



Brian Ferneyhough

Transit (1972-5)

Six solo voices (S, Mez, A, T, Bar, B) with amplification; solo flute (picc, a-fl & b-fl), solo oboe (ob d'a & ca) and solo clarinet (cl Eflat & b-cl) with amplification; 3hn, 3tpt, 3tbn, t-tba, b-tba, 3perc, pf (4hands) (I= amplified hpd, II = cel), 2hp, cimb, elec gtr (amplified acoustic gtr), 3vln, 3vla, 6vc, 4db

Duration: 45 minutes

First performance: March 1975, Royan Festival, London Sinfonietta and soloists conducted by the composer

Commissioned by the French Ministry of Culture

- I *Voices and timpani*
- II 'Tutti I'
- III 'Voices I'
- IV 'Verse I' *Bass Flute*
- V 'Voices II'
- VI 'Tutti II'
- VII 'Verse II' *Clarinet*
- VIII 'Voices III'
- IX 'Verse III' *Oboe/Oboe d'amore*
- X 'Transitio'

Transit was composed between 1972 and 1975 and reflects in its lengthy period of gestation the slow development and musical realisation of an idea which I had carried round with me for several years - that of trying to redefine common ground linking the arts with other fields in a manner rising above the tastefully descriptive. The essential presupposition of such an attempt (however modest in scope) is the development of some form of common denominator. As a sign system among other sign systems it ought to be possible to superimpose layers in such a fashion as to make visible their points of intersection, their areas of divergence. In *Transit* I have tried to combine several fields of various size and type in this manner.

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Starting point for my work on this composition was an anonymous woodcut depicting a renaissance magus in the act of penetrating the last sphere separating the mortal from the divine, the contingent from the absolute. I adopted the structure of this rich image in two distinct but complementary ways - on the one hand as a "plan" governing the spatial layout of the instrumental and vocal forces at my disposal, on the other as a set of "operating instructions" influencing more or less directly the course and nature of the musical events and processes forming the actual fabric of the composition. Movement within the physical "universe" of the orchestra thus corresponds with the stepwise increase in the degree of abstraction offered by the chosen texts understood as models of the relationship between perception and knowledge. The title of the piece can be understood either as a simple expression of controlled, goal-directed movement from one fixed position to another or as the rehearsal of an attempted "breakthrough", "transitio" - a demolition of artificial barriers in an essentially anthropocentric universe.

The overall form of *Transit* is dictated by the texts and their order of presentation. Whilst each of them retains a large amount of internal self-sufficiency (each representing one type of transformation) taken together they collectively represent an open-ended progression from material transformation (represented by texts concerning transmutation by Paracelsus) via cosmological (Heraclitus on the perpetual dissolution and reconstitution of the universe through fire) to universal/mystical transformation (the teachings on the nature of eternity contained in the *Corpus Hermeticum* attributed to Hermes Trismegistus).

As with the texts, so with the music. More than is perhaps the case in my other works the fabric of *Transit* is characterised by a high degree of deliberate sectionality. In part this was dictated by the essentially pluralist values expressed in the composition, but perhaps even more by the desire to bring together several sharply contrasted types of cyclical structure. Some of them are, by reason of their clearcut outlines and employment of immediate selective repetition of specific materials, characterised by an extreme degree of functional autonomy which clashes deliberately with sections in which the multilayered repetition of potentially endless asynchronous loops generates processes of a more open-ended nature. Each of these distinct types of progression serves to direct the attention towards a different aspect of time and its articulation: however, both are interconnected. Each makes use of material derived from a common reservoir; from time to time the two extremes are allowed to "infect" one another although, for the most part, they are made to move past one another at a distance, thus allowing for a sense of depth in the texture as a whole. An example of this might be the very opening of the work, where the solo voices are provided with a closed loop of rhythmic and phonetic material which, in the course of being continually repeated, is modified according to verbal instructions contained in the score, the performers largely improvising within the given limits. Against this there is



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placed a set of formal variations on an invariant proportional framework assigned to six timpani. Both of these levels are at this point functionally and perceptually independent; as the work progresses the distinctions are allowed to become increasingly diffuse, either by rapid and violent juxtaposition or by the process of "infection" mentioned above. The layout of the instruments conforms closely to the pattern of interlocking spheres in the woodcut taken as starting point. In the first row are situated the voices and the three solo woodwind (flute, oboe, clarinet) which ensemble might be said to stand for the more directly "humanistic" element in the design closely associated with them is an ensemble of keyboard instruments (harps, celesta, harpsichord, piano, guitar and cymbalom) - the "stellar" instruments. The percussion and the three trumpets occupy a more ambiguous position, depending upon which group they are linked with at any given moment. The sixteen strings correspond to the "darkness" separating the outer and inner spheres and play thus a negative, disturbing role in the proceedings. Behind them, spread out in a half circle, is the heavy brass (the music of the spheres itself...). The progress of the pieces if measured by a gradual movement outwards, the horns, trombones and tubas entering only in the second half of the composition.

To the extent that *Transit* is not a cantata, but a piece which necessarily includes voices for the realisation of its conceptual aims (the usual order of precedence is reversed: the text comments on - provides a context for - the musical events) the vocalists share the function of formal "signposts" with the woodwind, each of which (bass flute, clarinet, oboe) is assigned a "Verse" in which it occupies a central position. Although the basic form of each of these three sections is identical, being based upon permutations of the number three, and including large amounts of immediate repetition, the actual material employed is treated very differently in each instance. The lengthy sections for the voices, in contrast, exhibit a wide variety of textural and formal diversity. These two types of movement are woven into sections with fuller instrumentation, culminating at the end in the "transitio" itself, in which the strings fight an increasingly hopeless battle against the growing power of the heavy brass and amplified voices.

Transit is not a monolithic score (which would presuppose a rejection of the dynamic potential inherent in the textual plurality) nor is it a straightforward expression of a predominantly lyrical reaction to the concepts presented (the for the most part exegetical rather than poetic nature of the texts incorporated would in any case tend to eliminate this possibility). The texts are not "set" to music in the usual sense of this term: rather, they *generate it*, afterwards merging back into the background, their function having been fulfilled. The work is a search for momentary balance within flux, an attempt to make palpable the positive structure of doubt.

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