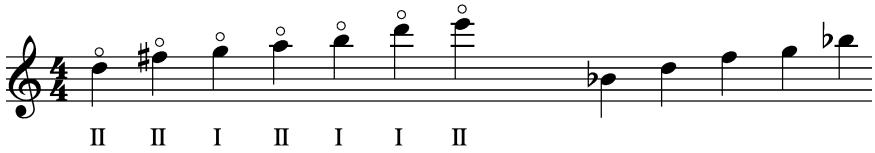
Its musical character expresses a topic, which is explored in the whole work: the constant fluctuation between consonance and dissonance.

Three main sections can be identified:

Figure 4 to 6

This section has its origin in my preliminary composition *On D*. The background provided by the strings uses seven pitches (see example 11) derived from some double bass natural harmonics on the first two strings. These pitches form two triads: D major and E minor. The string background is complemented by the airy sound of the woodwinds and brass, to describe a journey that is about to start. The sense of domestic boredom is initially emphasised by the diegetic sound of the wood blocks marking the ticking of a clock. The woodwind and brass, with the added vibraphone, gradually introduce five new pitches, which destabilise

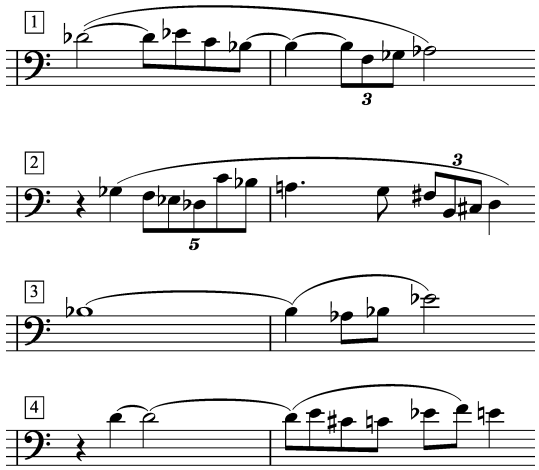
the consonant harmonies created by the strings, giving a sense of imminent change. The Bb major triad adds up to the previous pitches. This combination is very important and will constitute the basis for many of the harmonies used in the opera. The breaking up of the ticking wood blocks rhythm further underlines the imminent change, as if reality was gradually distorting. In fact, it is at this point that the BOY's attention is grabbed as he starts to hear some music coming from his imaginary world.



Example 11: pitch material derived from double bass natural harmonics, plus added pitches

Figure 6 to 9

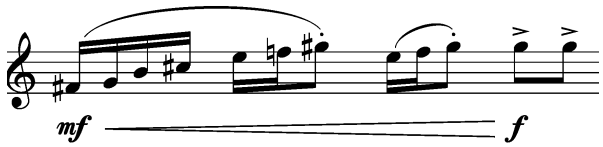
The main feature of this section are the melodic fragments played by the horn (see example 12). The BOY is called by them and goes to the piano to try and imitate them, with increasing excitement. More importantly, these melodic fragments are the seminal material that will recur later in the opera, when the YOUNG MAN is called back to the double bass. They represent the 'call', which will be expressed in form of vocal lines and double bass melodies throughout the opera.



Example 12: some of the horn melodic fragments (No.3 is the 'Call' motif)

Figure 9 to 12

This last section of the opening episode increases in density and volume, as the BOY gets more excited and continues to interact with his imaginary ensemble. Oliver Knussen's opera *Where the wild things are* (which in turn was influenced by Maurice Ravel's *L'enfant et les sortilèges*) also features a very similar situation, with a restless boy playing and making a racket. However, in my work the main focus of the BOY is music. His use of the toy piano is complemented by other toy instruments (mainly percussion), joined by other loud sounds played by one of the percussionists in the ensemble. The triplets of the temple blocks drive the other instrumental parts. Some musical material in this section comes from the preliminary composition *On D*:



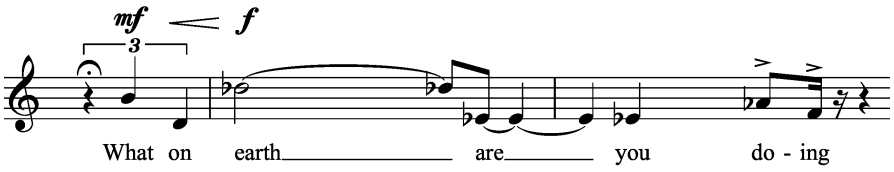
Example 13: clarinet fragment in bar 70 of Act 1, taken from the preliminary composition *On D*

The big final crescendo will eventually prompt the MOTHER to stop the BOY making such a racket.

Episode 2: Mother

From the first few bars of this episode, MOTHER's character is established through music (as it will happen with the other characters in the opera). Her anxious behaviour and extreme apprehension towards the BOY is expressed with the use of edgy and discontinuous vocal lines, with leaps and dissonant intervals, often in a very fast tempo (see example 14) and accompanied by the sharp sound of woodwinds and percussion. This musical treatment will be consistent throughout the opera. However, as can be seen later on in this episode and in other moments, other traits of her character are revealed through the use

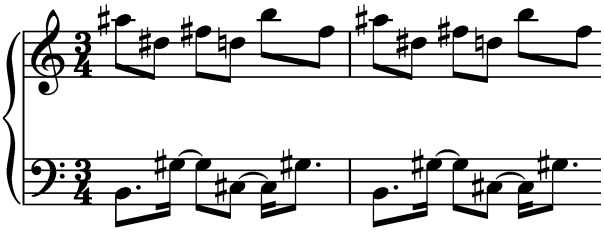
of more consonant and melodic material, especially when dealing with emotions and/or showing empathy towards the BOY.



Example 14: MOTHER's melodic line, Act 1, mm. 75-77.

On the contrary, the BOY's character and naivety is expressed in music through use of simple and melodic vocal lines, often accompanied by the glockenspiel, which gives a childish flavour to the music. His line from the Prologue 'I was only playing' reappears here. The BOY's enthusiasm is often underlined by diatonic instrumental gestures (for example in bar 85, or 103).

At figure 15, an important musical fragment is introduced (see example 15): it is what I will refer to as the 'reflective' motif. It is formed by the notes of a major diatonic scale, where also the minor third is introduced. This compositional device is extensively used throughout the opera in order to give some harmonies an ambiguous and shadowy flavour. The floating character of this motif is obtained by imposing a line in 3/4 (top) to a line in 4/4 (bottom). The 'reflective' motif (in different keys and rhythmically modified versions) appears whenever a character is absorbed in his or her own internal world. In this episode, it preludes the MOTHER's piece on the toy piano. This moment reveals something about the character's interior feelings when approaching the instrument, and hints at something about her past that is not explicitly described in the text.



Example 15: The 'reflective' motif

At figure 16 the first toy piano piece, played by MOTHER, is introduced. The decision to make some of the singers play the toy piano for real required the use of fairly simple material and techniques, nonetheless containing harmonic material coherent with the rest of the work. Taking a number of works by composer Vincent Persichetti as models (for example the *Mirror Etudes*, the *Little Mirror Book*, and the *Twelfth Piano Sonata*) , I have used mirrored melodies and harmonies in most of the toy piano pieces as their execution is facilitated by their visual symmetry.

This first toy piano piece starts from diatonic and consonant material, gradually extending its range upwards (and hence downwards), to cover more dissonant harmonies, as MOTHER's sense of frustration increases throughout the piece. She will eventually give up, with a strong gesture, and in spite of the BOY's incitement at 17, she will dismiss music at figure 18.

Episode 3: Big C

MOTHER freezes, and the lights dim on the first physical appearance of the antagonist BIG C. His entrances in Act 1 always occur after some sense of frustration pervaded the previous action. This episode splits the larger scene structure in two (see also Episodes 7 and 11). The BIG C's words and moves are accompanied by some subtle timpani music. It is not unusual to find low-pitched instruments to accompany the bad character of a story (for example in the opera *The Minotaur* by Harrison Birtwistle). However, my decision to feature the timpani as a solo instrument during the BIG C's appearances was inspired by the previously mentioned section of Süskind's play. The simple rhythm that accompanies BIG C can be seen from figure 19 onwards in some modified versions. Although often morphed into more complex units with the rhythm getting more articulated (to complement the rhythm of the text), the fragment will later reoccur in its original form (Episode 24). Four different pitches in the timpani part are used in each of the four episodes where BIG C appears (3, 7, 11

and 13). This episode uses the pitches F2, B2, C3, F#3. Their choice is based on the intervals they contain: 1 minor second, 2 diminished fifths, 2 perfect fifths and 1 augmented unison. Their combination gives rise to strong dissonances aimed at characterising BIG C's presence as unpleasant.

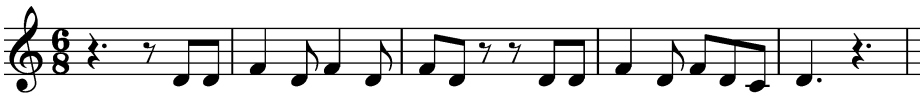
The *Eight Pieces for Four Timpani* by Elliott Carter had a strong influence on the writing of these timpani episodes. As each of Carter's pieces utilise a different palette of sound colours through the use of different techniques, so the four BIG C's episodes in Act 1 explore different use of dynamics and techniques, in order to follow the narrative, in particular BIG C's interjections. I have adopted Carter's symbology to refer to the different parts of the skin to be played: C for central position, N for normal position, R for near the rim. The continuous shift between centre and normal position, together with the constant rhythmic and dynamic fluctuations metaphorically describe the untruthful nature of BIG C, leading to a terrifying crescendo.

A high E7 harmonic on the violin frames the sonic space in this episode. This continuous high-pitched sound creates some extra tension, simulating a sort of disturbing underlying musical tinnitus. The BOY's motif 'I was only playing' towards the end will bring the lights back on to reality, with MOTHER noticing her son talking to no one, leading to the next episode.

Episode 4: Normal

This is one of the longest and most complex episodes in the opera, due to both its text length and to the diversity of characters present in the narration. It was conceived as a comedy piece on its own, with an introduction, four sections all divided by a refrain sung by the choir, and a finale. Its composition spanned over several months, in which my compositional style was developing, hence the strong heterogeneity of the music present in it. Moreover, many musical references influenced the composition of the different sections, as I will explain in detail.

Every character is intentionally accompanied by a stylistically different music and by different tempi. MOTHER's hysterical character is underlined by the fast paced and edgy music (as it happened in Episode 2); the careless FATHER is introduced by dull musical gestures and slow paced music; solemn chords accompany the PRIEST; the TEACHER's frantic behaviour is characterised by fast highly punctuated and rhythmical music; finally to close the circle, the FATHER will reappear under his daytime job hat as the DOCTOR. All together they form a choir, which sings the refrain 'it's not normal' between each section. This refrain was the starting point for the composition of this episode, and it comes from the use of a three-note fragment, with a minor pentatonic feel:



Example 16: the 'it's not normal' refrain fragment

My passion for jazz has had an influence in the composition of this episode, which at times loosely recall some 'Broadway musical' features. The operatic and comedic potential of the episode is also exploited towards the end of it, when all the characters sing together their own words, parodying the big *tutti* finale of the traditional nineteenth-century Italian opera. The BOY is a passive presence, being dragged by his MOTHER to see the various authorities in town, and will only start singing again in the next episode.

This long episode can be divided into six main sections:

Figure 23 to 24

This 16-bar instrumental introduction presents same musical material that will reoccur in the rest of the episode. The strings, counterpointed by sinuous lines of the flute and clarinet, introduce the 'it's not normal' fragment. The horn and the tuba provide some material that will be exploited later in 'The Priest' section (for example the descending chords at bar 161, or those at bars 167-68), and so does the cello (the line in bars 163-64). The clarinet and violin pattern from bar 161

will be used during 'The Father' episode, while the descending leap of the flute, clarinet, violin and cello will reappear in modified versions later (for example in the BOY's line in bars 175-76).

Figure 24 to 33 ('The Father' section)

This section re-establishes the dialogue between MOTHER and BOY, interrupted with the entrance of BIG C, using the same musical gestures used before (i.e. angular vocal lines for MOTHER, more melodic lines doubled by the glockenspiel for BOY). At figure 25, the tom-toms, cello and bass, introduce a version of the 'it's not normal' refrain, followed by a dull fragment played by horn, tuba, viola and cello (already heard in the introductory section), that preannounce the entrance of the BOY's FATHER. The family comedy starts, with the interaction between MOTHER and FATHER underlined by an alternation of slow and fast tempi. The music material is fragmented and not developed, in order to emphasise a non-musical and uninspiring family environment. Towards the end of this section, at figure 31, the MOTHER sings a line, which I will call the 'leading' motif, when the MOTHER drags the BOY to the next character. The 'leading' motif utilises different music material: in this first instance, an E Lydian scale. Finally at figure 32, the 'it's not normal' refrain appears in its original version. Its pitches combine the two triads of D major and Bb major already used in Episode 1.

Figure 33 to 43 ('The Priest' section)

As in the previous section, the interaction between MOTHER and PRIEST is underlined by different musical material and tempi. The PRIEST answers MOTHER's anxious requests with calm and solemn lines, accompanied by string chords in a tight voicing, in order to resemble an organ (for instance at figure 36). The drama increases until the second 'it's not normal' refrain. This version is rhythmically tighter and harmonically more complex than its version in the previous section. The pentatonic fragment is used in different keys (E for the soprano, A for the baritone, C for the bass), oscillating between major and minor, and with a 'mirrored' version (sang by the mezzo-soprano). The 'leading' motif sang by MOTHER this time follows the refrain, using a minor scale with the

major seventh. A very short instrumental quotation of the 'it's not normal' fragment leads to the next section.

Figure 43 to 51 ('The Teacher' section)

The composition of this section was very much influenced by the section of Ligeti's *Le Grand Macabre* (Scene 3, figure 387 onwards) , featuring a nervous and paranoid character (Gepopo, the chief of the Secret Police). I wanted to achieve a similar sonority for this episode. The common feature is the extensive use of percussion, such as the bongos, together with the brightness and sharpness of the xylophone. I analysed Ligeti's sophisticated use of rhythms, and tried to achieve a similar result by shifting the accents of the bongos so that they would not correspond to the strong accents of the bar (for example, first three bars at figure 43). The rest of the ensemble strongly punctuates the quaver feel, with accented and *staccatissimo* articulations, reinforced by the double bass Bartók pizzicato. The harmony proceeds with a fast pace, changing chords every one or two bars.

At figure 44, the MOTHER and the PRIEST reply with a melody used by MOTHER before (bar 223, figure 35). As the drama increases, MOTHER and TEACHER sympathetically sing about the tragedy of being an artist. MOTHER's 'leading' motif in this episode uses the same material of the 'it's not normal' refrain that follows, an A minor pentatonic scale, although towards the end of the refrain it extends to a hexatonic scale. The character of this refrain is different from the ones in the previous episodes, having much quieter dynamics in order to build up some tension. The rhythmic vitality is kept with three out of five participants only punctuating a few words ('normal', 'noise and fuss').

Figure 51 to 54 ('The Doctor' section)

This section reaches the quietest dynamics in the episode, as MOTHER gets more worried, with the chorus punctuating a creeping pulse in 9/8 that leads to the last 'it's not normal' refrain.

Figure 54 to 58

This finale of Episode 4 was conceived to recall those big dramatic choral moments of the nineteenth-century Italian operatic tradition, when all the singers on stage sing passionately together, often using different words that most of the time remain unintelligible to the audience. To reach the climax of the episode, with a sense of collective madness, I asked the librettist to provide some final lines for all the singers to sing at the same time. It was also my intention to transcribe some real operatic material and to quote it in my opera, to create a sort of 'opera within opera' moment. In the course of some research into this topic I come across very few examples of operas that contain reference to the operatic world. Although some composers like Jacques Offenbach in *Les contes d'Hoffmann* or Richard Strauss in *Intermezzo* set some scenes in an operatic context (an opera house, a rehearsal), I have only found a real opera representation within the opera in two works: *Osud* (Fate) by Leoš Janáček, and the more recent *Doctor Ox's Experiment* by Gavin Bryars. The former opera features some moments from a fictional opera by the protagonist composer Živný, while the latter actually stages an important scene from an existing opera, *Les Huguenots* by Giacomo Meyerbeer. At the end of Act 1 of *Doctor Ox's Experiment*, Bryars interestingly overlaps a choir and Verne's fictional characters with Meyerbeer's duet between Raoul and Valentine, adding new multidimensional layers to this operatic scene.

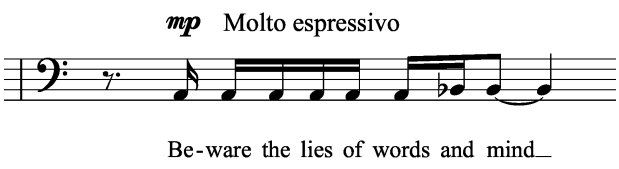
My approach to quotation is slightly different. I reworked the big choir at the end of the first act of *Turandot* and readapted it to my libretto. Some melodic lines have remained the same (for example MOTHER and GRANDFATHER's, who use the same melodic intervals as in Puccini) but other lines have been newly composed (PRIEST and TEACHER). Some of Puccini's original rhythms have been modified to fit the new text, and although the vocal harmonies reflect the original chord progression, the orchestration is very different. Flute and violin add extra pitches to those chords (later followed by tuba and double bass) and frame the choir, while internal parts (viola and cello) recall the 'it's not normal' refrain in counterpoint with the vocal lines.

At this moment, the GRANDFATHER takes the BOY out of this collective madness and they become spectators as if watching a real opera scene.

SCENE 2

Episode 5: Grandfather

The end of the last episode functioned as a transition from one setting to another. From the nervous environment of Scene 1 we switch into a more calm and reflective Scene 2, which establishes the relationship between the BOY and his GRANDFATHER. A few main musical decisions were taken, in order to break from the previous scene. Firstly, the orchestration is condensed, with the use of small instrument combinations; secondly, the extensive range of percussion instruments heard previously is now reduced to a minimum. The glockenspiel accompanies the BOY, while the GRANDFATHER is mainly associated with strings. The vocal lines are smoother and the harmony is generally more consonant (for example the opening Bb major9 chord at figure 58 or the G#m7 string chord in bar 361). The two characters interact without the abrupt tempi changes that characterised the previous scene, emphasising the more understanding and supportive role of the GRANDFATHER. The core of this episode is constituted by the GRANDFATHER's song at figure 62. The musical material of this section comes from the preliminary composition *Sonatina for tuba and electronics*. The authoritative character of the tuba melody in the first movement of the *Sonatina* well suited the GRANDFATHER's words addressed to the BOY. In particular, the first fragment of the song (announced by the tuba in bar 395) constitutes the 'Grandfather' motif, and it will occur several times later in the opera:



Example 17: the 'Grandfather' motif, Act 1, bar 397

The shift between strings in the previous section and wind and brass that now accompany the GRANDFATHER's song emphasise another side of GRANDFATHER's personality, that of a mentoring and advising figure to the BOY. The lack of harmonic instruments in this (and later episodes) is compensated by the use of soft pitched percussion such as the vibraphone and marimba, as opposed to the glockenspiel and xylophone previously used for livelier episodes.

Episode 6: Lesson

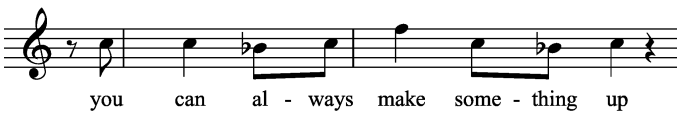
This short episode originates from another 'mirror' piece, played on the toy piano by the BOY. The development of the piece is connected with the piano lesson the BOY is taking from a teacher, who occasionally cuffs him (ironically symbolised by the strike of the whip). Each section represents a symbolic moment in the piano training, very much influenced by my personal childhood memories. Figure 65 obsessively concentrates on the hand falling on the middle D key (reflecting pitch of the 'mirror'); figure 66 introduces the first articulations; figure 67 onwards concentrate on scale and arpeggio fragments, exploring various modes, with the two hands always mirrored. The strings reinforce the harmonies created by the toy piano throughout, while the piccolo flourishing figures add some motion to the upcoming momentum. The increasing sense of frustration is underlined by the entrance of the timpani, which will lead to the next episode.

Episode 7: Climbing the Hill

The second BIG C's appearance occurs after a moment of frustration, as happened in the previous scene 1. BIG C's actions and words are once again accompanied by subtle timpani music, which utilises a different sonority from what heard before, with a use of some continuous *glissandi*. The dynamics vary according to the tone of the dialogues, and reach a climax when the BOY objects BIG C's statements for the first time. In this episode, the viola replaces the violin in the 'tinnitus' role.

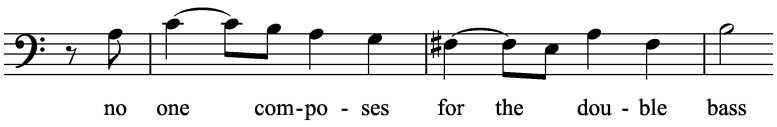
Episode 8: The Double Bass

The dialogue between BOY and GRANDFATHER is re-established at figure 72 with the same musical devices used in Episode 5 (i.e. strings accompaniment and glockenspiel). However, as soon as GRANDFATHER introduces the double bass, the tone will radically change. From figure 74 onward, GRANDFATHER's sarcastic tone towards his instrument is expressed by a faster and much more rhythmic pace. The vocal line from figure 76 is derived from the *Sonatina for tuba and electronics* (third movement). It is a very rhythmic and chromatic line, contrasting with the way GRANDFATHER has sung so far, and denoting a sense of irony as well as affection towards the double bass. The actual double bass in the ensemble provides the rhythmic motor of this section, with a highly chromatic line formed mainly by augmented fourth intervals. At figure 78, the BOY's creative attitude is expressed in his vocal line by the 'Call' motif:



Example 18: the 'Call' motif in the BOY's vocal line, Act 1, mm. 530-32

After a short quotation from Puccini in bar 540 (see example 19), the BOY presents his GRANDFATHER a composition he has written. The connection between the two is symbolised by the 'mirror' between toy piano and double bass parts. The other strings complement the harmony created by the 'mirror'. At figure 84, the double bass quits, and the staging will be showing the GRANDFATHER's 'departure'. Although ambiguous at this stage, it will become clearer in the next few episodes that the GRADFATHER has died.



Example 19: quotation from Act 2 (Figure 13) of Puccini's *Turandot*, mm. 542-44

SCENE 3

Episode 9: Requiem for Grandpa

This short 'Bachian' piece was written in response to the absence of repertoire for double bass and soprano mentioned by Süskind's double bassist (Süskind, 1988p.28). It was initially conceived on its own, without a specific function in the work, and with no lyrics. However, some music was needed to reinforce the action on stage, with the BOY, MOTHER and FATHER mourning the loss of the GRANDFATHER. I opted for this duet, to be played off-stage, in order to give a sense of distance and longing. I also set the *Lux Aeterna* words from the Requiem text, to match the strict contrapuntal nature of the piece, and to give this important moment a spiritual character.

The decision to use only natural harmonics on the double bass limited the harmony options. The piece starts in the D Lydian mode. In bar 580 the G natural indicates a shift to D major mode, which quickly shift to E minor in bar 585. In bar 588 the F natural suggests a shift to D minor, confirmed at figure 87 by the difficult and flat F natural harmonic of the bass. Bar 590 contains a G#, leading tone to the following A minor mode. From bar 592 the harmony shifts ambiguously between indefinite modes, by means of chromaticisms, to finally return to a D major mode in bar 597, which leads to the end of the piece in B minor. Some melodic lines from this episode will be reused in the Epilogue.

Episode 10: Legacy

This episode is linked to the previous one by the note B, which becomes the basis for a funeral march-like rhythm. This austere pace lasts for the whole first section (figures 88 - 91), where the BOY for the first time passionately expresses his feelings. At figure 91, a quote from the opening of Act 3 of Puccini's *La Bohème* reminds of the relationship between the BOY and the GRANDFATHER established in Episode 5. The second section (from figure 92) continues with some variations to the rhythmic background, with the BOY emotionally engaged singing to the double bass, and concludes with the FATHER joining him. From

figure 93 the funeral march-like rhythm changes its function, reflecting the FATHER's rigid point of view towards music, while the strings accompany the BOY's emotional response. At figure 100, after the interjections between FATHER and BOY have gained momentum, the BOY passionately sings his final aria accompanied by the warm sound of the strings and the horn.

Episode 11: Condolences

The third appearance of BIG C has a different character from the previous ones. The loud dynamics follow the BOY's impulsive feelings, while BIG C's reply has always a more subtle tone. The BOY rises up and tries to oppose his foe. The pitch choice of Ab Bb C and E gives this episode a brighter character than the previous ones. The cello takes the 'tinnitus' role (see Episodes 3 and 7). The string presence in all the BIG C's episodes describes a downward trajectory (from violin, to viola and finally cello), which somehow symbolically represents a descent into more mature and darker phases of the BOY's life.

Episode 12: The Concert

The BOY's last spoken words from the previous episode - 'one day I'll be a great musician!' - lead directly into the next action, where he takes on conducting his imaginary orchestra in a 'Fanfare'. This gesture formally announces a house concert, in which he will perform some of his compositions. The opening of the episode sets the mood that follows. The 'Fanfare' derives from a piece I wrote for the opening of the Stratford-on-Avon Music Festival 2012 called *Festival Fanfare*. The commission asked for a connection with Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy' from the *Ninth Symphony*. Some melodic ideas were taken from it and slightly modified (for example the descending lines in bars 719 and 722), using the Lydian mode. However, the main feature is the rhythmic figure in triplets, which will reappear throughout this episode and again later in the opera, and closely related to the timpani rhythmical fragment also taken from Beethoven.

From figure 106 the tone is set as the beginning of the act, with three different musical characters for the three family members, using some of the same material previously used, with the addition of a new layer of material derived from the 'Fanfare' (for instance at figures 108, 111, 115).

At figure 121, the first of the BOY's compositions is performed. It is called 'The Magic Zoo', and it derives from the juxtaposition of three layers. Layer one is played by the BOY on the toy piano and it is my first composition, written when I was ten years old. I never thought of developing it or rearranging it, and it only came back to me when I was in need of music with a childish connotation. It was also my intention to maintain a link to a number of musical references cited in Süskind's work. Mozart was one of them, also expressed in the BOY's words 'inspired by animals and Mozart too' (bars 782-84). Hence, the second layer is the string accompaniment, which takes elements from Mozart's *Clarinet Concerto in A major* K.622 (the 'Mozartian' feel is established at figure 120 with some remnants of the *Marriage of Figaro* 'Overture'). The third layer is constituted by the flute playing the diminished fifth of the chords in the second layer, and the tuba playing a third (major or minor) below the root of the same chords. These two extra layers (strings playing *sul pont.* and the dissonant flute and tuba) give the piece an 'out of focus' character, only at times interrupted with rests, which 're-focus' the tonality.

The following section (figures 122 to 126) re-establishes the three character features. However, a change of mood occurs at figure 127, in order to introduce the second piece performed by the BOY. Bar 821 is a melodic quote from Beatles' *Because*, after which (bars 825-28) the clarinet anticipates some fragments from MOTHER's aria that comes after the meditative piece written for the GRANDFATHER, played and conducted by the BOY at figure 129. The 'reflective' motif in figures 131 and 133 frames MOTHER's passionate aria, which uses the same words she sang at the end of Episode 4 (Normal). Five seconds of silence underline the BOY's lost battle against his family, and against BIG C, who makes his last entrance in the last episode of the act.

Episode 13: Let Go Your Dreams

Two overlapped timpani rhythms (both variants of the initial 'Beethovenian' fragment) form an augmented octave (Bb2-B3), to accompany this dramatic end of act. Two more pitches are used (E3-F3) to form both two perfect and two diminished fifths with the initial pitches. This sonority, together with the very quiet dynamics, conveys both a sense of anxiety and powerlessness in this episode, which is also underlined by an off-stage choir, reminiscent of the negative voices heard in Episode 4 (Normal).

ACT 2

SCENE 1

Episode 14: Geology

In Act 2 the piano replaces the ensemble altogether, giving an aural sense of complete departure from the dense and busy sonorities of Act 1. In one of the first modern chamber operas, *The Rape of Lucretia* by Benjamin Britten, similar changes are established, with the piano solo accompanying the narrators, alternated with instrumental sections when the main characters interact. In my work, this radical change of sonority is established from the very first few bars of the act. However, the stage directions in this episode (suggesting the presence of guests at a house party) induced me to have some musicians on stage. They add euphoria to the moment and complement the sound of the piano with instrumental intermissions. The episode is constituted by some recitativi, interweaved with short instrumental gestures. The GIRLFRIEND is introduced at figure 144, and shortly after the YOUNG MAN makes his first entrance, preceded and followed by some remainders of the jolly atmosphere of the BOY's 'Fanfare' in episode 12 (for example in figure 146). This short episode concludes with a short duet sung by MOTHER and FATHER. For the first time the FATHER character is given a part to sing (even though approximately). This behaviour (which will reappear at the end of the opera) aims at showing FATHER and MOTHER as a unique 'parents' entity, used only in those few moments when the

two characters need to convey a sense of protectiveness towards their son. The melody of the duet comes from the same Puccinian melody used in Episode 4 (Normal, figure 54), although in a modified version that uses a whole-tone scale. The ambiguous harmonies played by the piano at figure 155 lead to the next episode and will become a dominant feature of Act 2.

Episode 15: Little Flat

From this episode until the last scene of Act 2, the piano will be the main accompaniment to the singers.

I identified three main purposes for the piano in this section of the opera:

1. to provide an 'intimate' feel, in relation to the physical space where the actions take place;
2. to provide an 'ambiguous' feel, in relation to the YOUNG MAN's inner feelings of the characters;
3. to provide an 'urgency' feel, in relation to the passing time and sequence of events (mainly in the long Episode 16: Seismic Activity)

In order to accomplish all these three functional objectives, I have made some very specific compositional choices, both in terms of style and musical elements. These choices are strongly driven by my personal taste for dry and essential piano music (as well as by my distaste for too embellished and virtuosic Romantic piano music), and are also coherent with the concept of intellectual virtuosity applied to the double bass later in Act 3.

The main characteristic of the piano accompaniment used in Act 2 is very often simplicity and discretion. This provides the intimate feel needed to reflect the reduced physical space in which the YOUNG MAN and his GIRLFRIEND act (their little flat). Several works had an influence on this type of piano writing. J.S. Bach's keyboard works, especially the *Inventions and Sinfonias* (BWV 772–801) and the *Goldberg Variations* (BWV 988), and Dmitri Shostakovich's *24 Preludes and*

fugues, inspired me to write in a contrapuntal way. Figure 162 of this episode (the duet between YOUNG MAN and GIRLFRIEND) is a good example of four-part chromatic counterpoint between piano and voices. Other influences that provided examples of sheer beauty and simplicity are Arnold Schoenberg's *Sechs kleine Klavierstücke op.19*, Béla Bartók's *Mikrokosmos*, some of György Ligeti's *Études pour piano* (particularly *Étude 15: White on White* from the *Troisième livre*), Luigi Dallapiccola's *Quaderno musicale di Annalibera*, and Howard Skempton's solo piano music, which bears the influence of Morton Feldman's crystalline music, and according to Parsons (1980), concentrates on the 'quality of the sound and economy of means'.

A second important characteristic of the piano music in this act is the pitch content and harmonies used. The concomitant use of minor and major thirds, minor and major sevenths, and diminished ninths (or augmented unisons), provides a sense of ambiguity and uncertainty, often associated with the YOUNG MAN's contrasting feelings. Although this harmonic device is present in much music from the twentieth century, the main inspiration came from the analysis of Henze's opera *Die Bassariden*, where the choral harmonies in the opening of the first act use both major and minor thirds in the chords. Examples of this can also be found in Skempton's music. The waltz at figure 156 contains an example of this harmonic treatment.

The third piano characteristic is the use of mechanical and fast-paced rhythms, often using the 'mirror' technique. This provides a sense of urgency and flowing of time, needed in the next episode (16: Seismic Activity), and yet maintaining a coherent link with the toy piano pieces. The rhythms, with an abundant use of syncopations, are often informed by the jazz idiom, but also by the music of Ligeti, in particular some sections of his opera *Le Grand Macabre* and again some pieces from the *Études pour piano* (*Étude 4: Fanfares* from the *Premier livre*).

In the whole episode, as in the next one, there is no real emotional peak. The music brings the action forward with the minimum amount of dynamic fluctuations. This sonority represents the YOUNG MAN's life without music, with the only exception at figure 158, when the off-stage strings recall the 'reflective'

motif, triggered by the GIRLFRIEND's request for the YOUNG MAN to play the piano. This moment mirrors the sequence at figures 14 and 15 of Act 1 between BOY and MOTHER, helping in establishing the same type of attitude the GIRLFRIEND has towards the YOUNG MAN.

This episode concludes with a duet at figure 162. Its chromatic nature was inspired by the love duet between Amanda and Amando in Act 1 of *Le Grand Macabre*. However, love is not the main focus of this episode, nor is a main theme in the opera, and the relationship between YOUNG MAN and his GIRLFRIEND is musically realised without too much emphasis, in a pretty, nonchalant and at times sarcastic way (for example with the accidental quotation from the Beatles' song *Every Little Thing* in bars 83-84).

SCENE 2

Episode 16: Seismic Activity

This is the central and core episode of the opera, also the longest in Act 2, when the YOUNG MAN starts to feel the desire to reconnect with music. The complex structure is divided in three main sections:

Section 1	165 - 170	YOUNG MAN and GIRLFRIEND in the flat
	171	First call
	172 - 173	First encounter with the double bass
Section 2	174 - 176	YOUNG MAN and GIRLFRIEND in the flat
	177 - 179	Second call
	180 - 182	Second encounter (YOUNG MAN's song)
Section 3	183 - 184	YOUNG MAN and FATHER
	185	Third call
	186 - 189	Third encounter and GIRLFRIEND's song

The scheme above shows how each section is, in turn, divided into three sub-sections. In both sections 1 and 2, the first sub-sections have an initial static and

monotone pace, characterised by the repetitions of chords or arpeggios with both thirds (minor and major) and sevenths (also minor and major) in the piano accompaniment. The YOUNG MAN's lines are monotone as he studies geology (figures 168 and 174), but the musical intensity increases when he starts to subconsciously 'hear' the call within him (expressed by his humming and singing). The first sub-section of the third section is characterised by the monotone and steady counterpoint underlying the spoken dialogue between YOUNG MAN and his FATHER. The second sub-section in each of the three main sections is an instrumental part, which uses piano 'mirror' techniques, and fast and intense rhythms. These parts symbolise and describe the urgency of the YOUNG MAN to run and visit his GRANDFATHER's double bass; the third sub-section represents the three encounters with the double bass, which become progressively more engaging and dramatic going towards the closure of the episode.

The many YOUNG MAN's vocal utterances in this episode (humming and singing in figure 165, in bars 144-45, figure 172, bars 237-38, bars 387-92) constitute an important musical feature. Some of these melodic fragments were already heard in Episode 1 by the BOY, and are now 'regurgitated' by the YOUNG MAN. They are slightly developed, and they will find their final and complete appearance in Episode 28 (Concert No.2) played on the double bass.

The rhythmically intense and jazz-influenced second call in figure 177, followed by the YOUNG MAN's heartfelt song during his second encounter with the double bass in figure 180 is the mid-point of the opera, and a symbolic climax of Act 2. The piano accompaniment to the song is similar to the one used in the duet between YOUNG MAN and GIRLFRIEND at the end of the previous episode. The piano counterpoint is chromatic, its harmonic content ambiguous, yet with a strong melodic character. At the end of the song, the piano presents a chromatic variation on the 'reflective' motif (bars 324-25).

The sub-section starting at figure 183 features a spoken dialogue between FATHER and YOUNG MAN. It is one of the rare moments in the opera when the FATHER seems to empathise with his son. The musical material that precedes

this dialogue is very simple, and at times seemingly dull as it was in the FATHER's appearance in Act 1. This two-part counterpoint underlies the actual dialogue and remains understated, with no dynamic range. However, it contains some important material that will be developed in the last episode of the opera, when the YOUNG MAN finally reunites with his parents.

Towards the end of the episode at figure 187, the GIRLFRIEND's attitude towards music reflects the same attitude MOTHER had, and in fact some melodic fragments (as well as words) of the GIRLFRIEND's song are taken from MOTHER's aria at the end of Act 1.

SCENE 3

Episode 17: The Restaurant

This is the second episode that uses diegetic music with a small ensemble playing in the restaurant setting. In figure 190 I decided to achieve a jazz sonority by using some clichés, like the walking bass line and the triplet feel on the cymbal. The harmony loosely follows a I-VI-II-V chord progression, although both piano and clarinet play chromatically, masking this harmonic progression. From figure 190 onwards the 'family' dynamics heard before in Episode 14 (Geology) are re-established, with a similar pace, and fragments of the jolly 'Fanfare' reappear at figure 196.

From figure 198 there is a sudden change of pace and a very quick escalation of events that will lead to the YOUNG MAN's aggressive reaction towards the BOY. A short toy piano piece played by the BOY is gently accompanied and taken over by the piano (again using contrapuntal 'mirror' techniques). The timpani has also been introduced, symbolising the negative forces at work against the YOUNG MAN. His emotional eruption lasts only eight bars (figure 200), leading straight into the next episode. My intention was to make the actions on stage occur at a very fast pace, in such a way that it is not entirely clear what is happening.

Episode 18: Grandfather's Song

The strings accompaniment to the GRANDFATHER's reappearance, together with the change of lights, projects the audience into a contrasting 'dreamy' dimension. An orchestral sonority has not been heard since the end of Act 1 and, should project into a new dimension. The GRANDFATHER's tone in this two-verse song is very similar to his song in Act 1 (figure 62), imparting a moral lesson to the YOUNG MAN, and again re-establishing his mentoring role and influence on his grandson. The textural harmonies played by the strings are often diatonic and in consonance with the vocal line, although not observing any tonal progression.

Episode 19: My Life Has Got To Change

The full orchestral forces, with the extended string section, make their sudden entrance for this dramatic episode that leads to the end of Act 2. All the instruments are busy underlining the YOUNG MAN's excitement about his resolution to study music again. The harmonies are dense, there is a strong sense of verticality, and the isorhythms of the strings reveal a bigger set-up than in Act 1 (this will become visually evident only in the next act, with the full ensemble on stage). Fast exchanges between all the characters reach the climax when it is revealed that the double bass was sold at an auction. From figure 211 onwards the YOUNG MAN's rage is supported by the strong and displaced instrumental accents. An increase in tempo, dynamics and rhythmical activity is reached at figure 215, when the YOUNG MAN decides to break the engagement, which triggers the desperate reaction of MOTHER and GIRLFRIEND's duet at figure 216. Finally the pace gradually decreases towards the YOUNG MAN's song at figure 220. The piano accompaniment reprises some harmonic elements previously used (major and minor thirds and sevenths), and it is soon after supported by the strings. The full orchestral forces help the YOUNG MAN in stating his questions at the end of the episode, with the use of a loose A7-Dm cadence repeated three times.

ACT 3

SCENE 1

Episode 20: Lesson No.2

The relevance of the double bass in Act 3 is stated from the very opening of the act: a double bass quartet representing the YOUNG MAN surrounded by other students at first double bass class. As Barry Green (1987, p.81) points out "The very word 'learning' brings up classroom memories of boredom, frustration and tedious repetition for many of us". The way I conceived this episode is mindful of Green's words and very much informed by my personal experience as a double bass student and by the observation of differential stages of progress among students. I wanted to exploit different aspects of the learning process in a sequential order, and to display how the students reacted to these aspects in different ways, often resolving conflicts or technical problems at their own pace and time.

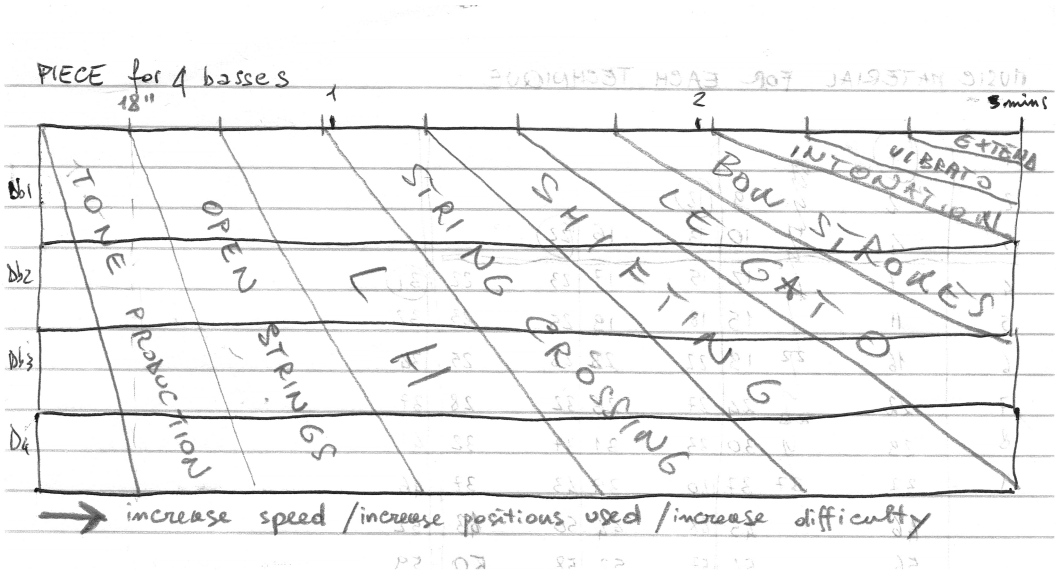


Figure 2: First conceptual sketch for the bass quartet opening Act 3

Figure 2 shows my first sketch for this concept: time is on the horizontal axis and the four bassists are on the vertical axis. The sloping lines delimit different technical aspects following the basic list outlined by Carl Fisher (1997) in his

violin methods: tone production, playing on open strings, the left hand, string crossing, shifting positions, legato, bow strokes, intonation, vibrato and extended techniques. The diagram shows how every player reaches the same technical stages at different times: player 1, supposedly the more talented, will reach advanced stages sooner than the other players.

This episode was also inspired by the study of Gunther Schuller's *Quartet for four double basses*. Two movements of the latter work use scordatura for the basses. I tried to find a way to achieve a combination of scordatura that would allow the use of the entire chromatic scale on natural harmonics. The following diagram shows my final choice for the tuning of the four double basses:

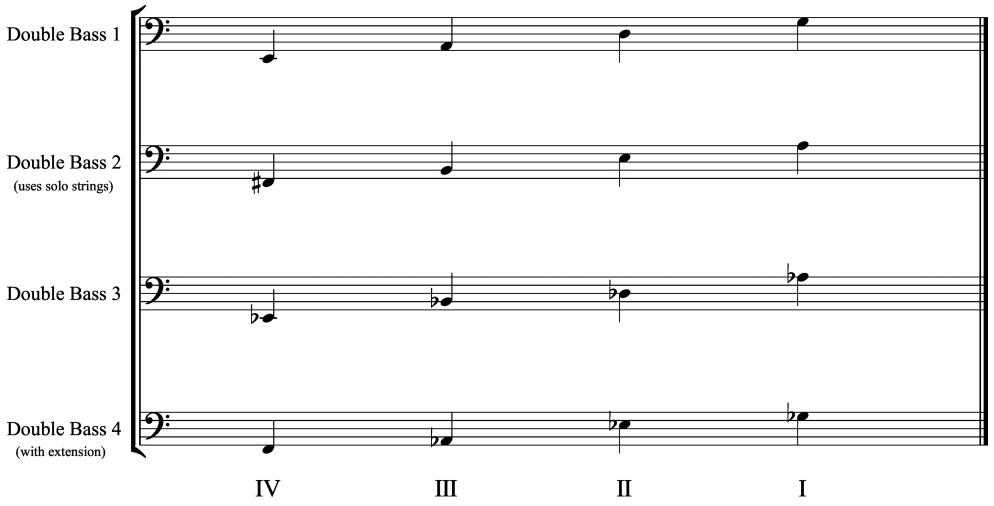


Figure 3: double basses tuning

The very loud and cacophonic first gesture of plucking all four strings at figure 223 is followed by a section showing the four players reaching different stages of technical development, starting from the tone production going from pure noise to pitched sound (also used in the preliminary composition *Noise*). However, there are moments when this concept is suspended, to allow some moments of verticality, for example the two pauses in bars 17-18. At figure 225 the double bass quartet accompanies the PROFESSOR's song with harmonies on natural harmonics made possible with the *scordatura*. BIG C, absent from Act 2 (for his malevolent actions were not needed in a world without music), makes his

reappearance in figure 226, with the four basses mocking the timpani rhythm used in Act 1. As the PROFESSOR and BIG C's comments make the YOUNG MAN grow more anxious, the four double bassists continue their practice with a short twelve-tone contrapuntal motif. They advance towards the final climax at figure 229, when all four use extended techniques to achieve a loud and percussive sonority. This dramatic climax represents the moment when the YOUNG MAN clutches his arm in pain, before going to see the DOCTOR (his FATHER).

Episode 21: Tendonitis

The very first bars of this episode set the dramatic mood for a short dialogic *recitativo*, the function of which is to create tension going towards the end of the first scene. The timpani (hence BIG C) creeps back in, and the orchestral outbursts underline the YOUNG MAN's despair and the tense relationship with his FATHER.

Episode 22: Out of control

This choral episode mirrors the voices of negativity already heard in Act 1 (Normal), this time formed by the PROFESSOR, and three new characters who orbit around the YOUNG MAN's life: his LANDLADY, his BOSS, and an elusive LOVER. The episode is extremely rhythmical, with extended techniques in the strings to achieve a strong percussive sound. The piano is prepared by inserting a metal plate on a limited register to give a harsh and percussive sound. Three voices are not pitched but spoken with an extremely rhythmical pace, except for the LOVER's sinuous melodic lines interleaved with flute and clarinet. The rhythmically steady accompaniment symbolises a constant hammering in the YOUNG MAN's head and slowly increases in volume and density, gaining momentum until finally the YOUNG MAN collapses on the floor.

Episode 23: A Way Out

The escalation of events of the previous episodes culminates in the YOUNG MAN's desperate cry of defeat. From figure 238 the ensemble has the mere role of accompanying this dramatic moment, with the timpani constantly remarking BIG C's presence and apparent victory. However, from figure 240 there is a drop in density and dynamics. The marimba recalls the rhythms (here augmented) that were used in Episode 10 (Legacy), just after the GRANDFATHER's death, which serve as a re-introduction to the PROFESSOR, who acknowledges his acquaintance with the GRANDFATHER, and offers the YOUNG MAN a way out to his problems. The PROFESSOR's calm and comforting attitude is reflected in the quiet sonority. In particular his line 'I have a cottage up in the mountains' at figure 241 reminded me of a similar line in Puccini's *Turandot*, Act 2, when the three ministers Ping, Pong and Pang recall their place of origin and Ping sings 'I have a home in Hunan, with a little blue lake, all surrounded by bamboo'. Quoting again Puccini in this episode allowed me to establish a stronger link between the PROFESSOR and the GRANDFATHER. It is at this very moment that the mentoring role is symbolically passed from one character to the other. Puccini's melody has been readapted for the PROFESSOR in a Lydian mode, and the way I have orchestrated the accompaniment is similar to Puccini's orchestration, with the woodwinds, piano and vibraphone creating an undulating harmonic texture underneath the expressive vocal line.

SCENE 2

Episode 24: The Silent Struggle

This episode is divided in two main sections. The first one, from figure 242 to 245 features another double bass quartet, which accompanies the YOUNG MAN's journey up to the mountains. This textural episode is very different from the first double bass quartet in Episode 20, much calmer and evocative of natural landscapes, although the use of some dissonant harmonies and colliding melodies reflects the YOUNG MAN's interior struggle. The *scordatura* of the

basses allows the construction of chords otherwise not playable only with natural harmonics. The harmonic rhythm in this episode is slow and the chords follow a general tendency to become more dissonant. All the chords are derived from mirror harmonies. Figure 4 shows a preliminary sketch containing some harmonies I intended to use:

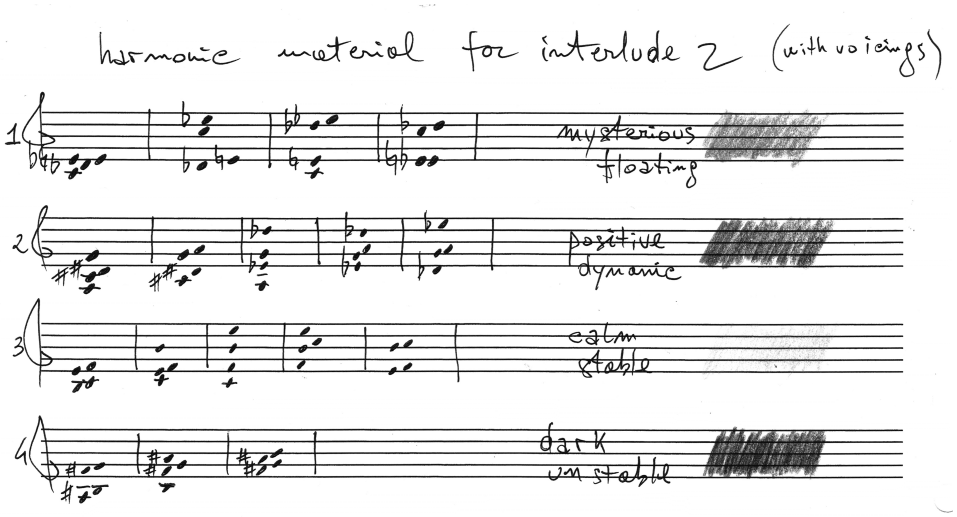


Figure 4: preliminary sketch showing some harmonies used in The Silent Struggle double bass quartet

Figure 246, which features action with no music, links the first section to the second starting at 247 with the timpani foreshadowing BIG C's presence, this time heard only through an amplified diffusion. The bare piano accompaniment is reminiscent of the sonorities of Act 2, and utilises some modified melodic fragments from it (for example bars 250-60).

Episode 25: The Cave

The dark and sinister setting of the first part of this episode (figure 249 to 255) is characterised by the doubling of bass flute and bass clarinet, and the shrill and dissonant piano chords. The YOUNG MAN has met his younger self, the BOY, as they visit BIG C's cave. The dialogue between the two becomes a duet at figure 256, when the secret about BIG C will be revealed. The tone becomes more

dramatic, with the use of the original 1-1-1-1 string quartet accompaniment, until the climatic moment at figure 257. From this moment the character of the music changes completely, to underline the fact that BIG C does not really exist, and it becomes more joyful and ironic as the two characters call out for BIG C. References to previous acts appear, for example the piano pattern in bar 253 or the following YOUNG MAN's lines, remainders of the 'it's not normal' refrain. The harmony becomes gradually more consonant throughout, leading to the last section of the episode at figure 262, which exploits an orchestrated version of the 'ambiguous' harmonies used in Act 2.

Episode 26: Composed

The conception of this episode was strongly related to the stage directions and the YOUNG MAN's actions. The episode is divided into three sections:

Figure 263 to 264

This slow and meditative choral-like section is a transcription of the second movement of my *Sonatina for tuba and electronics*. The tuba part has remained the same, while the electronic parts were orchestrated for bass flute, bass clarinet and horn, producing a very deep and warm sonority. This part also reflects the YOUNG MAN's line 'there is more space between each note' in the following section, with the abundant use of rests.

Figure 265 to 268

This section, named 'Hymn to the mountains' features the YOUNG MAN's hearty and expressive final resolution, and the bare string harmonics accompaniment should reflect the landscape he is surrounded by. The writing is very much inspired by a section of Ligeti's *Le Grand Macabre*, where the court astronomer Astradamos contemplates the stars with his telescope. However, while in Ligeti the effect is very chromatic due to his use of micropolyphony, my harmonies are very static and diatonic, highlighting the still character of this mountain setting

and symbolising a process of resolution. Figure 268 reprises the very end of the *Sonatina* second movement ending.

Figure 269 to 270

This last section represents the YOUNG MAN's frenetic act of composition. It is his very return to music, and as such it holds many elements that come from his previous experiences with music. The very rhythmical and fast-paced nature of this episode is very similar to the ending of Episode 1, where the BOY's enthusiasm towards music was reflected in the vitality of the music. Similar textural elements are used, and many melodic fragments, including the 'Call' motif, reappear here. This moment displays the coming together of a new composition, as the YOUNG MAN switches quickly between toy piano and manuscript paper. However, the toy piano is never played for real, its role symbolically taken up by the real piano, which plays complex mirrored patterns.

SCENE 3

Episode 27: A Reunion

The change from the previous episode is instantaneous, by means of a short blackout and a radical change of lights and setting. This strongly contrasts with the YOUNG MAN's journey to the mountains, sonically described by the double bass quartet in episode 24. His descent back into town is not represented, and the act of composing is immediately followed by the silent tension when he is waiting for the PROFESSOR's judgement.

The extremely consonant chords of this short episode underline another crucial moment, the YOUNG MAN's reunion with his GRANDFATHER's double bass. The unaccompanied PROFESSOR's recitativo leads quickly to the 'ambiguous' harmonies of figure 275, where the GRANDFATHER's motif also appears (bar 480).

Episode 28: Concert No.2

This episode, mirroring the BOY's house concert in Act 1, features the YOUNG MAN's final success in performing his newly composed double bass concerto. The coming together of many fragments heard throughout the whole opera is evident in the solo double bass part. The rest of the ensemble, in full force, responds by using the same material in a textural and contrapuntal way.

The form of this episode is disproportionate, a distorted version of what a real concerto form may have been. As in a film scene, or in a memory, the time line is not linear, and the form stretches some sections and compresses others.

The first section develops gradually, and features the soloist accompanied by a textural string part, chromatic in its harmonic content, but gradually shifting towards more consonant material. The cantabile soloist part contains the horn melodies of episode 1 (the 'call') as well as the vocal lines in episode 16 (the YOUNG MAN's vocal utterances).

The second section at figure 281 alternates different orchestral combinations, with the soloist playing ascending lines reminiscent of Romantic concertos. This section is highly compressed and formally undeveloped; its function is to fully express the 'call' material and to gain momentum before the cadenza.

Previously heard material is embedded with other more technically challenging material in a display of 'intellectual virtuosity' for the cadenza. Some gestural clichés also appear (arpeggios in bar 560 or final trill in bar 566) to maintain a link with the classical tradition, although their use is always coherent with the material previously used. A short coda at figure 284 leads to the tense moment of silence before the final episode.

Episode 29: And in the End

The urge to reconnect with a musical tradition of the past, maintaining my coherency as a composer, as well as finally resolving the YOUNG MAN's

challenging ordeals, results in this final and articulated episode that can be divided into four sections:

Figure 285 to 290

The music of this section is rooted in the traditional symphonic scherzo movement, with a waltz feel, and features a duet between MOTHER and FATHER. The family reunion is underlined by fairly consonant harmonies, and the musical main musical ideas are taken from the counterpoint underlying YOUNG MAN and FATHER's dialogue in Act 2, figure 184. That short moment of parental empathy is here amplified through playful orchestration. And similarly to the parents' duet at the beginning of Act 2 (figure 153), the FATHER sings the same melody as the MOTHER.

Figure 292

BIG C's last appearance and defeat is represented by a thinner version of his usual timpani accompaniment: ironically, the bongos and the triangle underline the same rhythmical fragment used for all the other BIG C's episodes. The 'tinnitus' background played in the BIG C's episodes of Act 1 by the violin, the viola and the cello, is multiplied here into a polyhedral version with the double bass harmonics, as if passed through a diffraction prism. BIG C's last attempt to undermine the YOUNG MAN fades out with his voice, while a short consonant and reassuring instrumental part leads into the next section.

Figure 294 to 298

An OLD MAN joins the BOY and the YOUNG MAN for this trio section, accompanied by consonant harmony mainly in fifths played by the strings. Occasional dissonances start to appear but the chords never lose their consonant quality. The strong connection between all the characters is underlined in figure 296 by a rhythm taken from a fragment of Puccini's *Turandot* (similar to the one the flute plays in bar 353 of Act 1, at the end of the Puccini quotation). The BOY's line 'I remember the future' was inspired by my reading of Luciano Berio's *Remembering the future*, to which the OLD MAN replies 'and I foresee the past'. The two lines were not in the original libretto but I decided to include them, as

they successfully represent my compositional intent to write music that looks both at the past and at the future. Moreover, the two lines effectively express the sense of memory of the whole opera narrative journey, and blur the distinction between the characters, validating the idea that the OLD MAN may represent a further stage in the BOY and YOUNG MAN's life. The 'conducting' element, represented by the passing of the knitting needle, is both a memory of the past (when the BOY used to conduct his orchestra in Act 1) and a foreshadow of a possible future scenario.

Figure 299

The straight quaver piano pattern taken from The Beatles' *The end* introduces this short farewell, sung by the whole cast. The vocal lines shift between major and Lydian mode, forming very consonant harmonies and opening up to their last chord in bar 711, a triumphant Ab chord with both major and minor third, and ninth.

EPILOGUE

In the opera's final part various elements are joined together in a multilayered fashion. A polytonal version of 'The Magic Zoo' (from Act 1, figure 121) is repeatedly played by the strings, while woodwinds, brass, a cello and a double bass play the counterpoint from the Requiem in Act 1. The glockenspiel adds a youthful feeling to the moment.

Throughout the Epilogue, the musicians leave the stage one by one, reinforcing the idea that they were part of the narration, leaving only one double bassist playing. The very last notes we hear are double bass harmonics forming a major third, the same material the orchestra plays after the tuning in Act 1, but also the same fragment my composition *On D* (2011) starts with, and going further back, the same material of my composition *Walking and running* (2008). This echoes the final line of the libretto: 'And in the end we're writing the same piece all over our short lives, we're all just writing one, long, great work'.

CONCLUSIONS

The focus of this research project has been the double bass, how the exploration of technical and musical aspects of its practice stimulated my creativity, and how a new world of ideas and musical associations has arisen from it. My compositional approach has attempted to resolve the sense of frustration arising from preconceived ideals of sound production and virtuosity on the double bass. If we revise the concept of virtuosity by contrasting the ideal of pure physical dexterity and agility, with the concept of 'intellectual virtuosity' or 'virtuosity of knowledge', we are setting new parameters for the performer to be confronted with. New conflicts arise from this perspective, dealing with properties of sound and physical gestures. I used these conflicts in a constructive way to provide musical material to be explored and developed into a new composition, where the tension arisen from virtuosity disappears in front of a finished new sonic world.

The key results of my research on the double bass were creatively exploited in the composition of a major work that sees the artist's quest as its essence. My role as a composer has facilitated the understanding and resolution of the performer's frustrations in a 'cathartic' act. The aim of the opera *The Cry of the Double Bass* is to express this redemptive process, communicating to the audience a positive sense of release, and encouraging their own frustrations to be resolved.

This creative project has been of paramount importance to clarify what influences have shaped my musical being so far, both as performer and composer. During the composition of *The Cry of the Double Bass* I have deepened my knowledge of music of the past, and faced new challenges presented by contemporary approaches to opera, assimilating languages and styles, transforming and reshaping them into my own material.

In addition, *The Cry of the Double Bass* is also my artistic response to Patrick Süskind's *The Double Bass*. The importance of Süskind's text was paramount in

the conception of my opera; nonetheless, I have managed to transcend it through the realisation of a new original work.

The recording of sections of the opera will continue in the near future, with a view to a staged production of the work. It has been extremely important for me to have a direct contact with the musical material I composed during my research. The rehearsal process has allowed me to rethink and develop further some parts of the opera as they were performed, and the collaboration with the performers has been highly productive. Their instrumental expertise has provided new creative stimuli for me to rework several sections. My privileged position as performer-composer has allowed me to keep the practical aspects of performance always at the centre of my work, sometimes adjusting my creative output to the needs of the performers. For this reason I will carry out a final revision of the work only after its staged performance.

Finally, *The Cry of the Double Bass* is the embodiment of my quest as a musician. Its realisation has helped me to reunite the three dimensions of my musical persona: the composer, the performer and the listener.

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