

To prepare this lecture I looked and listened through my works chronologically and could trace a clear evolutionary process at the core of which is a steady curiosity about **the material of music and the nature of music in general**. I should add: from the point of view of the dilettante.

I have no formal musical training, never went to music school. I grew up in an environment that equally mixed 19th century symphonic music and French popular songs. I'm still not wild about the former but definitely enjoy the latter. That same environment expressed a strong distaste for rock music and contemporary 'serious' music, for which the generic name was 'Stockhausen'. So I developed a healthy curiosity for both and bought a record of Armengaud playing the Stockhausen Klavierstuecke (on sale in a supermarket) one year before buying my first Sex Pistols record. I liked both but eventually sold the Pistols, while I still have the Stockhausen.

My first musical endeavors date back to 1977 and I took the 'No Future' slogan rather seriously, so there was no point going to whatever school. But, unless you're successful, rock music is a rather boring practice, so after a few years I could convince fellow band members to check out Stockhausen and some other weird composers and try our hand at more experimental stuff which over the years lost any connection to rock music and ended up as free improvisation.

It was fun while it lasted, but unless you're one of the rare virtuosos at it, free improv gets just as tedious as rock. The funny thing is that rock usually gets boring for those who play it, while free improv gets boring for the audience first.

All this time I had been listening to a lot of new music and around 1985 I started working for the Logos Foundation (which I did until 2001), where I got exposed to new music on a daily basis. And that's where I became musically more ambitious and started thinking 'composition', first in a rather conceptual, verbal way. And then gradually in a more musically conventional way. And from the very beginning I had this strong 'what if?' drive.

One of the first pieces I wrote, in 1986, was for a contest about the music of Franz Liszt. I had no theoretical knowledge whatsoever and my practical knowledge was fairly limited. So I decided to approach the material of music - in this case Franz Listz's - from an objective non-musical statistical point of view: 'Let's see what's in there.' And I developed a technique which I enjoyed so much that I have later used it again on a few occasions. I counted all the onsets of pitch occurrences in Liebestraum and put them back in descending order starting from A on the rhythmic and dynamic structure of the original. So what you get is Liebestraum with all the pitches neatly organized (though I must admit there are some minor inconsistencies here and there and I have no idea where they come from, but I like the way they sound). To this day, 20 years later, I still enjoy the piece a lot.

I applied the same process when accordionist Guy Klucevsek asked me to write a polka for his Polka from the Fringe series. Though only for one of the two movements of the piece. For the other movement I used a deduction method: keeping only one pitch at the start and then gradually adding the other pitches, up to halfway, where there are two bars identical to the original (a polka titled 'Dancing Fingers'), to then remove them again and end up with just one. Thanks to Guy it became my most performed and published work.

Such a meticulous dissection of other people's scores made me gradually more comfortable with notation, reading and musical analysis and apparently people enjoyed my music and I started getting commissions.

I became bolder and my curiosity led me to develop other techniques, yielding more complex results than the statistical approach. Probably due to living in an urban environment where I was continuously surrounded by music of some sort, whether I like it or not, rather than a calculated postmodern move, I got curious as to what would happen if I'd combine works with different aesthetics, that shared more or less common harmonic structures.

To combine them in such a way that I could be surprised I wanted to avoid aesthetic arbitrariness. So I had to find preferably non musical organizational structures, like maps or charts. One of the first works I wrote in this way, in 1990, was commissioned by the Zivatar Trio. A group consisting of flutist Anne La Berge, mezzo soprano and accordionist Elise Lorraine and cimbalon player Michiel Weidner.

I must, at this point, confess that, as the main issue for me was the musical result rather than the concept, which I viewed as a mere tool, I always got rid of sketches and notes once the work was

finished. Therefore I can not always remember too well how or why I did certain things. For some works I have no recollection of what I used at all. I do remember however that for 'The Many Gypsies in Me', the work for the Zivatar Trio, I used maps of villa designs by Palladio. I remember that in those days I was reading Frances Yates book on the art of memory and was attracted to the idea of virtual, mental spaces or rooms to store information, to be retrieved by visualization of the architectural construction. I was also quite interested in bossa nova, in Prince and in the standard song repertoire (an ongoing love). I placed fragments in different rooms of the villa's and had the ensemble members individually moving through the building. They shared a common musical field but not necessarily a common route. I have no idea how I made the decisions as to what instrument would move from where to where.

The next year I used oceanographic maps (and I have no idea how) to explore the common ground on which two of my favourite songwriters dwell: Franz Schubert and Hank Williams, hence the title 'Biedermeyer Hillbillies'. It was written for two singing pianists, Annette Sachs and Francoise Vanhecke. As a novelty the score not only used materials from both composers but part of the lyrics was derived from the oceanographic maps.

I must have enjoyed working with the oceanographic maps a lot as I used them for two other pieces which to this day remain unperformed, due to ensembles splitting or musicians changing their mind.

I did not mention Cage so far, just Stockhausen, though Cage was there early on and much more present and important in my musical evolution than Stockhausen would ever be. Cage's music and his ideas were what subconsciously told me that it was perfectly OK to do this. And in 1992 I wrote a piece that was strongly indebted to him. That year I bought a house and was in the midst of huge and urgent renovations and at the same time facing a deadline for a commission (the money of which was most welcome to pay some of these renovations). I couldn't take my mind off the work and concentrate on music until one evening I was on my knees putting in new floorboards when I saw the knots in the wood and thought 'that's it, here's the music'. With a pencil and some graph paper I got all the melodic material for the work together that same night. I have no idea how I determined the musical field - knots in a floorboard are still not music. The only thing I remember is that the commission required the work to use part of La Chanson de Roland. The text was divided between 4 composers and I got the battle. It's sung in Flemish, and the very suave floorboard melodies are quite deceiving as the text is about chopping off limbs and piercing through liver, lungs and heart. The experience also included my first encounter with adversity from a musician. The baritone who was supposed to sing the piece refused to do so as, though it was fully conventionally notated, he didn't seem able to recognize the work as music. The soprano was originally hired only to play the harmonium, but bravely agreed to combine it with singing (she had sung my music before).

The commissioning organization must have liked the work as they asked me again the following year. But the experience turned out to be far less pleasant and because of that also quite revelatory. I was again not happy about the communication with the musicians. There were some 'open' passages in the work and it became clear that not all musicians can deal with that kind of freedom. Though people were nice and seemed to like the music, or at least some of it, I felt strange, quite displaced among the other three composers on the program, and quite isolated on the Belgian contemporary music scene. It left me with a feeling of frustration and an unsatisfactory recording of a piece that will probably never get performed again.

This must be what led me to consider writing things which I could perform myself. From 1993 on I clearly composed less for other people (which wasn't too hard as apart from recorder quartets not many people asked me to write for them anymore). I remember repeating the experience one last time in 2000, when I was asked as one of 20 or so other composers to write a one minute piece for guitar based on a guitar collection John Zorn once wrote for Eugene Chadbourne. It was nicely performed, well received but it was so strange among all the other works (for one thing it was the only piece for electric guitar and sounded quite obnoxious next to all the gentle twanging) that I decided it would be my very last piece of 20th century music.

But back to 1993; I started experimenting with formats in which I could participate as a rather mediocre guitarist. It was back to square one and the produce was not always very successful, but I enjoyed the attempts.

It was a matter of finding new ways to organize the materials, other than maps or charts, rather starting from the musical materials themselves. One of the more satisfying attempts was 'Standard Indeterminacy', from 1997, which applied temporal indeterminacy to standards.

Then, a year or so later, I had an epiphany when for the first time I heard Peter Zummo's *Experimenting with Household Chemicals*. I had a very strong 'that's it!' feeling, though I could not pinpoint what made the work so relevant to me. There were lots of things, a certain enthusiasm of the musicians, a will to reach out, an elasticity, both freedom and structure. After some time I contacted Peter (whom I had met a first time in 1986 or so) asking him about the piece, whether there was a score to it and other people could play it, which he confirmed. I then started working on the project of inviting him over and getting people together to perform the work, but first I wanted to see the score. Once I had it I was puzzled, and so were the other musicians who had agreed on joining in the project. It is basically trombone music, assembled in a fragmented way. So we started working on it, trying to find a way to interpret it. We came to interesting results but were not sure to be heading in the right direction. In the end it all came together when Peter got over. He had that one metaphorical instruction which was the key to piece: 'you go through the materials like a herd.'

This was like primitive stochastics, with the herd as a simplified and much more surveyable version of the swarm. I also realized that 'the herd' was also close to the form I was more or less working with in *Standard Indeterminacy*. In *Experimenting With Household Chemicals* the musicians go more or less from the beginning of the score to the end (also more or less). They do not necessarily all play all the parts, just like some animals in the herd will encounter or stray around certain bushes or puddles, while others will meet different things, but all are heading in the same direction. It is what give this sensation of simultaneous homogeneity and independence. Recently, while attending a performance of Morton Feldman's *Crippled Symmetry* I found myself projecting the herd analogy to this music as well, except that in that work the herd is in a closed meadow instead of being headed from A to B.

Our performance of Peter Zummo's work, with the trombone more or less leading the herd, was a rewarding experience, also because I had gathered musicians who were able to make that kind of music happen. I would later work with them again for my own music.

But here I am, 5 years into the 21st century, 5 years since I decided to stop writing 20th century music, and it is still unclear to me what 21st century music could be. One movement I have made seems to be a full circle back to 1977, back to the most simple forms used in rock music, those derived from early blues music. I had the feeling that of all music theory that part, the I IV V progression, I could fully grasp. And my fondness of jazz taught me that this very simple foundation can yield very complex and interesting music. The lack of musical education has, next to obvious technical disadvantages, provided me with the benefit of being uninhibited. Allowing me to look at Robert Johnson through the eyes of Iannis Xenakis or the other way round. Strangely enough it is also since making that move that I found myself very much enjoying Arnold Schoenberg's theoretical writings. They make much more sense to me now than they did 15 years ago.

This researching the harmonic language of early blues has so far produced two works, one, very straightforward titled "*CrossRoads/Invocation*" is for computer and microphone feedback.

The other one, the most recent one, is "*Bending the Tonic*", which was created last November and performed twice since with an ensemble consisting of most musicians I had worked with on Peter Zummo's piece.