**Chaos or Chess:**

**The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill as Creative Catalyst**

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I first read some of Geoffrey Hill’s poetry in 2005 and it made a very strong impression. I remember being drawn initially to his love of antinomies and frequent use of oxymorons: ‘ascetic opulence’ from ‘Pavana Dolorosa’ (*Tenebrae, 1978*) was one of the first that caught my attention. I purchased *Without Title* (2006) shortly after it came out, having immersed myself in a *Collected Works* with a selection of the early poems. *Tenebrae* and *Without Title* were the most heavily absorbed collections at that time and their influence is overt in the titles of my compositions written during the following years. The short orchestral work *Lachrimae Antiquae Novae* (2007) takes its title from the *Tenebrae* poem rather than directly from the Dowland *Lachrimae Pavan* that Hill is alluding to. *Broken Hierarchies[[1]](#endnote-1)* (2008) for eight cellos is a response to the *Without Title* poem with the same name; to my mind the phrase ‘broken hierarchies’ immediately suggested the possibility of creating a disjointed unison melody fragmented across high strings (*archi* in Italian), in this case cellos confined to the top of their register. The musical result is wildly different from the Appalachian music Hill voices within the poem.

like Appalachian music, those

aureate stark sounds

plucked or bowed, a wild patience

replete with loss,

the twankled dulcimer,

scrawny rich fiddle gnawing;

To date, I have set Hill’s poetry once. In 2008, I received an invitation to write a song for The NMC Songbook, a CD release celebrating the 20th Anniversary of the British contemporary music record label NMC Recordings. I chose to set ‘Wild Clematis in Winter’ (*Without Title*) for mezzo-soprano and piano. The second line of the poem ‘as we speed citywards through blurry detail’ suggested acceleration to me and I conceived the song as a large-scale quickening enhanced by a global pitch shape for the mezzo-soprano. Her register is gradually crushed towards one pitch; her singing finally squeezed to a whisper ‘this blanched apparition’. ‘Replete with loss’ is the performance direction in the score.

Since 2006, I have been developing and refining compositional techniques that use exponential functions to create temporal structures that are inherently extreme. The setting of ‘Wild Clematis in Winter’ is a particularly clear example of this in practice: an exponential function underlies the temporal structure for the accelerating text, itself then subject to poetic license, ‘blurry detail’, further on in the compositional process. It is hard to know whether the poem’s text influenced the choice of mathematical function or whether perhaps my natural inclination towards using exponential functions influenced the choice of poem.

A predilection for paradox significantly influences the methods I use to create musical responses to ideas from science and mathematics. Also in 2006, I first began to consider ways of creating music that behaves as though it is being attracted and/or repelled by magnets, first realised in the orchestral work *Magnetite* (2007). The choice of magnetite as subject was informed as much by the mineral’s cultural associations as it was by a study of the structure and physical properties of magnetite crystals along with the development of a musical magnetism.

Two compositional techniques emerged in *Magnetite*, derived from considering ways to shape melody and harmony in the same way that magnetic fields shape physical structures. The first involves creating an accelerating rotation of pitches that eventually produces a registral explosion, strongly influenced by the visual image of the magnetic fields produced in the well-known school physics experiment with a magnet and iron filings. The second concerns the design of a sequence of chords that ‘attract’ and/or ‘repel’ one another, conceived by imagining each chord as though placed within a solenoid, and considering interactions of magnetic fields. In *Magnetite*, I crafted these devices into contrasting ‘magnetic’ soundworlds: passages of loud energetic explosive music are set against those that are still, inert and quiet.

I wrote to Geoffrey Hill for the first time in January 2009, sending him scores and recordings of works including *Magnetite* and ‘Wild Clematis in Winter’. A week later I received a reply. Hill’s own response to my music, and in particular to the orchestral work *Magnetite* was the following: ‘Your work is austerely sensuous and sensuously austere’. I am very grateful that he made this remark since I find it to be such a concise yet poignant way of expressing in language the nature of *Magnetite*. In retrospect, it is clear that his observation encouraged me to pursue the implications of the co-existence of contradictory found materials (musical and extra-musical), techniques and ideas within my work to a far greater extent. More consciously, I began to develop what I now refer to as ‘oxymoronic orchestration’ where the literary term oxymoron translates into an orchestral device in my music in the following way:contradictory orchestrations of the same material presented simultaneously*.* Proto-oxymoronic orchestration present within *Magnetite*, magnified and brought into focus by Hill’s comment, has since informed all of my writing. The consideration of how to create ‘austerely sensuous’ music as opposed to ‘sensuously austere’ music has been a valuable line of enquiry.

In 2011, I began work on a new orchestral piece, *Calculus of the Nervous System* (2011). The title refers to the mathematician, Ada Lovelace’s wish to develop what she termed a ‘Calculus of the Nervous System’: a mathematical model for how the brain gives rise to thoughts, and nerves to feelings. A short way into the writing process, Hill sent me a copy of his then new collection *Clavics* (2011), centred on the seventeenth-century composer, William Lawes, and it became a rich source of imagery for the piece. The language in *Clavics* is an uneasy collision between words that conjure up images of seventeenth-century England, particularly the English Civil War, and language with musical, metaphysical and scientific associations. On first reading, so many of Hill’s phrases immediately leapt out at me as potent musical images: ‘Chaos / Or chess’; ‘Punched semibreve’; ‘And neurocratic hope’. I found the regular use of obscure vocabulary appealing and a quick visit to the Oxford English Dictionary confirmed that Hill had most likely invented the word ‘neurocratic’, like the word ‘clavics’ itself.

*Unity of knowledge – consilience –*

The phrasing cribbed for I have no Science:

Through the lens of *Clavics*, my knowledge of seventeenth-century music and history grew exponentially, hand in hand with the discovery of a number of scientific concepts new to me. I was notably glad to encounter the word ‘consilience’ and subsequently read *Consilience*: *The Unity of Knowledge* bythe biologist, Edward O. Wilson, noting that on consecutive lines on page 22, the word 'broken' seems to appear conspicuously above the word 'hierarchies'.

*Clavics* influenced the construction of *Calculus* in the following way: I chose to create 32 distinct yet malleable musical identities that I term ‘memories’, each a response to a phrase found within Clavics. The phrases were chosen, dislocated, one from each of the 32 poems within the original *Clavics* sequence.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Intensive prayer is intensive care (1)

Cruel *Profan -* (2)

Punched semibreve (3)

Discord made dance. (4)

Poised beyond wrath (5)

This ritual (6)

Caught in static (7)

Not romantic. (8)

Should benefit from this mixed blood and flame (9)

Sophistical (10)

Plug in a dissonance to make them wince. (11)

And neurocratic hope. (12)

Etcetera; (13)

Turning to spirit voices for control. (14)

The screams (15)

Core, thy pulsings irritable (16)

Pitching inquietus (17)

Truth is austere (18)

Oblivious the calm (19)

Flesh restless to obey (20)

No narcolept, (21)

Break C minor to C major at LIGHT. (22)

Calculation (23)

Of frozen spray (24)

Mechanic root: (25)

*Unity of knowledge – consilience –*  (26)

Absence of sloth, (27)

Chaos / Or chess (28)

Measured inconstancies of blood-sugars (29)

From blood-clay build what ennobles. (30)

Fully constrained (31)

There is a noise in my head: the breaking (32)

Independently, I designed a structure for the composition, a calculus of the nervous system to house these memories, an imagined neural network with its roots in strictly engineered calculations that relate to a number of musical parameters using values derived from one source, an exponential function and its derivative, subsequently muddled and reordered by chance processes. In the resulting configuration, the memories occur and recur in different ways; at times clear, partially-remembered or very distant; sometimes in succession and at other times punctured by silence; as though they are experienced in differing states of consciousness. Not all of the 32 memories are voiced in the final rendering. Some of the *Clavics* phrases appear as directions within the musical score.

Since *Calculus*, on many occasions I have returned to the 32 *Clavics* ‘memories’ as a creative source for subsequent works. Some of these memories, in combination with an oxymoronic proclivity, have developed over time into specific compositional devices that I now use frequently. The musical translation of ‘Punched semibreve’, transformed through a series of works, is a pertinent example. Even when the phrase is considered in isolation, the complexities that arise through attempting musical translations of its various, and often contradictory, meanings have proved fruitful in the creation of a malleable yet distinct musical identity. The semibreve, originally the shortest of all musical note values used, is, in modern notation, called the ‘whole note’, and the longest note routinely notated today. How is the semibreve ‘punched’? Literally, in that it looks as though its centre has been punched out? Or ‘punched’ meaning ‘clipped’ as in ‘shortened’, potentially leading to the curtailment of a semibreve’s four beats? Does the violent punching with a metaphorical fist translate into musical accenting? ‘Like fatal bullet through the fine slashed coat’ is the line that follows ‘Punched semibreve’, a reminder that when the phrase is considered in the context of *Clavics* as a whole, there seem to be infinitely many further readings. Hill extensively revised, expanded and reordered *Clavics* for his collected poems *Broken Hierarchies: Poems 1952–2012* (2013), adding a welcome additional layer of intricacy. How to create a music that references all of this at once, whilst allowing room for further extra-musical ideas?

Sketched, although never voiced in *Calculus*, a ‘Punched semibreve’ identity influences my orchestral work *Axon* (2013) prominently: sections are saturated with sequences of ‘Punched semibreves’. This process intensifies in the string quartet *Afference* (2014), in which the first movement is conceived as a sequence of ‘Punched semibreves’, whilst also functioning in its entirety as a ‘Punched semibreve’, an afferent upbeat to the second and final movement, a meditation on the notion of ‘neurocratic hope’. *Leviathan* (2015), for baritone saxophone and percussion, explores elements at war with one another: the collision of opposites. The instrumentalists travel slowly through the pitches of a William Lawes melody in 91 ‘Punched semibreves’, each attack at war with the others and with itself. There are two competing time structures: one moves from the fastest tempo to slowest and back again, the other is informed by the unpredictable lengths of notes, a translation from chaos theory in mathematics. In *Leviathan*, the concept of homeomorphism, in which two objects can appear to look very different, but in fact have the same fundamental form, has become fused with the notion of a malleable ‘Punched semibreve’: the 91 punched semibreves sound so different from each other, but in fact they have the same essential form. In stark contrast to the rigorously calculated *Leviathan*, the short work *Chaos or Chess* (2016), for solo tuba, features tuba-voice sound complexes, punched out in a freely imagined anarchicstructure.

It is through ongoing engagement with Hill’s poetry, and his antinomy-seeking mind, that I have come to view my own compositions as musical reactions to a wide range of extra-musical influences. It’s the resulting collision and union of disparate ideas from diverse sources that excites me, and the subsequent translation of these hybrid ideas into sound is essentially the crux of my creative process.

1. The work was rescored for piano trio – *Broken Hierarchies II* – in 2009. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Here I refer to the original version of *Clavics* (Enitharmon Press; 2011). An extensively revised, expanded and reordered version of *Clavics* appears in *Broken Hierarchies: Poems 1952-2012* (OUP; 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)