Michael Finnissy & Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: the composer as anthropologist

Abstract: Starting with composer Michael Finnissy and anthropologist Tim Ingold's preoccupation with line, this paper contemplates features of the former's music through some of the latter's ideas and writings. More specifically, it considers the notion that exploring Finnissy's compositional approach as applied anthropology provides productive insights into his music and performance practice. The starting point for this investigation is a consideration of three of Finnissy's pieces connected to Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: *Completion of the Requiem KV 626 by W.A. Mozart and F.X. Süssmayr* (2011); *Cibavit eos* (1991); and *WAM* (1990-1991). These pieces provide a convenient set of examples with relevant features: music that connects to the past; music with elaborate line(s); music written for amateur performers; transcription; and instrumentalists that move as part of the performance. These recurring features of Finnissy's composition could be considered indicative of this anthropological approach; they are informed by an investment in people that aspires to musical and personal transformation.

It was a naïve starting point that led to these thoughts on Michael Finnissy's music. Finnissy is a composer with a documented interest in transcription, folk music and anthropology who has identified line as a central feature of his music. Tim Ingold is an anthropologist who has written extensively about the interdisciplinary territory of line. Exploring Finnissy's music with an Ingold slant offers some potential readings on the works and their performance practice. Although this paper refers to various pieces it takes his 2011 *Completion of the Requiem KV 626 by W.A.Mozart and F.X.Süssmayr* and other works relating to Mozart as starting points. Finnissy's relationship with Mozart may seem like a strange choice; Ian Pace, writing in 1997 about a short piano work *Cibavit eos* (written in 1991 for the bicentenary of Mozart's death), states that Mozart is 'a composer who Finnissy does *not* admire'[1]. Despite this, the *Requiem* explicitly demonstrates Finnissy's engagement with earlier music, transcription and non-professional performers, all relevant here, and perhaps offers a perspective on a changing relationship with a composer from the past (Finnissy's preface to his *Requiem* seems, at least in part, to contradict Pace's comment).

[1] Brougham, Fox and Pace, 1997, p.98

Finnissy opens his preface to his completion of the Mozart *Requiem* writing, 'at the beginning of the 21st century most people know and care more about the 'classical' music of the distant past than they do about the present' and 'it is a situation that seems, to me, to create an imperative to connect meaningfully and adventurously to that past.'[2] Elaborating he equates this to entering into an 'imaginative dialogue' and quotes Gilles Deleuze's book on Francis Bacon 'what matters is the confrontation of the two sensations, and the resonance that is derived from it'[3]. Finnissy also suggests a connection between his *Requiem* completion and the walls of the Kreuzkirche in Dresden, 'where the charred, firebombed remains have been newly continued upwards with a poignant energy and confidence, and no attempt to replicate the original architectural design.'[4] The implication is that this 'meaningful' engagement with the music of the past is both discursive and transformational. It also suggests that the consideration of a person is central to this (no matter how problematic). He writes, 'I never met Mozart except through his music, and the aspect of that music which particularly fascinates, and doubtless influences, me has to do with this exploration and synthesis of his own time and musical history.'[5] In his 2013 book *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* Ingold makes distinctions between ethnographical work, which he suggests is primarily *documentary,* and anthropological work, which is primarily *transformational*.[6] Finnissy's compositional processes may be exactly the kind of transformational exploration which Ingold is identifying.

Finnissy connects himself with anthropological studies. In an 1988 interview with Richard Toop, Finnissy says:

> *I spent a long time reading Eliade, Lévi-Strauss, and other anthropological writers: their studies of tribal notions and folk notions; the way in which customs (which then lead to forms of theatre and, by implication to other forms of literature, folk-song, shamanistic ritual and this kind of thing) arise from those basic*

[2] Finnissy, 2013, p.vi
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ingold, 2013, p.3

> *'archetypal' responses to nature. Man's attempt to come to terms with his environment. I suppose one might say. I don't think of myself as any different from that kind of artist except in terms of living in a so-called 'civilised' country.*[7]

This supports the assertion that Finnissy is primarily concerned with people. Christopher Fox puts this succinctly when writing about Finnissy's fondness for using many different musical sources in a single text (in the *Requiem,* for example, he 'enlarges Mozart's field of reference to include Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, Bruckner Masses, Schubert, Mahler, Busoni, Schoenberg, Franz Schmidt and Hindermith'[8]. Fox writes. 'Whatever the form in which different ideas become part of the final work, Finnissy's interest is in demonstrating their commonality, showing how, regardless of circumstance, era or geographical location, people have been susceptible to thoughts and feelings whose congruences are more striking than their disparity.'[9] Fox further disassociates Finnissy's connection to these multiple sources from the 'colonialist "anthropology" of men like Pitt-Rivers, whose museum in Oxford is stuffed with artefacts from all over the world, arranged not by culture but by type'[10]; a clear, if bleak, example of the Ingold ethnographic documentary.

Finnissy's preoccupation with line is also well documented. In the Toop interview he also says:

> *I think that quite a substantial part of my continuing interest in composition, if I have to say anything about it at all, has to do with being fundamentally fascinated by melody, by line: line, and juxtapositions of lines.*[11]

And then nine years later with Ian Pace:

> *It's interesting that Cézanne, or maybe Degas, on going to visit the great nineteenth-century painter Ingres, was told, 'line, line, line, line, line is what you need to master'. For me the same applies to music, though it may be different for other people. Line*

[7] Toop, 1988, p.10
[8] Finnissy, 2013, p.vi
[9] Brougham, Fox, and Pace, 1997, p.214
[10] Ibid.
[11] Toop, 1988, p.10

> *is what I learnt from drawing and line is what I pursue in music.*[12]

In his 2007 book *Lines: A brief history* Ingold attempts a taxonomy of lines. While not exhaustive he argues that most lines fall into one of two categories and that these definitions are particularly useful in considering a line's relationship with surface. He identifies *thread* as 'a filament of some kind, which may be entangled with other threads or suspended between points in three-dimensional space… they are not drawn on surfaces.'[13] Ingold gives examples including 'a ball of wool, a skein of yarn, a necklace, a cat's cradle, a hammock, a fishing-net, a ship's rigging, a washing line,… roots… and fungal mycelia.' By contrast a *trace* is 'any enduring mark left in or on a solid surface by a continuous movement.' Ingold identifies additive and reductive traces where the former might be 'a line drawn with charcoal on paper or with chalk on a blackboard' and the latter 'a line scratched, scored or etched'[14] with animal footprints given as an example. Avoiding (for now) the complexity of musical line being potentially expressed as an act of calligraphy, typography, sound wave and/or physical action, Ingold's taxonomy can be extended into useful musical metaphor; the notion of trace provides a reference point for a musical line's relationship to a surface that might be a feature of transcription or reference. So Finnissy's musical lines might be superimposed on or etched into their transcribed origins and this could cast light on the significance of the source material or be viewed as a feature of linear compositional control in itself.

Finnissy's 1991 short piano work *Cibavit eos* demonstrates this notion of musical line as trace. In Mozart's original he takes a line of plainsong and develops this into a short choral work (Figure 1). Here Finnissy extends this process, opens with a transcription of the Mozart then oscillates between transcriptions of sections of the Mozart and sections of new decorative linear writing (Figure 2). Although these 'traces' might been seen as invasive it is initially difficult to read them as reductive; there is more linear activity in these new sections of music and this escalates until the end of the piece

[12] Brougham, Fox and Pace, 1997, p.2
[13] Ingold, 2016, p.42
[14] Ibid. p.44

(Figure 3). However, if here the surface is the original Mozart, then this has clearly been eroded by Finnissy's interventions (a reductive scenario). Furthermore, in a musical context, the 'surface' may been seen as the passage of time. In the Mozart the passage of time is most consistently indicated by the harmonic rhythm underpinned by a bass line which, aside from the opening plainchant and the final cadence, metronomically retains the same durations throughout. Finnissy's sections are always over pedal notes apparently suspending the passage of time; given the 'surface', this is also invasively reductive. Finally in a performative context the notation provides the instructions to make the line; so in this case the act of performing the piece is cutting lines into the surface of the Mozart.

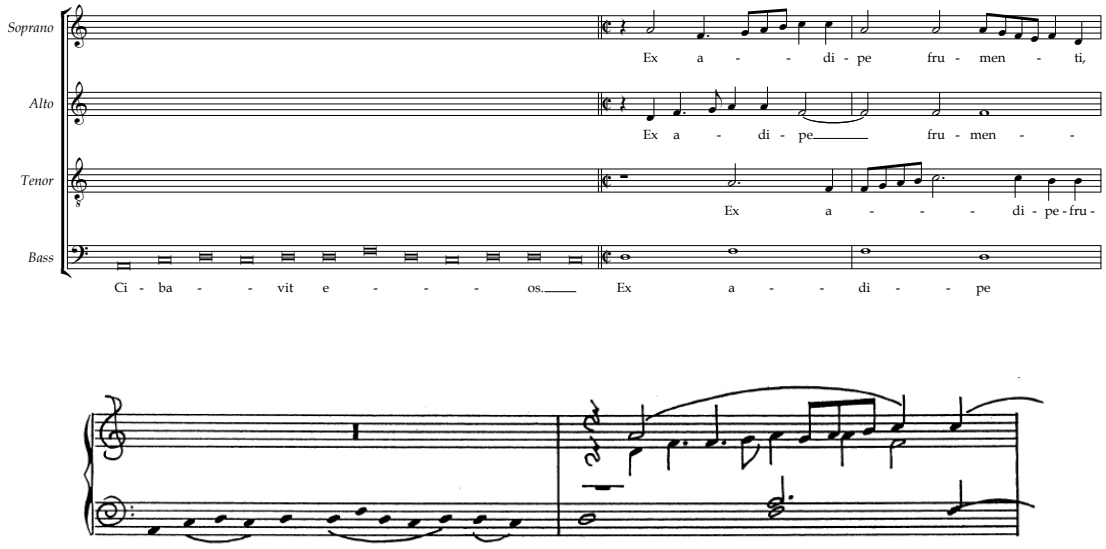

Figure 1: *Cibavit eos*, Mozart (above) and Finnissy (below), opening

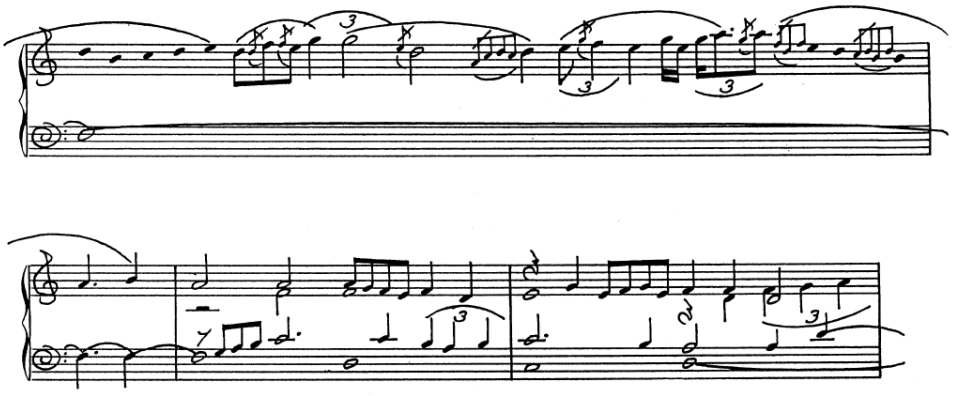

Figure 2: *Cibavit eos*, Finnissy, systems 2-3

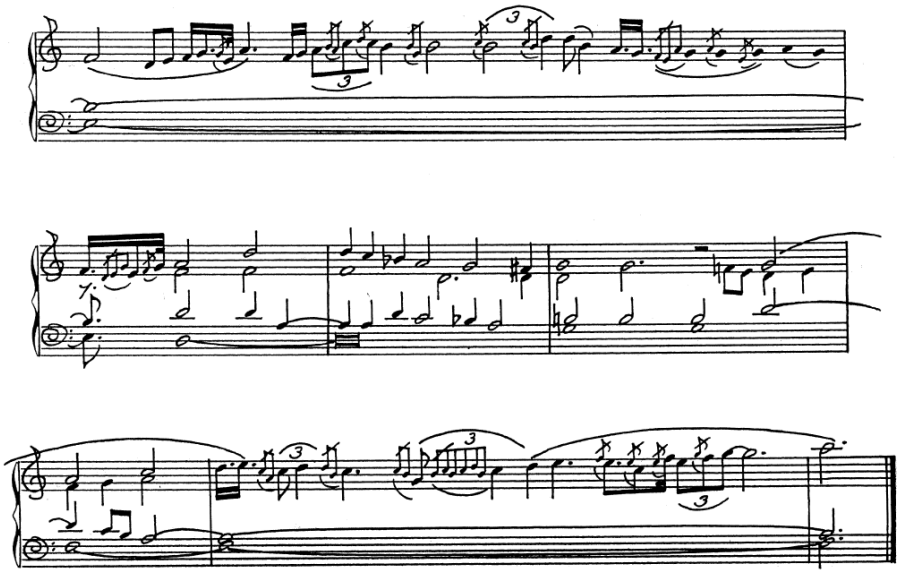

Figure 3: *Cibavit eos*, Finnissy, ending

Although subtler there are similarities in the *Lacrimosa* of the *Requiem completion*. This is the only movement which is acknowledged as being written by Mozart, Süssmayr and Finnissy in Thomas Irvine's introduction to the piece (as opposed to either Finnissy alone or some combination of Mozart, Eybler or Süssmayr)[15]. During the first obvious deviations from the original, in the solo vocal parts, the harmonic rhythm is comparatively static (Figure 4).

This is less obvious elsewhere in the music and, unlike in *Cibavit eos*, there are Finnissy lines superimposed over Mozart or Mozart-like music. There seems to be correlations between the extent to which a musical line as 'trace' is reductive or additive and the similarity of the new line to the original sound, and the treatment of the passage of time in context, as well as the more expected level of erosion of the surface or (in this case) original.

In *WAM* or (*W[olfgang] A[madeus] M[ozart]*) the notion of the original source material as surface is more elusive. This work, for piano and two obbligato instruments (treble and bass), takes Mozart's music as the starting point and demonstrates how, according to Finnissy in the sleeve notes from a

[15] Irvine, 2013

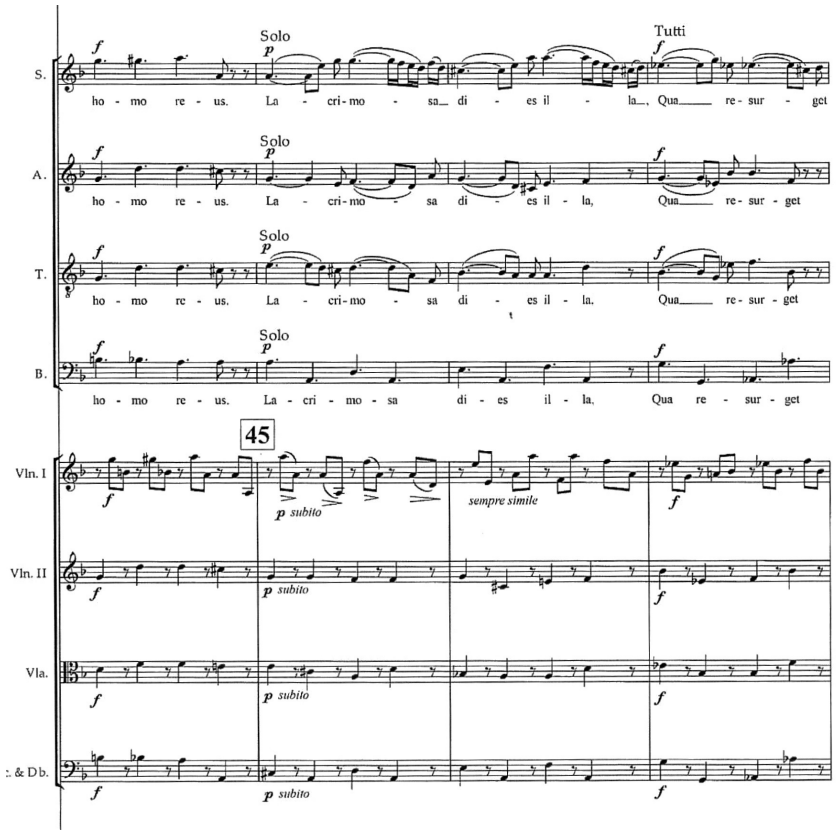

Figure 4

'Lacrimosa' from *Completion of the Requiem KV 626 by W.A.Mozart and F.X.Süssmayr*. Finnissy, bb.8-11

recent (January 2016) recording, 'it is possible to take Mozart's music, and do something else with it, to explore the pitch patterns and rhythmic patterns differently and take them on different adventures.'[16] Here an initially (and often) dense piano part takes central stage to the two monophonic instruments. The three instruments operate independently (there is no score) and, given the characteristic rhythmic variety in the mostly contrapuntal piano writing, the lines of the piano rarely coordinate (in the traditional sense) except perhaps at the start and end of sections of music. Unlike *Cibavit eos* and the *Requiem* the use of source material is far more fragmentary. Here the notion that surface is the historical/transcription starting point does not seem to work; there is nothing in the transcribed material either organisational, structural or any other feature that explicitly and consistently prioritises measuring the passage of time. Finnissy separates the piano from the other two instruments not only with the denser music, but also that the two

[16] Finnissy and Norsworthy, 2016

obbligato parts have much in common with each other and both leave the stage at certain points in the piece (one for a section in the middle and one for the final third). Here the lines of music might be seen as threads (within the Ingold model). There is emphasis on the physical presence of the sounds, particularly in the piano part moving, systematically in sections, from *fortissimo* to *pianissimo*. This sense of receding into the distance is also reflected in the other instrumentalists literally moving off stage. Here this juxtaposition of lines comes across as an aural mesh of physically intertwining lines.

There are other ways, however, of considering the idea of transcription or historical starting point as surface which may also account for the juxtaposed collage of *WAM*. In Ingold's *Lines* monograph he makes distinctions between different kinds of lines of travel. In particular he makes a distinction between what he calls *wayfaring* and *transport*. He describes the wayfarer as 'continually on the move. More strictly, he is his movement… the wayfarer is instantiated in the world as a line of travel'[17]. He gives ethnographic examples of communities where travelling is a way of life. By contrast *transport* is, for Ingold, 'destination oriented. It is not so much a development *along* a way of life as a carrying *across*, from location to location, of people and goods in such a way as to leave their basic natures unaffected'[18]. In wayfaring lines form meshes, weaves and knots; in transport, by comparison, grids. 'A wayfarer has to sustain himself, both perceptually and materially, through an active engagement with the country that opens up along his path… for the transported traveller and his baggage… every destination is a terminus, every port a point of re-entry into a world from which he has been temporarily exiled whilst in transit'[19]. Finnissy might be considered the quintessential compositional wayfarer. His music, so often employing transcription (whether the juxtaposed and reinvented fragments of *WAM*, the to-ing and fro-ing of *Cibavit eos*, or the subtle interjections of the *Lacrimosa*), sustains itself exactly though this perceptual and material engagement. It is of particular interest when extending Ingold's descriptions to musical landscapes that,

[17] Ingold, 2016, p.78
[18] Ibid. p.79
[19] Ibid. p.78-80

where destinations in transport might be seen as arrival points – resolutions comparable to final or intermittent cadences – wayfarers must 'periodically pause to rest, and may even return repeatedly to the same abode or haven to do so. Each pause, however, is a moment of tension that – like holding one's breath – becomes even more intense and less sustainable the longer it lasts'[20]. In *WAM* pauses in the music are rarely arrival points but moments of high-tension interruption. In the piano part almost every long pause is characterised by a sudden cutting off of activity which might just have easily continued and the other two parts demonstrate similar behaviour (Figure 5) or long pauses where the material either side is similar even if it then quickly moves on (Figure 6).

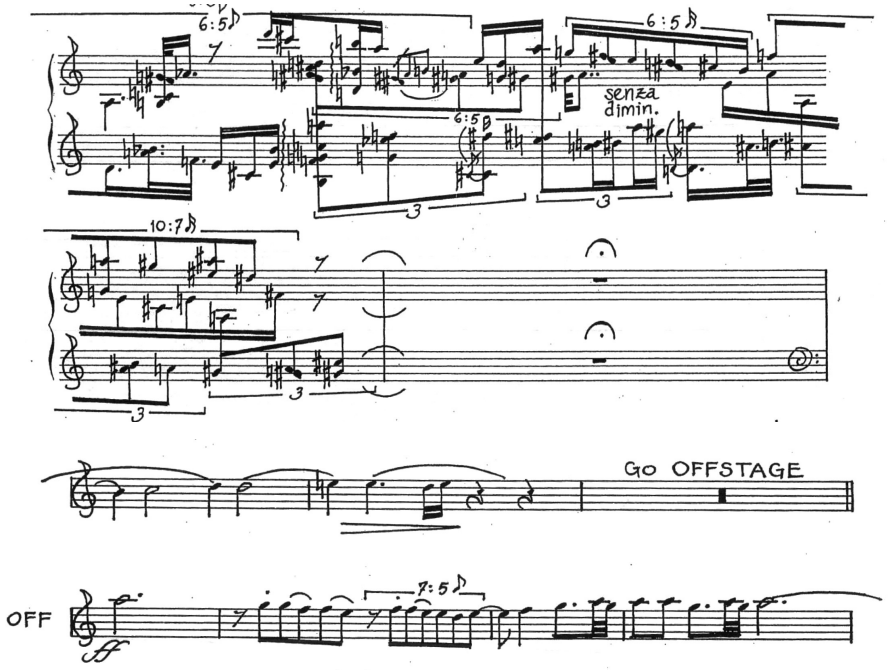

Figure 5

WAM, Michael Finnissy, Piano, systems 2-3 (above), Instrument I, p.2, systems 4-5 (below)

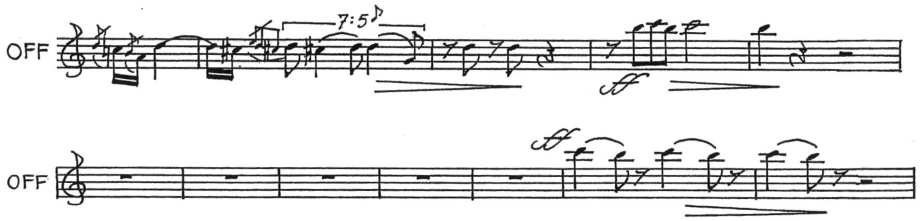

Figure 6

WAM, Michael Finnissy, Instrument II, p.5, systems 8-9

[20] Ibid. p.79

This might be seen as comparable to the pedal-notes that serve as pauses in the harmonic movement in *Cibavit eos* as discussed earlier.

When replying to Richard Toop about 'the business of formal structure' and whether it is pre-planned or 'arises naturally out of the material as you work on it?' Finnissy answer's makes perfect sense alongside this notion of wayfaring. He replies,

> *A bit of each. I try to develop an attitude towards the form, an intention, which I then play with – expand, sometimes alter. Usually the forms are very simple: a progression from one point to another, or an interrupted progression. I try to make them as monolithic as possible, just so that I've got a simple framework for a complex series of actions.*[21]

These monolithic frameworks are particular clear in *Cibavit eos* and *WAM* where the former, (as previously mentioned), gradually becomes more and more linearly elaborate interrupted by sections of more literally transcribed Mozart, and the latter gradually moves from loud to quiet and from dense to less so. These are the territories in which Finnissy 'wayfares'. The landscape is made up of the transcribed material and his lines travel though it; this is the 'confrontation of two sensations' that is mentioned in the preface to the *Requiem*. As with any wayfarer the destinations are present but not central to the musical argument so that the music is a constant expression of exploration, conflict and interdependence. Finnissy's commentary to *Cibavit eos*, originally published alongside the piece in the *Musical Times*, acts as a literary counterpart to the music, oscillating between extracts from correspondence from Mozart at the time of writing and, presumably, the same from Finnissy (or perhaps other comparable musings). These windows into these two times and two places disconnected from their relevant narratives, invites the reader, as a creative commentary might, to perceive their own line

[21] Toop, 1988, p.9

of travel though this territory and discover their own connections between these apparently disparate texts.

> *I've not much time to write anything, my pen's not worth a bean, and neither's he who holds it. (1770)*
>
> *So many people seem preoccupied by ideas about music than ideas from music, and ready to give instant opinions rather than absorb and consider in any depth. (1991)*
>
> *Please tell me to what Brotherhoods I belong, and what prayers I should offer up to them. (1770)*
>
> *Urbi et orbi – Did he? What a shame. (1991)*
>
> *In the past few weeks I've written four symphonies, at least six arias, and also a motet. (1770)*
>
> *Plainsong Introit for the Monday in Whitsun Week: CIBAVIT EOS – ex adipe frumenti, alleluia: et de petra, melle saturavit eos, alleluia, alleluia, alleluia! (Votive Mass of the Blessed Sacrament) (1991)*[22]

This notion of Finnissy as wayfarer might also be applied to his relationship with performers. Ingold writes:

> *Wayfaring, I believe, is the most fundamental mode by which living beings, both human and non-human, inhabit the earth. By habitation I do not mean taking one's place in a world that has been prepared in advance for the populations that arrive to reside there. The inhabitant is rather one who participates from within in the very process of the world's continual coming into being and who, in laying a trail of life, contributes to its weave and texture.*[23]

This is of particularly relevance to Finnissy's *Requiem* where his usual compositional practices, including transcription, sit alongside original music by Mozart and earlier completions. When considering a historical musical

[22] Finnissy, 1991, p.1
[23] Ingold, 2016, p.83

literature, habitation – in the non-Ingold sense - could be seen as any relevant edition, whatever the quality, as a prepared guide for 'residing' in that music through performance. In the introduction to the *Requiem* Finnissy writes, 'indications of phrasing and dynamics are sparing, actually more sparing than either Mozart or Brahms, and they should be agreed during preparation and rehearsal: as this is not really a piece to throw together in a few hours'[24]. It is typical, particularly for orchestral music (*particularly* new orchestral music) in a professional setting in the UK, to be put together exactly this quickly. This is potentially damaging as there is not necessarily any prepared performance-practice rhetoric for the repertoire and there will certainly be nobody in the orchestra with prior performance experience of a new work. Finnissy invites performers to engage with the performance practice of his completion in parallel with how it was written; to allow for the performance to be a negotiation between what is agreed as required for his new music and what is agreed as required for the original. This would allow for considerable possible variety in the final interpretations. Finnissy wrote this music for an, at least partially, amateur ensemble as the music was premiered by a specially assembled orchestra and choir derived primarily from University of Southampton music students. For Finnissy perhaps sparsely annotated and saturated scores serve the same purpose; to facilitate a conversation between the parties involved in the performance and to allow all to contribute to its weave and texture. Scores for amateurs and different kinds of performance scenarios are accommodating but not compromised; the agenda is one of discursive interaction, not a compositional methodology in isolation. In this context innovation is not the primary intention (although it is often the welcome by-product); the primary intention is the built-in interaction of the 'wayfarer'. It is telling, towards the end of Michael Hooper's article *Reaching higher: Finnissy's 'Greatest hits of all time' as the impetus for innovation*, the implication is that the work in developing the high range of the oboe between Christopher Redgate and Finnissy is, in part, based on friendly competitive conversation as much as a systematic performer/composer experimentation.[25]

[24] Finnissy, 2013, p.vi
[25] Hooper, 2011, pp.55-56

Although I have used examples connected to Mozart I believe the same could be said of many of Finnissy's works. His wayfaring musical lines may be framed by specific pieces but are, in fact, a continual exploration over an entire output. This microcosm, in Finnissy's case, demonstrates the larger-scale intentions; that discursive connections to the people, in context, and the often two-way transformative relationship he has with these people (whether they are the performers, musicians responsible for the music he is transcribing, or the individuals or communities he is reflecting on) is at the heart of the music. This is the composer's anthropology in action and, I believe, can be usefully extended to further explore these musical and extra-musical details. This has been articulated well by Alan Bennett in *The Uncommon Reader* where the queen (of England) discovers first a mobile book library behind Buckingham Palace and, subsequently, the transformative power of reading:

> *'But ma'am must have been briefed, surely?'*
> *'Of course,' said the Queen, 'but briefing is not reading. In fact it is the antithesis of reading. Briefing is terse, factual and to the point. Reading is untidy, discursive and perpetually inviting. Briefing closes down a subject, reading opens it up.'*[26]

[26] Bennett, 2008, p.22

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