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Just the Tip of the Iceberg: Some Aspects of Gavin Bryars' Music

WHEN MICHAEL NYMAN called him 'the most independent and original experimental composer in England' in 1972,[1] Gavin Bryars did seem to be on the crest of a wave. This judgement was made in an article that previewed a concert on December 11 that year in the Queen Elizabeth Hall, London, consisting of three of his works – *The Sinking of the Titanic* (a 'work in progress' begun in 1969), *The Squirrel and the Ricketty Racketty Bridge* (1971) and *Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet* (1971) – and an appearance by the Portsmouth Sinfonia which Bryars founded.

Not only was that concert an unusually large-scale public statement for an English experimental composer to make, but it came at a time when English experimental music appeared to be undergoing a crisis – a crisis that, for example, had caused its generally acknowledged guiding spirit Cornelius Cardew practically to stop composing for a while. This apparently abrupt change of gear and the need for the composers concerned to question their whole musical aesthetic in the light of the political issues raised in the Scratch Orchestra is documented elsewhere in this issue by John Tilbury.[2] Bryars' concert, despite the fact that the pieces in it had actually been conceived during the heyday of English experimental music around 1970, must have seemed to some at the time quite anachronistic. Indeed, to regard it as a contemporary 'statement' is possibly quite misleading, since Bryars had himself almost stopped composing by the end of 1971 and was entering a period of crisis at exactly the same time as many of his fellow experimentalists: a crisis occasioned by the awakening of a political consciousness and the resulting desire of some of the composers to 'turn their abilities, including the style they've mastered, and use them in support of it'.[3] Yet there is at least one very important difference between Bryars and most of the others: he was not at any stage a member of the Scratch Orchestra.

The years 1972 and 1973 were undoubtedly crucial in the development of English experimental music. The Scratch Orchestra, founded in 1969 by Cardew with Michael Parsons and Howard Skempton, survived for a while under the banner of 'Scratch Orchestra Ideological Group' but finally disbanded altogether. Some composers followed Cardew in attempting to compose an overtly political music to accord with their new Marxist-Leninist or other related left-wing political beliefs; others, some of whom shared those beliefs, stopped composing, and often all other musical and related activites. Some carried on the composition and performance of an experimental music based on what they had been doing before, but it could clearly not be the same. The year 1973 was considered by some at the time to have been particularly barren; though Christopher Hobbs and John White were working regularly as a duo after the break-up of the quartet called the Promenade Theatre Orchestra, and though there were brief moments of solidarity among the 'non-political' composers (such as the Purcell Room concert on January 4, 1974 in which Parsons and Skempton, Hobbs and White took part),[4] much of the activity there was seemed to take place in isolation. There was little sense of a movement such as had existed strongly only a couple of years before. The summer of 1974 saw the publication of Nyman's book,[5] which included an account of English experimental music – more strictly, of some of the experimental activities in London – up to 1973. This seemed to its author and others, I think, to mark the end of an era and even the end of the use of the term 'experimental' as a vital and meaningful force.

Bryars' activities up to the end of 1972 have been fairly well documented, probably rather better than those of many of his experimental colleagues.[6] It is therefore my intention here to add to this material and avoid duplicating it, though I shall not attempt a comprehensive coverage of his output since the early 1970s. Rather I hope to shed light on the nature of his sharing in the crisis of this period, and to examine a variety of pieces, tracing a number of ideas to their sources, both musical and extra-musical. I contend that Bryars *remains* 'the most independent and original experimental composer in England', and in trying to demonstrate the nature of that independence and originality I hope also to suggest that the term 'experimental' still has meaning and validity today, even if, quite naturally, it means something a little different from what it did ten years ago.

Bryars was born on January 16, 1943 in Goole, Yorkshire. Interested in music from an early age, he nevertheless read philosophy, not music, at Sheffield University (1961–64), though he also studied composition with two Yorkshire composers, Cyril Ramsey and George Linstead. Bryars was a double bass player, and much of his early involvement with music came through playing jazz and popular music; for example, for 18 months from January 1965 he played in a working men's club in Greaseborough, Yorkshire. In 1963 he met fellow Yorkshire jazz musicians Derek Bailey and Tony Oxley. This was the period when they were moving away from their jazz roots towards the free improvisation for which they are now known. A free improvisation group was formed (which must have been among the first, if it was not the first, of such groups in this country), called Joseph Holbrooke after the composer (1878–1958, known today, if at all, as 'the Cockney Wagner').[7] The name was Bryars' suggestion and represents one of the earliest examples of his involvement with what, in another context, has been called the 'apparently disparate collection of composers

[1] 'As the Titanic went down', *Music and Musicians*, vol. 21, no. 4 (December 1972), p. 10.

[2] For a further account of this political approach to music see Cornelius Cardew, *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism* (London: Latimer New Directions, 1974) which includes contributions from Tilbury.

[3] Cornelius Cardew in an interview with Keith Potter, 'Some Aspects of a Political Attitude', *Contact 10* (Winter 1974-75), p. 23.

[4] For an attempt to define 'experimental music' in the climate of that concert see 'Some Aspects of an Experimental Attitude', an interview with Michael Parsons by Keith Potter, *Contact 8* (Spring 1974), pp. 20-25; see also the articles on John White and Howard Skempton in *Contact 21* (Autumn 1980).

[5] *Experimental Music: Cage and beyond* (London: Studio Vista, 1974).

[6] In addition to Nyman's article and book and other references below see Martin Dreyer, 'Yorkshire Composers 5: Gavin Bryars – Experimental Musician', *The Month in Yorkshire*, vol. 9, no. 10 (Summer 1979), p. 12. There is a short and uninformative entry on Bryars in *The New Grove*.

[7] The name given to him by Hannen Swaffer.

from the world of "alternative" musical history'.[8] The group, though, had almost nothing to do with Holbrooke's music.

Bryars' improvising activities at this stage find a parallel in Cardew's work with the free improvisation group AMM in the mid-60s and later. But Bryars became disillusioned with improvisation fairly quickly. His principal criticism of it continues to be what he calls its 'indulgence': 'There seemed to be nothing that was going to be produced by improvisation that was going to go beyond what the person was capable of thinking up in the moment . . . a repertoire of tricks.'[9] His development towards a distancing of creator from thing created, a fundamental characteristic of experimental music from Cage on, may also be seen in the following quotation which represents Bryars' position at the time he gave up improvisation in 1966:

> One of the main reasons I am against improvisation now is that in any improvising position the person creating the music is identified with the music. The two things are seen to be synonymous. The creator is there making the music and is identified with the music and the music with the person. It's like standing a painter next to his picture so that every time you see the painting you see the painter as well and you can't see it without him. And because of that the music, in improvisation, doesn't stand alone. It's corporeal. My position, through the study of Zen and Cage, is to stand apart from one's creation . . . They are conceptions. I'm more interested in conception than reality.[10]

In 1966 he stopped all regular playing and moved to Northampton to teach music at the technical college. Giving that up after a year, he went at the end of 1967 to America for six months, going out to the University of Illinois at the invitation of Powell Shepherd, an American dancer whom he had met while playing for some dance classes in London during his time at Northampton. His activities were already tending strongly in an experimental direction, and his stay at Illinois coincided with Cage's residency there.[11] On his return to England in 1968 he became part of the fast developing London experimental scene and worked regularly with the pianist John Tilbury for about a year and a half.

Typical of Bryars' approach at this time are the several versions he made in 1968 and 1969 of Stockhausen's *Plus-Minus* (1963) and a piece of his own called *Private Music* (1969). The notation of *Plus-Minus*, in which all content and several aspects of form are left to the player, leaves the way open to distinctively experimental approaches as well as the more avantgarde realisations sanctioned by the Master himself. In Bryars' versions something of the zany qualities of the Fluxus movement with which he became familiar in America (and which was also an important influence on the Scratch Orchestra) seem to be combined with the related concern for simple, sometimes apparently naive, tonal statement, often through the use of familiar classical or popular material (the starting-point for the Portsmouth Sinfonia). Both these are aspects that recur regularly in his later work. One of his versions of *Plus-Minus* incorporates a collage of the slow movement of Schubert's C major String Quintet and Barry Ryan's pop song *Eloise*:

> The result was quite ravishing – the sheer sensuality of the sound of each was enhanced by the other. In this respect things have changed radically over the last five years. Previously our attitude had been quite ascetic, in fact we had a horror of any kind of indulgence and it was felt necessary to destroy 'beauty' whenever it occurred. It was La-Monte Young and his music that helped to bring about the present situation.[12]

The 'indulgence' that Tilbury here accepts as a valuable and important part of an experimental attitude in the late 60s is of a very different kind from the one that Bryars has condemned as inevitable in improvisation. The 'cult of the beautiful' which Nyman identified as an element in English experimental music from around 1969 or 1970[13] may have stemmed from the American process composers and from Young in particular. But the re-acceptance of tonality, or at least of a high degree of consonance, in radical music started with Cage, who let 'sounds be just sounds', and if they were 'folk tunes, unresolved ninth chords, or knives and forks' allowed them to be 'just folk tunes, unresolved ninth chords, or knives and forks'.[14]

It is perhaps this more easy-going treatment of materials that is ultimately of greater importance to English experimental composers. Nyman points out that 'unlike the Americans . . . English composers have tended to use as their source material the music of Western classical composers. And as regards method, while the Americans have evolved highly controlled systems, English composers have tended to adopt less restricted processes.'[15] White's list of influences from the 'apparently disparate collection of composers from the world of "alternative" musical history' is an obvious instance. An openness to sentimentality is another important aspect of this very English realisation of *Plus-Minus*; Bryars was later to demonstrate his closeness to White when he used his elder colleague's dictum 'System and Sentimentality are the SS of my Reich'[16] (all puns presumably intended) as the starting-point for his piece *White's SS* (1977).

Surprising and subversive, ravishing and sentimental though it may be, Bryars' realisation of *Plus-Minus* nevertheless demonstrates the importance for him of following a clear and logical line of procedure. The rules of the composition appear to have been observed to the letter; there is a reason for everything, everything 'fits'. The importance of this will soon become apparent.

Private Music (1969) is similar to Stockhausen's piece in that it sets up a scheme for the player to work to, a system if you like, but does not give any precise indication of content. (The entire score is reproduced in Example 1.) But the aspect of the piece to which I want to draw attention is its very 'privacy'. The sound sources should be such that probably only the player can hear them. What the audience sees or hears will probably be the by-products of the performer's attempts to follow the score's instructions.

Three points emerge. The first is that this is a good example of Bryars' interest in conception rather than perception ('I'm more interested in conception than in reality.'). He has said that his compositions of this period 'have tended towards perceptual incompleteness, towards excess (of duration, number, ratio of effect to cause, of visual to aural), towards caprice, towards an interest in titles as well as pieces.'[17] His whole input in the composition of *Private Music* has been on the conceptual level: the idea *is*, in an important sense, the piece; few hints

[8] A quotation from Dave Smith, 'The Piano Sonatas of John White', *Contact 21*, p. 6.

[9] This and all following quotations not individually acknowledged are taken from conversations between Bryars and the author during December 1979 to February 1980.

[10] From 'Objections', an interview with Bryars by Derek Bailey, in Bailey's *Improvisation: its Nature and Practice in Music* (Ashbourne: Moorland Publishing, 1980), pp. 135-136. This interview gives an account of the circumstances in which Bryars abandoned improvisation and his reasons for doing so. (See Howard Riley's review of the book in this issue.)

[11] For some of the information contained in this paragraph and for one or two later biographical details I am indebted to Martin Dreyer who made available to me the full transcript of his interview with Bryars in June 1979 that formed the basis for the article mentioned in footnote 6.

[12] John Tilbury quoted in Nyman, *Experimental Music*, p. 135.

[13] Nyman, *Experimental Music*, p. 135.

[14] John Cage, 'Erik Satie', *Silence* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1966), p. 81.

[15] Nyman, *Experimental Music*, pp. 135-136.

[16] Quoted in Michael Nyman, 'Believe it or not melody rides again', *Music and Musicians*, vol. 20, no. 2 (October 1971), p. 28.

[17] Quoted in Nyman, *Experimental Music*, p. 80.

Example 1

PRIVATE MUSIC

For any number of performers
lasting as long as the source material.

Any kinds and numbers of private sources:
earphones, headphones, viewers, scents, feelies, food, drink, telephones etc.

Alternatives:
join in with the private source (not theatrically, but humming along, identifying, guessing).

Talk to the other performers or to yourself.

Simply keep your privacy private depriving others of the possibility of your privacy.

'The Sybil with raving mouth utters solemn unadorned unlovely words, but she reaches out over a thousand years with her voice because of the god in her.'
(Heraclitus: fragment 79)

Additional inputs:
telepathy, spirtualism (if the performer is a medium), all sensory inputs are available for use providing that their monitoring (expression) is voluntary.

Private Music **is essentially a solo performance, or parallel solos in simultaneous performance: for private group pieces, see** *Serenely Beaming and Leaning on a Five-barred Gate* **and** *1-2-3-4.*

Private Music **may be performed simultaneously with** *Marvellous Aphorisms Are Scattered Richly Throughout These Pages* **(solo performer).**

• • •

are given in the score as to how it may be realised. Any realisation will not merely be only one, inevitably partial, way of turning concept into percept (just as a performance of Beethoven's Fifth will only reveal some aspects of the conceptual whole that is the Work); a performance of *Private Music* will focus attention on the fact that the piece is about the fact that 'the piece is not for hearing'.

The second point is that Bryars seems to wish the privacy of the piece to extend to a hiding of the 'system' itself. This is in some ways most uncharacteristic of an experimental attitude. There is, admittedly, a good deal of secrecy surrounding Cage's chance operations; but Steve Reich's systems of phasing, etc. are designed to be audible, and his philosophy of composition is directed towards the perception of process, towards breaking down the barriers between system and sound, structure and hearing, concept and percept: 'What I'm interested in is a compositional process and a sounding music that are one and the same thing... I don't know any secrets of structure that you can't hear.'[18] On one occasion Reich asked Bryars just what he was trying to hide. Bryars' answer is interesting: 'I said that by retaining a certain privacy within the piece, a certain kind of hidden area where everything isn't revealed . . . you're not laying all your cards on the table. If someone wants to find out what your cards are they've got to look very closely.'[19]

Bryars' attitude to composition is thus very different not only from Reich's but from the 'usual' one. Like Cage with his use of chance, Bryars indulges in secret operations, but unlike Cage starts only with observations on the particular phenomenon that is to be the basis of the piece. That these secret operations are present will be obvious to any listener, and their detail can be ferreted out by anyone who takes the trouble. For *Private Music* anyway there is no other pre-compositional information, secret or otherwise. The difference between Cage and Bryars can be summed up: Cage's secrecy is a by-product of his compositional method, the details of which are undetectable by the listener but also largely irrelevant to him; Bryars' is an integral part of his compositional results and can be penetrated to the depth that the listener wishes to go.

[18] Steve Reich, 'Music as a Gradual Process', *Writings about Music* (Halifax, N.S.: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1974; distributed by Universal Edition), p. 10.

[19] From an interview with Bryars by Andrew Thomson on April 1, 1980, and quoted in Thomson's *Music of Association – Mr Gavin Bryars and 'Irma': an Opera Op. XII by Mr Thos. Phillips* (dissertation, Keele University, 1980), p. 12. I am grateful to both composer and author for making a copy available to me.

Example 2

MARVELLOUS APHORISMS ARE SCATTERED RICHLY THROUGHOUT THESE PAGES

Any number and kinds of quiet sound sources

Concealed inside clothing in such a way that their activation and manipulation is outside public view.

Inside shoes, hats, coats, trousers.

Bulky maybe, but quietly buzzing.

A bottomless mine of useless information.

First it was like Harpo Marx.

John saw it like an old man on a park bench.

I saw it like a prince among poets, constantly seeking out marvellous aphorisms.

• • •

The third point about *Private Music* concerns the observation I made earlier: few hints are given as to how the piece may be realised. To see how Bryars himself might make a version, we can turn to three pieces all of which seem to be realisations of the initial idea. *Serenely Beaming and Leaning on a Five-barred Gate* (1969) sets up a 'reducing network' of microphones, headphones and tape recorders for the transmission of two-channel tapes of spoken verse by Patience Strong. The effect is somewhat akin to that achieved in the party game in which a sentence is whispered from person to person, usually becoming hopelessly distorted in the process; here, though, listening and repetition are required to be simultaneous and Bryars asks for selective listening – just to high or to low sounds, for example. The piece may be done using 1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32 or 64 tape recorders; 64 would require 127 performers. *1, 2, 1-2-3-4* (1971) works on a similar principle, each performer having his own cassette tape recorder to which he listens using headphones; each has either a different or the same tape of 'familiar music' and is asked to reproduce what he can of the part for his own instrument. *Marvellous Aphorisms are Scattered Richly Throughout These Pages* (1971) is reproduced as Example 2 and is self-explanatory.

Despite his involvement with Tilbury (a regular and highly influential member of the Scratch Orchestra in both its pre-political and political years) and despite the similarity of many of the pieces he wrote between 1968 and 1971 to the kind of things the Scratch Orchestra was doing, Bryars never joined the group, which during its brief existence was the uniting and driving force behind English experimental music. One reason was simple and purely practical. In January 1969 Bryars took a part-time teaching job at Portsmouth School of Art (now part of Portsmouth Polytechnic), which became full-time for a year from that autumn. (The Scratch Orchestra's manifesto was published in June 1969[20] and its activities started shortly afterwards.) Following this year and a half of teaching music to fine-art students, he transferred in 1970 to Leicester, where he has taught ever since: he is now head of music at Leicester Polytechnic. Hence teaching outside the metropolis has prevented his regular involvement with a London-based group. This geographical isolation should not be overplayed, for throughout this period Bryars maintained his links with London by keeping a flat in Ladbroke Grove, which in 1972 became the centre for the Experimental Music Catalogue. Hobbs began the Catalogue in 1969, and was joined by Bryars and Nyman three years later; from then on, Bryars and his wife Angela did most of the work on the collecting, editing, anthologising, advertising and selling of scores.[21]

Bryars' early period of close contact with art students, professional artists and art historians contributed to the

[20] Cornelius Cardew, 'A Scratch Orchestra: Draft Constitution', *The Musical Times*, vol. 110, no. 1516 (June 1969), pp. 617-619.

[21] The EMC is currently in something of a dormant stage, but some of the material it made available in its early years is still obtainable, including quite a number of early pieces by Bryars. The full address is 208 Ladbroke Grove, London W10.

attitudes and involvements that constituted his experimental approach to the writing of music. It could in some respects be said to have been more important for him than for any other English experimental musician. A composer whose ideas stood little chance of being taken seriously in the professional musical world needed a sympathetic environment; some found it in the Scratch Orchestra, but Bryars found it in the art schools. At Portsmouth there was a genuine interest in the music he had recently been writing. Much of it was nearer to what is now called performance art than to traditional music making; it could often be performed quite successfully by students with little or no musical training. In terms of sheer numbers of pieces, the years 1968-71 are Bryars' most prolific; many have been collected in the EMC's *Verbal* and *Visual Anthologies.*

Other English experimental composers also took advantage of the liberal arts and complementary studies options that were still burgeoning in the art schools at the end of the educational expansion of the 60s. Parsons, for example, took over Bryars' Portsmouth job in 1970 and still teaches there. His involvement with the English systems artist Jeffrey Steele and others stems directly from contact with some of them at Portsmouth.[22]

In May 1970 Bryars founded the Portsmouth Sinfonia. Consisting at first entirely of Portsmouth art students plus Bryars, the orchestra's approach encapsulated many of his current concerns, including the use of classical music in an experimental context and working with amateur or non-musicians (both these were also concerns of the Scratch Orchestra). Nyman provides a useful summary of the Portsmouth Sinfonia's activities,[23] making reference to Skempton's term 'uncontrolled variables' - an important experimental concept:

> The uncontrollable factor arises out of the variable abilities of the members. Some are untrained and others less musically innocent may not be specially expert on their instruments. As with so much experimental music one hears a wide discrepancy between intention and effect. The intention is to play the notes, carefully, as written, even though some members can't read music and may not be too good at playing by ear. What results through the players' incompetence, is somewhat at variance with the letter of the music, and uncontrollably hilarious. What one hears at a Sinfonia concert is familiar music, seriously dislocated (to a greater or lesser extent). The originals may be recognised only by their rhythmic content or there may occasionally be more than a whiff of familiarity about a tune. Rhythm in the Sinfonia is something not to be relied upon; most players get lost, are not sufficiently in control of their instruments to keep up the pace, may suddenly telescope half a dozen bars into one, or lose their place. Pitch too is a very volatile element; as some players will most probably, if unintentionally, be playing wrong notes, the vertical combination will be unpredictable (one person *may* get the tune absolutely right for a few bars); rather, pitch *shape* and melodic contour may be preserved.[24]

At the same time, paradoxically, the crisis that occurred in Bryars' compositional development arose directly from working in an art school environment. The start of his period of teaching at Leicester brought about a rationalisation, a codification, and a considerable extension of his ideas, especially about his relationship with the arts in the widest sense: literature and philosophy as well as the plastic arts. This seems to have confirmed the relevance of some aspects of what he had been doing 'naively' before, but also raised doubts about whether his already established methods of working could form the basis of what he did next.

The widening, sharpening and focusing of Bryars' ideas through contact with the other arts can be seen as ultimately more important to his development than the critical dialectic of politics with which so many of his former colleagues became involved at the same period; he had little to do with the 'politicisation' they underwent. These two seemingly opposing modes of proceeding may be taken as two sides of the same coin, the currency of which has to do with some kind of reformation or reformulation of the whole notion of experimentalism in music, indeed in the arts generally. There must, after all, be *some* common ground in the rejection of experimental music as she had so far been practised; a rejection made at the same time by a group of people who were, in spite of a certain isolation, still very much in touch. Perhaps the dialectic between the two modes of proceeding can be carried on in the reader's mind in the light of the clear artistic–political–philosophical gap that exists between the content and argument of this article and that of John Tilbury.

To give a clearer picture of Bryars' preoccupations immediately before the 1972 concert I turn to one of the three pieces performed on that occasion; it is in some ways his best-known work, owing not least to its having been available for some time on record[25] and also, though admittedly more obscurely, in published form.[26]

The Sinking of the Titanic is an open-form work in progress begun in 1969. By the time of the 1972 premiere, the greater part of the work Bryars has done on it was already accomplished; the only published version remains more than adequate as the basis for the preparation of new realisations, even though he is still adding material as he finds it. The initial idea and much of the work thus predate the critical years of 1973 and 1974.

The *Titanic* is based on a detailed investigation into the loss off the coast of Newfoundland of the supposedly unsinkable ship of that name on its maiden voyage in April 1912. One of the 20th century's most famous disasters, it has captured the imaginations of many other artists including several composers.[27] In a programme note for an American performance in 1978, Bryars explained that 'The starting point for the piece was the report by Harold Bride, the junior wireless officer, of the band's behaviour and, from there, the various researches, interviews and reconstructions have provided a body of material out of which performances can be constructed.'

[22] For further on this see Michael Parsons, 'Systems in Art and Music', *The Musical Times,* vol. 117, no. 1604 (October 1976), pp. 815-818.

[23] The orchestra was very active in its early years and appeared on several records including *Hallelujah: The Portsmouth Sinfonia at the Royal Albert Hall* (Transatlantic TRA 285), a live recording of its concert on May 28, 1974. More recently the orchestra has resurfaced on television and elsewhere and there are projects for further recording. Bryars is still a member.

[24] Nyman, *Experimental Music,* p. 140.

[25] On the Obscure record label, OBS 1; *Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet* is also on this disc. *1, 2, 1-2-3-4* is on OBS 2, *The Squirrel and the Ricketty Racketty Bridge* on OBS 8 and Bryars' realisation of Tom Phillips's *Irma* on OBS 9. Originally marketed by Island Records, the ten discs on the label so far are now distributed by Polydor. In case of difficulty in obtaining them, write to Polydor Records Ltd., 17-19 Stratford Place, London W1N 0BL.

[26] In the American magazine *Soundings,* no. 9 (June 1975), unpaginated. This valuable issue also contains the scores of *The Ride Cymbal and the Band that Caused the Fire in the Sycamore Trees* (1969) and *Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet,* as well as a contribution by Nyman, 'Gavin Bryars 1971 Michael Nyman 1975'.

[27] George Antheil and Karg-Elert have both written pieces based on the sinking of the Titanic. Luciano Berio was attracted to the dramatic possibilities of the incident as early as 1957; though he never completed his original project, the story found its way into his *Opera* (1969-70) as one of the three main ideas behind the 'drama'. More recently the West German composer Wilhelm Dieter Siebert has written an opera called *The Loss of the Titanic* (premiered in Berlin in 1979) in which the opera house itself serves as the ship and the audience are among the passengers. More recently still the English composer George Nicholson's *The Convergence of the Twain* for chamber orchestra (1978) received its first performance; the title comes from a poem by Thomas Hardy about the sinking of the Titanic, and the poet's contrast of man's arrogance with the 'malevolent god' of nature is reflected in the two types of music on which Nicholson's work is based.

The score consists of elements besides musical notation. The bulk of it is made up of writings documenting, explaining and expanding the material that Bryars has painstakingly collected from newspaper clippings, interviews with survivors, etc. It also presents various hypotheses and conjectures concerning the events on the Titanic's voyage, and implicitly suggests ways in which this material may be used to make a performance. A representative sample page is given in Example 3.

Bryars investigates the story of the disaster as a whole, but selects in particular facts about the activities of the ship's band: the specifically musical situation of the incident. The documentation includes much information on the eight members of the band, the instruments they played and the music they performed. During the ship's last evening they played selections from Offenbach's *The Tales of Hoffmann* and various ragtime numbers; the latter were apparently 'of incalculable help in maintaining morale'[28] after the ship had struck the iceberg. But the evidence crucial to Bryars' piece centres on the controversy surrounding what music was played last. There being insufficient lifeboats for all on board and the chances of survival seeming increasingly slim it appears that the entire band took the decision not to abandon ship but to continue playing, even as the ship went down.

Concluding a correspondence on the subject in *The Musical Times* which arose independently of Bryars, at the time of the QEH performance, the composer wrote as follows:

> Most evidence is in favour of the band's last tune being not *Nearer, my God, to Thee* (which they undoubtedly played at some stage) but an Episcopalian hymn tune *Autumn.* The most reliable witness on the subject of the ship's last moments is Harold Bride, the second wireless operator, one of the last survivors to leave the ship. In the *New York Times* of 19 April 1912 he recalled:
>
> The way the band kept playing was a noble thing. I heard it first whilst still we were working wireless, when there was a ragtime tune for us, and the last I saw of the band, when I was floating out in the sea with my lifebelt on, it was still on deck playing *Autumn.* How they ever did it I cannot imagine. That and the way Phillips [first wireless officer] kept sending after the captain told him his life was his own, and to look out for himself, are two things that stand out in my mind over all the rest.
>
> As to the band's abilities and the use of parts in performance: the night of the disaster was Sunday, and that evening until after 10 p.m. there had been hymn-singing in the saloon, conducted by the Rev. Mr Carter accompanied at the piano by a young Scottish engineer. It is not unlikely that the two hymns were played then (ironically, *For those in peril on the sea* was played), and that the musicians could have been present. If there were parts, the night was exceptionally bright (and the electricity for the ship's own lighting lasted for a surprising length of time); there was also the Aurora Borealis, so the musicians could have read the parts – most cabaret musicians read music in far worse light conditions. Even if the parts were not there, there is no reason to think that the musicians could not play without music nor to suppose that the performance was perfectly harmonized.[29]

According to Bride's evidence, the piece the band played as the Titanic sank was the hymn tune *Autumn:* it is therefore given in Bryars' score as one of the basic materials for a performance. But evidence from other sources suggests that the last item played was another hymn tune with a confusingly similar name, *Aughton;* there is even a suggestion that it was not a hymn tune at all but Cécile Chaminade's *Autumn.* Confusion, not only of musical memory but of the names of the possible pieces thus characterises the evidence. Though the words set to *Aughton* in the *American Episcopal Hymnal* are appropriate to the situation,[30] there is no conclusive proof that it was played; but it could have been, and so it too is given in the score. Presumably the Chaminade could feature in a realisation too.

The question of evidence – the hard facts of what took place, in so far as they can be ascertained – is a crucial one for Bryars' work. The process of gathering it and using it in the way he does may seem an unusual method of going about putting together a piece of music, but it should now be obvious that the *Titanic*'s experimental qualities stem naturally from his previous preoccupations. Having made every attempt to base the piece on fact he takes matters further: not from fact to fiction exactly, but at least from thesis to hypothesis. For Bryars' *Titanic* is not merely a musical documentary or play with music. The question of supplying missing facts that have gone down with the ship is also taken into consideration, and in peculiar and original ways.

Again the musical situation is central. Here it is not a question of the general (the whole story of the voyage) leading to the specific (the story of the band), rather it is one of the specific ('the purely musical, acoustic consequences of the performance situation in which this extraordinary music-making took place')[31] leading to the general (the ways in which considerations of musical perception force the piece logically but relentlessly on to the rocks of the conceptual). Bryars asks what would have happened to the music the band was playing and builds this logical hypothesis into the piece. There is no evidence to suggest that the musicians actually stopped playing as the ship went down. Logically therefore, the piece must be concerned with 'what would have happened if they had still been playing – how would the piece have sounded, *granted that it is impossible that they still could be playing*'.[32] Note the passage in (my) italics. In the light of other pieces that he had written before the *Titanic* (particularly the 'versions' of *Private Music*), it is only a short step to thinking that 'it doesn't really seem an unreasonable hypothesis to assume impossible conditions'.[33] Even the most impossible of Bryars' hypotheses – that the sounds of the band never ceased – turns out to have some basis in scientific theory:

> After the development of wireless telegraphy, Marconi had suggested that sounds once generated never die, and hence music, once played, simply gets fainter (as does any sound on this account). Indeed, it is retained more effectively in the more sound-efficient medium of water and is partly sealed in by the 'ceiling' effect of the coincidence of air and water.[34]

Parallel with the *Titanic* piece is an 'imaginary' one, a kind of double which at the first performance was in phase with the 'real' one. Morgan Robertson's book *Futility,* published some 15 years before the Titanic disaster, foreshadowed the real event in uncanny detail: the ship is even called the Titan. A version based solely on the fictional disaster can even be mounted; in fact the composer has done this. The ways in which this 'imaginary' aspect may or may not connect with Bryars' hypotheses deserves investigation. And just as the real disaster could hypothetically have been a re-enactment of the Titan story, so there could be a 'real' performance of *The Sinking of the Titanic* off Newfoundland on one of the recently proposed replicas of the ship.[35]

This hypothetical line of reasoning led to the making of a

[28] From the eleventh page of Bryars' score as published in *Soundings.*

[29] *The Musical Times,* vol. 114, no. 1563 (May 1973), p. 489. For the complete correspondence see the three other letters in this issue and also no. 1559 (January 1973), pp. 33-34, and no. 1561 (March 1973), pp. 259-260.

[30] 'And when my task on earth is done/When by thy grace the victory's won/E'en death's cold wave I will not flee/Since God through Jordan leadeth me.'

[31] Nyman, 'As the Titanic went down', p. 12.

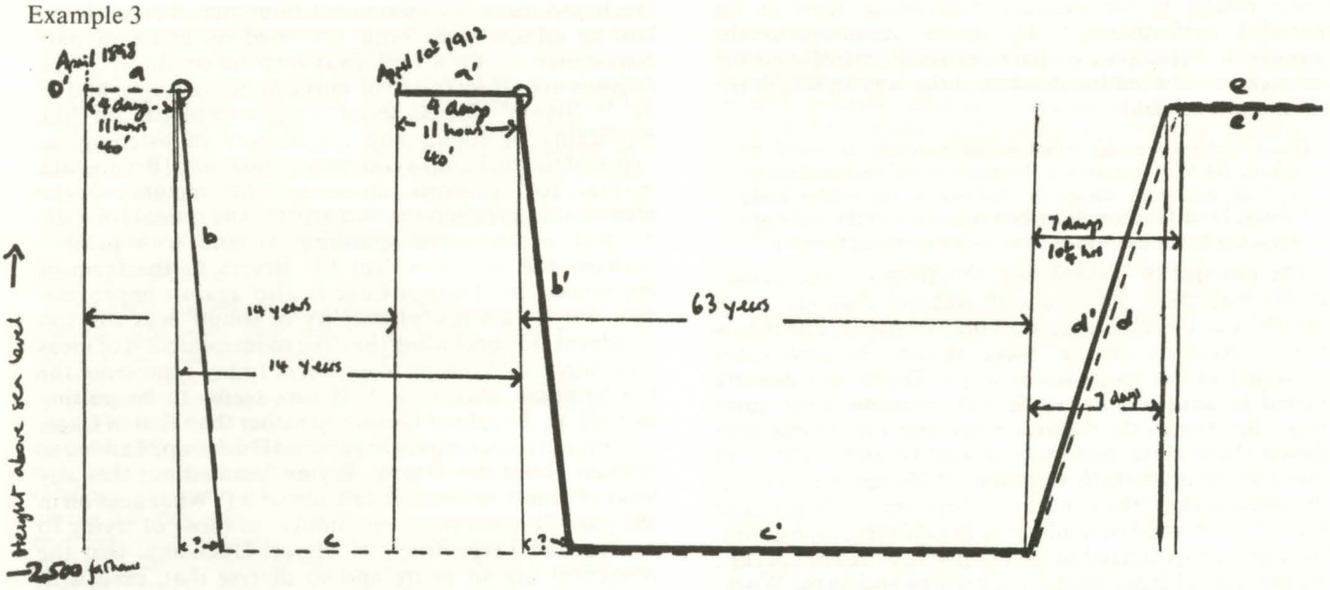
[32] Bryars quoted in Nyman, ibid, p. 12.

[33] Ibid, p. 12.

[34] From Bryars' sleeve note to OBS 1.

[35] See John Huxley, 'America wants to build three Titanics', *The Times* (Friday March 20, 1981), p. 1. According to Huxley there is also another plan afoot to salvage the original ship this summer. Many previous plans have foundered.

Example 3



4-dimensional 'side elevation' having time for horizontal axis & depth of sea as side axis. Cone of vision gives a breadth of April 1898 to 'present day' + 7 days 10½ hours +.

Parallel with the reality of the musical performance is the 'ghost' version of the Titan. The letters a – e, and a' – e', give the different states of the music.

a = acoustic open air version, prior to & up to influence of water (28° F.)
b = changing version as trajectory takes Titan to bottom
c = stable state at 2,500 fathoms
d = during refloating, changing version as ship comes to surface
e = 'resurrected' stable open-air version.

a' – e', as above, for Titanic; times change as above.
Even at the end there is no stable phase relationship between the two, since the Titan takes 10½ hours longer to be refloated (see data)

'present day', in this view = the point at which the Titanic begins to move off the ocean floor

tape for the premiere on which the sound of *Autumn*, played by a band of the line-up used on the ship, is subjected to timbral modification to suggest four stages of change: as heard in the open air on the deck; as the ship sinks; as it remains stable on the bottom of the ocean; and in a new state in the open air had the Titanic been raised in 1972 as had been planned. (The piece could presumably be extended to incorporate the raising of the ship if it ever takes place.)

These specific musical and acoustical hypotheses have led Bryars into the uncharted waters of the conceptual rather than the better-mapped perceptual. His concern with the minutiae of uncovering documented facts and pursuing hypotheses to their logical conclusions must result in a change in the notion of what constitutes a 'musical object', a change perhaps in its way greater than that required to understand either what Cage was doing in the 50s and 60s or what Bryars had been doing before the *Titanic*. For not only are we presented with 'found objects' forming 'readymades' (to follow the terminology associated with Marcel Duchamp): the documentation discovered and compiled by the composer to make a 'work of art' that is open in form and subject to the wind of circumstantial change; but the labyrinthine detail leads us to reconsider what constitutes a piece and whether what apparently surrounds it is not in fact central to it (if there is a centre to be found). As with Cage's chance pieces, the listener's perceptual starting-point will lead him inevitably in the direction of the conceptual framework. But unlike Cage, Bryars has made a link between perception of the sounds and the concepts that lie behind them by making just sufficient of his process apparent. That process is revealed as at root a musical one: it takes our perception of music as the basis for altering our conception of it.

In his dissertation on Bryars, Andrew Thomson suggests that not all the detail in the *Titanic*'s complex

fabric relates to the musical material, at least in the recorded performance.[36] He draws attention to the important 'Pataphysical character Dr Faustroll and the connection between his death and the way in which the Titanic met her end:

> Dr. Faustroll was 63 when he deliberately drowned by sinking his skiff, removing the waterproof preparation by drawing his finger along the outside of the hull – Lady Cosmo Duff Gordon described the effect of the iceberg's impact as being like a giant finger drawn along the ship.[37]

The practice of 'Pataphysics threatens to take us into waters even more infested with icebergs than we are in already; but three observations may be made. The first is that in working on the piece Bryars 'became more interested in the many facets of the *Titanic* not directly related to aural events, while still researching the aural ones'; he 'found the various roles and the people who played them more and more attractive and even as an object lesson in aesthetic rightness'.[38] The second is a point Thomson makes: the connection between the fingers and Bryars' piece could be made clear in a different realisation. The third, also referred to by Thomson, arises out of this; one perceptual experience cannot define and fix the Work, for the Work, if it exists, is a conceptual construct not subject to the laws of perception only, even though it is in part rooted in them. This contributes to the blurring of the distinction between percept and concept, between musical object and the thinking that gave rise to it. To the extent that Bryars succeeds in forging the links between his idea and his material (as Thomson observes, it may be that the composer achieves this more completely in later works), the *Titanic* must be connected, in terms of musical history, to the blurring of the distinction between 'art' and 'life' in the work of Cage. What Bryars was doing was part of an already distinct experimental tradition. If experimental music may be defined as that which deliberately steps outside the European post-Renaissance tradition of subjective expression, fulfilled through developmental structure in a clearly delimited art object, then the *Titanic* is surely experimental music. (Gratuitous though it may seem to some, there is even a social-political side to the piece: there is enough detail about the class divisions on the ship to make a performance about the consequences of the struggle for survival in terms of class struggle.)

The Sinking of the Titanic occupies a central and vital place in Bryars' output. It is central in terms of the number of works he has written: he was fairly prolific in the late 60s and far less so later; the bulk of the work on the *Titanic* was done from May to December 1972. It is vital in that it is still officially a work in progress. It is one of his last overtly experimental pieces, in which the thoughts behind the piece and the possible actions on the stage are more numerous than the number of bars of music on paper. At the same time, Bryars' concern for detail and its logical consequences indicates that his thinking was moving away from pieces that were perhaps just good ideas towards a new rigour.

The figure who most obviously represents this position in the art world and to whom various aspects of Bryars' *Titanic* appear to owe their existence is Marcel Duchamp. Bryars is fascinated by Duchamp; he has lectured on him quite extensively and written about his work.[39] He seems to agree with Cage's remark: 'One way to write music: study Duchamp.'[40] Bryars demonstrates that Cage and Duchamp are in some ways very different in their outlook, but he admits that 'both are cited as being in part responsible . . . for a shift away from an emphasis on the finished art-object/piece of music in performance and so on'.[41] Bryars' discussion of Cage's emphasis on 'the physicality of sound and the activity of listening' as opposed to Duchamp's comments about what Bryars calls 'retinal rot' presents an interesting picture of the relationship between the two artists. The retinal rot – the product of indulgent splashing around with paint – perhaps had an equivalent for Bryars in the form of improvisation. Though Cage is also against improvisation, for Bryars his 'physicality of sound' was still too indulgent. In concluding that 'the re-introduction of ideas into music by younger composers today represents the Duchampian alignment',[42] Bryars seems to be putting himself on the side of Duchamp rather than that of Cage.

How may we compare Bryars and Duchamp? Talking to Nyman about the *Titanic,* Bryars 'pointed out that any kind of purely descriptive talk about it ("What goes on in the piece") raises problems similar to those of trying to analyse the *Large Glass* of Marcel Duchamp: that the references are so many and so diverse that, even with reading the *Green Box* and various notes, one can only get clues as to what is going on'.[43] He considers that

> both the *Large Glass* and the *Titanic* can be viewed as narrative pieces. There's a kind of topography to the *Large Glass*; there's a narrative, a sort of possible movement of elements within the *Large Glass* from one space to another. The whole thing works as a sequence of events. So in that sense one can view the two things as being art worlds which behave in a similar way . . . Also both deal with a kind of imaginary objective world: in the case of the *Large Glass* that of a sort of three-dimensional entity depicted on a two-dimensional glass, and a kind of four-dimensional state in terms of the narrative and the way in which things move in and out of time. Similarly with the *Titanic* there's a kind of imaginative use of so-called 'real' events, by bringing in fictions, by bringing in conjectures and taking it into a different sort of dimension.

Having said all this, Bryars dismisses it as 'merely clever critical thinking . . . I think it's oversimplifying both the *Large Glass* and the *Titanic* piece to say that they're about different dimensional treatments of objective events.' It comes as something of a surprise to learn that the *Titanic* was conceived before Bryars had really started to discover Duchamp's work. The real involvement with Duchamp began when Bryars started teaching at Leicester in 1970. His colleague the art historian Fred Orton asked him to lecture on Duchamp; from this first attempt (which only got as far as 1918 or 1919 – Duchamp died in 1968!) there developed a lecture just on the *Large Glass* and then a whole course on Duchamp with Orton. It was 'a series of accidents and promptings that got me involved with Duchamp', says Bryars.

These 'accidents and promptings' could not have come at a better time. For at the beginning of 1973 Bryars reached his crisis, an impasse through which he somehow had to find a way into an experimental future which continued to seem valid, despite the collapse of English experimental music that was going on around him.

There is, according to Bryars, 'no music whatsoever' of his from either 1973 or 1974. Nor had there been very much from 1972; for most of the year he was preparing the *Titanic* for its premiere. He finished four pieces for the EMC's *Visual Anthology* but they had been sketched earlier.[44]

[36] See Thomson, p. 14.

[37] From Bryars' sleeve note to OBS 1.

[38] From Bryars' programme note for a performance of *The Sinking of the Titanic* at the British Music Information Centre, London, June 15, 1973.

[39] See Gavin Bryars, 'Notes on Marcel Duchamp's Music', *Studio International,* vol. 192, no. 984 (November–December 1976), pp. 274-279.

[40] John Cage, '26 Statements re Duchamp', *A Year from Monday* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1968), pp. 70-72.

[41] Bryars, 'Notes on Marcel Duchamp's Music', p. 274.

[42] Ibid, p. 274.

[43] Quoted in Nyman, 'As the Titanic went down', p. 10.

[44] *To Gain the Affection of Miss Dwyer Even for One Short Minute Would Benefit Me No End,* for stereo playback equipment and a construction using at least 14 small loudspeakers; *A Game of Football,* employing a large outdoor space for a game of association football and manifesting the use of extreme distances; *Golders (as) Green by Eps(ups)om('n') Downs,*

When asked the obvious question 'why?' he was at first fairly non-committal: 'Heavens knows! Let's put those two down as crisis years, shall we? That's probably over-dramatising it. But I think I was aware during that time that there was nothing that I was able to write that made any sense to me, that I was sort of happy with.'

Fallow – largely or even entirely silent – years are not unusual in a composer's career. Sometimes the period is much longer than a mere two or three years: look at Satie, Schoenberg and Varèse. Bryars' silence was not only considerably shorter than that of Schoenberg or Varèse, it also came much earlier in his life: around the age of 30 rather than somewhere over 40. Not so much a mid-life crisis, more something that the composer suggests could, even should, have happened at the beginning of his composing career rather than several years into it. It was, he says, 'like going back to school' (which was what Satie did).

Putting it like this may imply that Bryars had more in common with the political ex-experimentalists than was the case. When Cardew, for example, rejected his experimental past, he had to school himself in functional tonal composition before he could write 'valid' music again; he was, on his own admission, too busy being experimental to bother to learn things like harmony and counterpoint at the Royal Academy. Bryars' case is far less extreme and far more subtle. In many respects the ideas and techniques to be found in his early music were to prove more durable than he must have thought during 1973 and 1974. What was really required was not the rejection of those ideas and techniques, but a greater focus on certain of them and a process of extension and refinement. The 'school' to which he returned to do this was the one where he was already a teacher: the art school.

Like all good teachers, Bryars learned a great deal from his teaching; it may even be said to have given him the crucial impetus he needed to find himself afresh as an experimental composer. In the early 70s he discovered not only Duchamp but also many of the other figures who have suggested ways forward to him as a composer – not necessarily by their music, for probably the majority are not musicians, but by their example in general and often by their working methods in particular. A brief and by no means exhaustive checklist of names follows. I have avoided the attempt to define closely the influence of 'Pataphysics on his recent thinking and music, even though it appears to be, if not central, at least important to his current work. The task of defining 'Pataphysics itself is fraught with problems (and debate continues to rage over whether to use the apostrophe and what it means): the College of 'Pataphysics is a kind of secret society, dedicated, it seems to the outsider, to the preservation of its secrets, and disapproving in the rare instances where an initiate has attempted some form of explanation.[45] (The College has, anyway, 'occulted' until the year 2000, though it is hard to gain a clear idea of what this means either.) Nevertheless, some of the names below have been associated with 'Pataphysics, and I hope some idea of the subject will be gathered indirectly.

Erik Satie (1866-1925) has been a major influence on many experimental composers from Cage on, particularly for his use of simple materials in unusual, non-develomental ways and his sense of humour; Bryars has, I think, always shared these qualities. Satie's 'indispensability'[46] has long been apparent to him; witness his performance with Christopher Hobbs of *Vexations* at Leicester Polytechnic in 1971.[47] Since then Bryars has done quite a lot of original research on Satie, and has written several articles.[48] The Garden Furniture Music ensemble, founded by John White in 1977, of which Bryars was an occasional member until its demise in 1979, owes its name to Satie's notion of musique d'ameublement ('furniture music'). *Ponukelian Melody* (1975), Bryars' first successful piece after his period of silence, draws on the scales and their harmonisations in the Rosicrucian notebooks and takes its unvarying, very slow crotchet pulse from Satie's *Les pantins dansent.* Not only does Bryars' piece share Satie's distant manner and unresolved harmonies, it also uses his mosaic method of composing: the piece was written in short sections and not in linear sequence; only afterwards were the sections put together in a definite order.

Lord Berners (1883-1950), who formerly had a reputation as an eccentric English dilettante – composer, novelist, painter and diplomat – has in the last few years become known in experimental circles largely due to Bryars' advocacy. He writes that Berners had 'a fondness for any style so exhaustive that it contains its own parody':[49] something that is characteristic of some of Bryars' own music, both pre- and post-crisis (*Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet,* 1971; *Out of Zaleski's Gazebo,* 1977). He also points out that Berners and Satie each 'pursued what was essentially an isolated career, at odds with the work of his contemporaries, and each produced a body of work that ranges beyond the normal confines of a composer's':[50] again comparisons with Bryars' own career and output are tempting. One of his major preoccupations at present is writing Berners' official biography for publication in his centenary year. *Poggioli in Zaleski's Gazebo* (1977) and *Out of Zaleski's Gazebo* both quote briefly from the second of Berners' *Valses Bourgeoises* (1919).

Percy Grainger (1882-1961) also has a reputation in mainstream opinion as an eccentric fringe figure but his importance as an experimentalist is slowly being recognised. Both his 'free' music and his apparently more conventional works have had an influence on experimental musicians. *White's SS* uses a Grainger source *(Irish Tune from County Derry,* 1902-11) and the easily recognisable and tonal-sounding cadence figures from Grainger's *Mock Morris* (1910) are the basis for the interludes in *Out of Zaleski's Gazebo.*

Siegfried Karg-Elert (1877-1933) is a Russian-German composer 'adopted' some years ago by experimentalists. His strange chromatic harmonies have, like Busoni's and Reger's,[51] been a considerable solace to the troubled experimentalist seeking an alternative both to the world

involving large resonators which the performer activates from a helicopter; and *Ouse* for 'prepared' vocal duet, performing 'My Hero' from Oscar Straus's *The Chocolate Soldier.*

[45] Roger Shattuck, a fairly high-ranking official within the College (Provéditeur Général Propagateur aux Iles et Amériques and Suscepteur Transséant de la Régence et Chaire de Matéologie post-Colombienne), did so and was apparently reprimanded. His article appeared in the *Evergreen Review* and was later published by the College as *Au Seuil de la 'Pataphysique* (Collège de 'Pataphysique, XC), available to College members in any of the nine languages into which all publications are translated. (The date of publication follows 'Pataphysical practice in using Jarry's date of birth as a starting-point.)

[46] Cage's term; see, for example, his 'Erik Satie', p. 82.

[47] See Nyman, *Experimental Music,* pp. 32-33 for extracts from the written dialogue that the performers carried on during this event. The whole of it was scheduled for publication by the EMC, with commentaries about other performances of *Vexations,* but it never appeared (see, however, footnote 48).

[48] See Gavin Bryars, 'Berners, Rousseau, Satie', *Studio International,* vol. 192, no. 984, pp. 308-318. A forthcoming book on Satie in the series *L'herne* (Paris) will include French translations of substantial articles by Bryars: 'Satie and the British' and '*Vexations* and its Performers'. The latter draws on material from the unpublished *Vexations* anthology referred to in footnote 47.

[49] 'Berners, Rousseau, Satie', p. 308.

[50] Ibid, p. 308.

[51] For comments on these and others of the 'apparently disparate collection of composers from the world of "alternative" musical history' see John White quoted in Smith, p. 4.

where the 'right' note reigns and to that where the 'wrong' one does. The two Zaleski pieces draw on Karg-Elert's organ interludes.

Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) must come at the head of any list of non-musicians who have influenced Bryars, and a few words about his work are appropriate in the light of Bryars' current concerns. In a sense, he has led Bryars to all the other figures mentioned below who (in a very literal sense) inform his work. Though there is no piece that is overtly based on his work, Duchamp guides us to the very centre of Bryars' present preoccupations.

Bryars draws attention to the way in which Duchamp combines a lightness of approach with a remorseless logic by which the seemingly most inconsequential detail becomes of crucial importance.

> There's a certain quality of 'mental dancing' almost: he flitted about in an apparently self-indulgent way, but on examination all his moves turn out to have a quite close logic to them . . . There's nothing which could be stripped away . . .[52] Even when you look at the most minor piece of Duchamp – a cover for a magazine or a telegram to a friend – there's always some particular quality which seems to refer backwards and forwards to other pieces and draw everything together into one coherent shape.

Bryars' word for this way of working is 'justification': there has to be a reason for every compositional move and the composer must fully justify it to himself before he can proceed.

Alfred Jarry (1873-1907), the French writer, is known today principally for his play *Ubu Roi* (1896); Dr Faustroll, mentioned earlier, appears in his posthumously published novel *Exploits and Opinions of Dr Faustroll 'Pataphysician* (1911). He was, according to Roger Shattuck,[53] the 'chosen vessel' for making 'Pataphysics known to the world. Shattuck's attempt to define 'Pataphysics met with considerable disapproval from the College of 'Pataphysics, but it should be read by those interested in the subject if they can lay their hands on it.[54] Shattuck's briefest definition of 'Pataphysics is 'the science of imaginary solutions';[55] the better-known "Pataphysics is to metaphysics as metaphysics is to physics' may also be helpful. Jarry is of obvious importance to Bryars, but as with Duchamp, there is as yet no piece that draws directly on his work or ideas.

Raymond Roussel (1877-1933; notice that his dates coincide with Karg-Elert's) is close to both 'Pataphysics and Duchamp. He was a playwright, poet, novelist and even composer. He has been described as a 'Millionaire, crack marksman, chess theoretician, fan of Jules Verne and hackneyed melodramas, owner of one of the first "mobile homes"' and, significantly for his influence on Bryars, 'a globetrotter who preferred "the domain of Conception to that of Reality"'.[56] His work has been a considerable influence on surrealism, the nouveau roman and structuralism. A description of some of his working methods may be found in *How I Wrote Certain of My Books.* Duchamp is reported saying 'It was fundamentally Roussel who was reponsible for my *Large Glass.*'[57] Bryars' *Danse Dieppoise* (1978) has its starting-point in Roussel.

Jean Ferry (1906-1976) was an author and scholar much involved with 'Pataphysics; he wrote on Roussel and others. Bryars has particular respect for the thoroughness of his scholarship and his painstaking research of the smallest detail. The punning title of *The Cross Channel Ferry* (1979) is a homage to the writer; the piece was composed for a concert in Paris: 'the ferry being the way in which I can cross the Channel to France and, inversely, Ferry being the way in which France was brought to me'.[58] Bryars' reading of the volume of the *Cymbalum Pataphysicum* on Ferry revealed that the writer was devoted to Palestrina's *Missa Papae Marcelli.* He adopts a Rousselian device, and takes the last letter of 'Palestrina' and the fact that the mass ends 'in A major' as a starting-(or rather finishing-) point: this leads to a web of connections with the letter A: the instruments for which the piece was originally composed (viola, tuba, marimba, quijada, maruga [= maraca(s)]), the note 'la' (A), Latin America (LA) – with which Roussel and Duchamp had associations – and therefore Latin American rhythms ending in A (samba, rumba, habanera, etc.) and so on.

Henri Rousseau (1844-1910) was a painter and writer who occasionally composed music; he finds a place with Satie and Berners in an article by Bryars as an amateur musician whose painting is also 'difficult to locate within the mainstream of art'.[59] His interests are related to those of several of the above (he was, for example, a friend of Jarry). The multifarious manifestations of his talent have appealed to Bryars as much as to the Dadaist Tristan Tzara, who called Rousseau 'the complete modern artist'; Bryars suggests that Rousseau is a good example of Tzara's view that 'since art is a state of mind rather than a means of expression, the way used to express oneself is unimportant'.[60] Bryars involvement with the Portsmouth Sinfonia shows the value he places on the 'amateur'; there is no piece of his as yet, however, that has any direct connection with Rousseau.

One other involvement of Bryars in recent years that must be mentioned is his interest in detective fiction. A serious concern for this subject is something which he shares with the 'Pataphysics movement, or rather with those members of the intricate hierarchy of the College of 'Pataphysics who have set up a special sub-group to study detective fiction. Obsession with tiny detail and the enormous potential importance of the smallest clue in the assembling of evidence to which clear motives can be imputed is the obvious link between this and Bryars' other preoccupations. Not only are Sherlock Holmes and other giants of the genre important to him, but also such lesser-known figures as the detectives Poggioli and Prince Zaleski. The creations of T.S. Stribling (1881-1965) and Matthew Phipps Shiel (1865-1947) respectively,[61] the two characters are the exact opposite of one another in personality and approach:

> Poggioli works by trial and error, blundering from solution to possible solution, whereas Zaleski is a model of pure ratiocination, never leaving his room, arriving at the correct solution in a haze of hashish, fingering an Egyptian scarab, and rambling through the *Lakme* of Delibes on a harmonium.[62]

Poggioli in Zaleski's Gazebo and *Out of Zaleski's Gazebo* use elements of their characters. *The Perfect Crime* (1978) for two pianos, tape and slides uses projections of details from pictures with an accompanying description, from which a narrative reading about several murders may be extracted. The 'perfection' in question is the absence of clues.

Danse Dieppoise was composed in March and April 1978 in response to a request by some music students at Bryars' old university Sheffield for a piece involving video. The students' first idea was to make a television programme

[52] Not by her Bachelors, even?

[53] Shattuck, p. 7.

[54] See footnote 45.

[55] Shattuck, p. 9.

[56] From the potted biography on the back of Raymond Roussel, trans. Trevor Winkfield, *How I Wrote Certain of My Books* (New York: Sun, 1975).

[57] Ibid.

[58] From the composer's notes on the piece.

[59] 'Berners, Rousseau, Satie', p. 312.

[60] Ibid, p. 312.

[61] See, for example, T. S. Stribling, *Best Dr. Poggioli Detective Stories* (New York: Dover, 1975) and Matthew Phipps Shiel, *Prince Zaleski and the Cummings King. Monk* (Sauk City, Wisconsin: Mycroft and Moran, 1977).

[62] From the composer's notes on *Poggioli in Zaleski's Gazebo.*

about the composer and his music, but the nature of the project changed several times during work on it; what finally appeared was a videotape of a performance of Bryars' piece that included a version of its visual inspiration.

In François Caradec's biography of Raymond Roussel there is a page with two photographs of the writer taken in Dieppe in 1904, apparently within a very short time of each other.[63] The photographs show Roussel, his mother and a group of friends. The two are almost identical except that Roussel, on the far right in both, has moved from a fairly neutral pose in the upper picture to a somewhat flippant and jaunty one in the lower: what Bryars describes as 'playing a game with the camera; making a little joke'. Since the photographs may have been taken within seconds of one another, Bryars considers the pair as 'if you like, the only picture I've got of Roussel moving. It's an animation.' The original idea for the piece was to make an actual animation, on film or video, of Roussel moving between one pose and the other: 'a kind of dance, at Dieppe', hence the work's title. This proved beyond the capabilities of Sheffield University's TV studio and the idea had to be rethought.

Also in Caradec's book is another pair of similar photographs placed one above the other, this time of two designs Roussel made in 1932 for his funerary monument. The version of *Danse Dieppoise* eventually made at Sheffield had music played by five musicians visible on the videotape separated by two gaps. The first of these alternated the two 1904 photographs with a slow dissolve between them to suggest movement; the second consisted of a sequence of photographs of Roussel at different stages of his life, concluding with the two of the monument.

The first performance of the piece in this form took place on June 1, 1978 in Sheffield; the scoring was flute and clarinet, horn and trombone, and harpsichord. The first performance of the music alone had previously been given on April 15 in Amsterdam in a different scoring made for the Garden Furniture Music ensemble: vibraphone (taking the parts for flute and clarinet), baritone horn and tuba, and piano. (The instrumentalists were Ben Mason, Dave Smith, John White and Gavin Bryars respectively; Bryars has written frequently for various combinations of these players both before and after the disbandment of the ensemble.) An excerpt from the Garden Furniture version is given in Example 4.

In its melody and harmony, *Danse Dieppoise* is fairly typical of Bryars' music of the late 70s. Its 'new tonality' is pretty evident in the on-the-whole consonant progression of simple ideas, with a bass line that is never sure if it's a tune or not and a focus on the repeated piano figurations outlining the basic harmonies. Chords tend to be augmented, with what the composer calls 'slightly false relations' in the harmonic progress. The loud long low notes in the brass instruments create a peculiar effect not untypical of much of the music written by Bryars or by the more regular members of Garden Furniture Music for this unusual, bottom-heavy combination. This is due not only to the thematic prominence of these parts, but also to their sometimes tenuous relationship with the piano harmonies and their considerable difficulty: Bryars admits that in conventional terms, for two solo instruments anyway, this is 'simply bad brass writing'.

What is going on here is a transformed and somewhat dislocated rendering of *The Bluebells of Scotland.* The tune is in the brass instruments, much slowed down (it has also been referred to on the vibraphone in the opening bar); the 'correct' harmonisation of the piano and vibraphone does not alway fit. The effect is of a tune trying to synchronise with its harmonisation but not always succeeding. The piece is divided into two sections: the second has the same, though speeded-up, harmonic sequence as the first.

The reason why *The Bluebells of Scotland* is used is that the tune occurs as a musical quotation in Roussel's novel *Locus solus.* Roussel's surname is used in a Schumann-esque cypher form and there is a reference to Debussy's *La Mer,* which was composed at Eastbourne, facing Dieppe across the English Channel. Rhythmically and metrically the music appears fairly staightforward. The repetitive nature of the piece can occasionally lead to unexpected changes, but the most unusual features are the single bar of 19/4 at the beginning and the one of 19/32 before the second section. These time signatures are derived from the dates of the two pairs of photographs (1904 and 1932).

This kind of extra-musical derivation is fairly typical of Bryars' 'justification' process. This method of accounting for a high percentage of the notes in a piece has been described by Thomson as 'music of association'[64] and has led him to assert that 'Gavin Bryars is not a composer in the accepted sense of the word. He has no wish to be considered as such.'[65] Thomson points to Bryars' two or three years studying Duchamp rather than writing music as evidence that 'he feels no overriding urge to write music'.[66]

Bryars uses the 'deceptively simple surface' of *Danse Dieppoise* to 'lull the listener into a false sense of security';[67] the music has such a normal and unexceptionable surface that surprises are the more striking when they come. But the lengths to which 'justification' of the musical fabric, including the surprises, is taken is less representative of his recent music than the deliberately experimental quality of the brass writing and the tenacious yet tenuous hold on tonality. Bryars says:

> I was trying to be extremely literal in the sense of not wishing to write anything which I couldn't actually explain by extra-musical means. That is to say, everything that I did within the piece had to have a particular point and I had to be capable of justifying it without saying 'this is a nice-sounding chord'.

Danse Dieppoise takes to extremes what Bryars does in the planning stages of most or all of his recent pieces. Despite this, one of the bases on which he criticises it now is that he 'didn't actually make it rigorous enough; I could have gone even much further'. Typical of his highly self-critical approach is that he has largely disowned the piece, withdrawing it from performance and using part of the material for *The Cross Channel Ferry.*

Out of Zaleski's Gazebo is probably a better piece and one that readers are much more likely to come across. For the first concert, on November 21, 1977, of Garden Furniture Music, Bryars wrote *Poggioli in Zaleski's Gazebo,* for piano, tuba and percussion. In it the two detectives are characterised musically: Poggioli by a somewhat blundering xylophone part, independent and incongruous both timbrally and in terms of material; Zaleski by a very 'laid-back' harmonic style laden with chords of the type C-E-G sharp-B associated with his 'indolence and other-worldly preoccupation'. The piece was written in something of a hurry and Bryars was not satisfied with it. He therefore wrote *Out of Zaleski's Gazebo*, basing it on harmonic elements associated with Zaleski in the earlier piece, augmented by references to Karg-Elert, Berners and Grainger: at the time, 1977, his work was dominated by Karg-Elert and Roussel, whose centenaries both fell that year. Like a number of other pieces written in 1977 it ends with 'a faintly ironic coda'.

The piece is a very successful reworking of tonal materials in which traditional musical content is refracted to produce a curiously dislocated effect. Its 'deceptive surface' turns out not to be nearly so deceptive on the level of extra-musical 'justification', however: there seem to be no rigorously 'justified' reasons for using the particular combination of these particular pieces of Karg-Elert, Berners and Grainger other than their general significance

[63] François Caradec, *Vie de Raymond Roussel* (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1972).

[64] Thomson, p. 10.

[65] Ibid, p. 11.

[66] Ibid, p. 11.

[67] Bryars quoted in Thomson, p. 6.

for Bryars.

What Bryars calls his concern for 'justification' is at the very centre of his work since 1975; it is rooted principally in the work of Duchamp. Just as we can trace the concern in the realm of conception back through the ideas of Roussel, Ferry and others to Duchamp, so we can also trace it as actually perceived through the music of the last six years or so and ultimately back to *The Sinking of the Titanic.*

Looking at Bryars' output from the vantage point of 1981, one is struck at least as much by its unity, consistency and tenacity as by its diversity, inconsistency and the point where he seems to be loosing his grip. He seems to believe that the process of 'justification', of making everything 'fit', really only began with the *Titanic.* It is true that he hit upon the integrated approach to an almost cosmic amount of detail for the first time in that piece and that this is one of the reasons why it is so important. But I hope I have shown that earlier works like *Private Music* and the realisations of *Plus-Minus* 'justify' themselves in something like the same ways, as well as exhibiting some of the other experimental qualities that are present in the later music too: the use of other people's music, especially that of composers 'from the world of "alternative" musical history'; the acceptance of sentimentality as well as system, and so on. Just as the young Bryars rejected improvisation as indulgent, so the older Bryars through the rigorous pursuit of 'justification' has conquered all temptation to indulge.

What is different about the music of the last few years? Where are the inconsistencies in Bryars' development? Well, for one thing all the recent music is fully notated, fixed and immutable in one version, except where material is transferred from one piece to another (as with the two Zaleski pieces). This is true even of pieces that were either originally intended to have an accompanying visual element in performance (the video, photographs, etc. in *Danse Dieppoise* which can be jettisoned) or which normally do have a visual element as an integral part of the performance (the slides used in *The Perfect Crime).* It's all dots now: no overcoats with objects hidden in the pockets or multiple rows of tape recorders relaying private messages.

There is both more manipulation of those dots and fewer 'uncontrolled variables'. In *Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet* Bryars took the song of an old tramp, made a tape loop of it and then gradually harmonised it over the course of the piece. Its length can vary from performance to performance but the tramp's song is exactly the same at the end as at the start and provides all the material. The listener's feelings at the end of a hearing of the work will undoubtedly be different from what they were at the beginning, as Bryars' harmonisation is extremely moving and suggestive of many things, some contradictory – pathos and parody, for example. *Jesus' Blood* is a one idea piece: all Bryars has done with the tune is to repeat and harmonise it. Uncontrolled variables in the work include the difficulty the live performers inevitably have in synchronising with the tape of the tramp, especially as he does not sing in strict tempo.

In *Out of Zaleski's Gazebo*, on the other hand, there is much more found material. The combination of Karg-Elert, Berners and Grainger in the same piece is bound to produce a more complex organism, for any good piece is more than merely the sum of its parts. The situation for the listener is in one respect much richer than with *Jesus' Blood*: not only is there more material but it does not proclaim itself nearly as much as the tramp's song does. Except for the Grainger cadences which stand out at various important structural points, the listener may be unaware that much of the piece consists of found material. Even in these, though, the effect of emerging briefly into a wry tonal clarity is richly ambiguous. Not only will each performance of the piece be the same length, but as far as uncontrolled variables are concerned, no performance seems likely to exhibit them any more or any less than a performance of any fully notated piece.

On the whole, found objects are more disguised in Bryars' later music. Tunes that one would expect to recognise may be slowed down and played out of step with their rightful harmonies. Sometimes the found object consists purely of a generalised harmonic source so obscure as to go unrecognised by all but the super-informed listener (Satie's Rosicrucian experiments in scale formation that are the basis for *Ponukelian Melody*); anyway, this is nothing like the same as quoting a complete piece of music or a tune.

The 'justification' process has meant more extra-musical references in the much more complex and rarefied atmosphere in which Bryars' music now moves. The result might appear from what I say above to be more musical, but concept and percept have not matched up on anything like a one-to-one basis for the listener, who must do an awful lot of homework unless he simply wants to wallow in Bryars' sentimentalities. Again the *Titanic* seems central. I implied earlier that in this work Bryars might have been moving in the direction of relating concept to percept, idea to musical surface, more completely. He cannot really be said to have achieved this goal; despite all the 'justification', he sometimes appears to have been too carried away by the ways in which 'facets . . . not directly related to aural events' seem to have become 'more and more attractive', 'an object lesson in aesthetic rightness'.[68] This is a lesson that sometimes only he can appreciate and which must seem to the average, even the non-average, listener to have nothing to do with the 'aesthetic rightness' that may or may not be present in the music. A lot of the most interesting things about the *Titanic* derive, it seems to me, from the concept of the piece having a musical basis. Later this is not always the case.

A reply to this could, of course, start by saying that perhaps there is no inherent reason why this should be the case. It could go on by pointing out that the one-to-one basis I referred to above is no proper basis at all for a piece of music, indeed for any work of art. The musical surface must work on musical terms; Bryars, like most composers, doesn't always achieve this. Schumann's musical surface was accepted at its face value for years before it was discovered that this apparently most intuitive of composers had concealed all manner of cryptic cyphers below the 'deceptive surface' of his music. The better the 'deceptive surface' on a clear musical level, the more successful it is at deception. From there we can only move into an argument about the 'meaning' of music.

The concept of privacy I brought in earlier now takes on new significance. From a *Private Music* with its privacy made public to the private 'Pataphysical meaning of *The Cross Channel Ferry* is a move that some would regard as retrenchment into the old experimental ghetto, Bryars being unwilling to move outside it and confront the real world: of politics, for example. But this is to beg the question that his music seems to be asking: what does 'real' mean anyway? Does it mean anything? Long ago, Bryars considered that the implications of his music were 'logical and hence necessary rather than literary, political, social, situational and hence tangential'.[69] Logic at least has its own necessity and necessities have a way of imposing themselves if they have integrity behind them.

Perhaps all Gavin Bryars' music is private music, as Thomson suggests. If so, I for one shall, for the moment at least, continue to rejoice in public that music of such integrity, refinement and wit is still being composed.[70]

I should like to thank Dave Smith, David Wright and, in particular, the composer for their assistance in the preparation of this article.

[68] Bryars, programme note for the BMIC performance of the *Titanic.*

[69] Quoted in Nyman, *Experimental Music,* p. 80.

[70] A new recording of music by Bryars (on the Belgian label Crépuscule) includes *My First Homage* (1978), *The English Mail Coach* (1980), *The Vespertine Park* (1980) and *Hi Tremolo* (1980).

Example 4