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Crossing Over – an Inclusive Ethos and Method in Music Education

Presenter: Dr Graeme Downes

Reviewed by Sarah Watson



Dr Graeme Downes

Graeme Downes completed his PhD on the music of Mahler and his 19th-century antecedents in 1993. He contributes pre-concert lectures for the NZSO on the music of Mahler and Shostakovich, in particular, and for the Southern Sinfonia. Graeme has a 30-year career as a songwriter and performer in his rock band, the Verlaines, and as a solo performer. He is a senior lecturer in the University of Otago Music Department and teaches song writing and analysis.

Dr Graeme Downes classes himself as a “classical refugee”, and regards rockers as “cultural refugees from classical music”, which form he studied almost exclusively at university.

He still enjoys teaching it, but became a rock musician in order to compose “in the here and now”. Downes regards the University of Otago Music Department as a unique teaching environment because of the various disciplines; the Contemporary Rock Department was founded in 2000 and, at first, the Rock theory was entirely separate from Classical Theory. After a year it was decided to merge them into one stream, the idea being “to get students to find all music teachable and learnable”.

The Rhythm module used to be the poor cousin in the educational field, with Harmony seen as the most useful component. The study of Bach chorales and counterpoint was the backbone of study and yet this was a paradox for students of the MUSI 101 degree. Not everything is written in 4/4 time and, at this level, it is necessary to teach other time signatures. We were shown rhythm worksheets used for student assessments where rhythms need to be re-expressed e.g. 4/4 to 12/8, 3/4 to 6/8 etc. Downes regards music as “primary school maths performed in time”, and rhythm and polyrhythm can be seen as part of the universality of human game playing. He reminded us that Beethoven wrote works in 4/16 when he was older and more combative, where the rhythms actually sound as if they are written in 4/4 but the scores are more daunting.

Downes, citing a talk by Talking Heads musician David Byrne, talked about music and the environment it is written for, and where it is most effective. African drumming is an ‘outdoors’ music, and its polyrhythms sound good out in the open spaces; chorales written for Gothic cathedrals allow the music to soar and resonate around the architecture; sharp, jangly music works in the close confines of New York clubs, but not big rock music such as U2’s, which requires the acoustics of a rock stadium to work to its full potential. So, there is a need to compose music for the environment where it will be performed.

No music is seen as superior but its purpose is to ‘work’ in its intended environment. This view is further explored in Peter van der Merwe’s book, *Origins of the Popular Style*. Furthermore, the origins of present-day popular music can be traced back to the near East, coming via Africa to Europe, and then on to America, that great melting pot of peoples and cultures, who recognise each other’s music even after its long journey, because of historically shared elements.

Isochronism

Returning to the awareness of mathematical properties shared by different time signatures, Downes looked at how humans play with metre and polymetre. To establish a time signature, there is a need for a clear pulse and accent. In the first movement of the *Eroica*, Beethoven uses isochronism to create a dramatic opening with no real sense of a time signature; the repeated opening chords with equal accent disconcert the listener. He compared this with the '80s hit *O Superman* by Laurie Anderson, which uses a voice sample repeated to create a continuum of "isochronic sound events". There is a tendency on the listener's part to impute a 4/4 time signature to the song but it slips into triple time which is disconcerting. Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* went further in creating "unsettling" music by having the strings downbow the chords in 2/4 but the horns interjecting in a 5/8, 5/4 pattern.



Laurie Anderson, American experimental performance artist and musician *Wikimedia Commons*

The use of isochronism to disturb is also evident in film music, where it serves to heighten the tension, particularly in psycho-horror films.

Thus classical, 20th-century 'serious' and 20th-century 'pop' music all use isochronism, different instrumentation, and expressive agendas to unsettle us as our ears search for a regular metre.

Downes reminded us that Brahms is not a conservative composer. His *Piano Concerto in B flat Op. 83*, has a 4/4 time signature, the 'parent' time signature which drives the form, but he uses triplets to create polyrhythms. The second piano entry comes in with semiquavers, with simple time subdivisions in the left hand but opposing compound rhythms in the right hand. Effectively, we hear 12/8, 4/4 and 3/2. The intense polyrhythmic work

enables a larger structure, thus the first movement of the concerto is able to run for almost 20 minutes, "a monster of a work".



Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) *Wikimedia Commons*

Gary Moore - *Still Got the Blues for You*

The late Gary Moore's 20th-century guitar solo *Still Got the Blues for You* begins with an even pulse in 6/8 played by the drums. This bare and simple pattern allows the guitar solo to build gradually until five minutes in we are hearing "major action". The opening melody has developed compound rhythm within compound rhythm, and hammer notes create accents, which in turn create greater polyrhythms. As it becomes more complex, triplets come in, and then grace notes, the speed appears to increase as the subdivisions get smaller and smaller, and there are semiquaver triplets in groups of four. Gary Moore, who died 6 February 2011, was a "monster blues guitarist" and showed that virtuosity is not about speed but about rhythmic structures. After the increasing element of polyrhythmic devices there is a return to the 'head', the original simple melody.

In the Finale of Shostakovich's *Violin Concerto No. 1*, the basic background is simple duple. Shostakovich uses polyrhythms to make the soloist stand out from the background in much the same way as Gary Moore does. Similarly, these become more complex as the piece progresses, generating a sense of structure.

Rhythm itself can define a style. In Ragtime, there is a sense of 3/8 in the right hand and 2/4 in the left hand (Scott Joplin's *The Entertainer*; Botsford's *Black and White Rag*). The polyrhythms make it a sophisticated popular music; the quadratic phrasing, 4-

barphrases, were the norm for dancing and Ragtime is designed for dancing.

By comparison, The Pixies' Break my Body, is 'music played by a psychopath', six-and-a-half bars in the first riff, a 3-bar phrase for the chorus and a 6-bar coda. This Alternative Rock is primitive in some respects, but it has a rhythmic violence that is hard to break down. It is structurally uncomfortable but paradoxically closer to some structures in Mozart than to those of U2. This genre is about not being in 4-bar phrases.

Downes showed us that human beings write for the environment they are in, and that techniques used by musicians to achieve effects are actually very common. Aspiring rock composers need to know that they can actually learn a lot from Brahms's astonishing rhythmic patterns. The poetry of the 21st century can still be set to music that uses the tonal lay of the 19th century and its compositional methods. If we are stimulated by any music, we need to "look under the hood and see what makes it tick", and perhaps incorporate those elements into our own compositions.

Sarah Watson is originally from England but has lived in Auckland for the past 11 years. She teaches piano and theory at the King's School, Remuera, where she also helps with the School Orchestra and String Group. She is a member of the Auckland Branch Committee of IRMT.