Michael Finnissy

Gershwin Arrangements

More Gershwin

Ian Pace - piano

METIER

FINNISSY AND TRANSCRIPTION

In 1910, Ferruccio Busoni wrote the following in defence of Liszt's transcriptions:

Notation is itself the transcription of an abstract idea. The moment that the pen takes possession of it, the thought loses its original form. The intention of writing down an idea necessitates already a choice of time and key. The composer is obliged to decide on the form and the key and they determine more and more clearly the course to be taken and the limitations. Even if much of the idea is original and indestructible and continues to exist this will be pressed down from the moment of decision, into the type belonging to a class. The idea becomes a sonata or a concerto; this is already an arrangement of the original. From this first transcription to the second is a comparatively short and unimportant step. Yet, in general, people make a fuss only about the second. In doing so they overlook the fact that a transcription does not destroy the original; so there can be no question of loss arising from it. The performance of a work is also a transcription, and this too - however free the performance may be - can never do away with the original. For the musical work of art exists whole and intact before it has sounded and after the sound is finished. It is, at the same time, in and outside of Time.

Such a conception of *all* composition as a form of 'transcription' came as a revelation to Finnissy when he first read Busoni's essay. One might well question the nature of this elusive 'abstract idea' that can be conceived independently of a particular realisation, but this form of conceptualisation of the compositional process has informed much of Finnissy's music. He attempts in these works to make clear his own particular aesthetic and technical priorities by applying them to something preëxistent.

Of course there is nothing particularly new about this approach (except in the degree to which the composer is conscious of it); think of Bach's transcriptions, Mozart and Beethoven's numerous sets of variations, Liszt's quasi-symphonic reminiscences from popular operas, Debussy's ironic cribs of Wagner, Stravinsky's utterly original reworking of Pergolesi; more recently Berio's collage of Mahler, Debussy, Stravinsky, Boulez, Pousseur and others in the *Sinfonia*, Kagel's fixation on small elements within received genres, Cage's use of a citation as just another type of sound with no special importance, and, most ominously, the claustrophobia created by the 'closing in' of many voices from different times and places in B.A. Zimmermann's *Requiem für einen jungen Dichter*. Finnissy's transcriptions do not clearly fit into any of the above categories, although they are clearly informed by this history. His approach is not one of blind respect for his source material, rather, he is uninhibited about its modification or mutation to suit his own ends.

Transcription has a long history within Finnissy's output (beginning with the curious piece *Romeo and Juliet* are *Drowning* from 1967, in which music derived from *Berlioz's Romeo*

et Juliette 'drowns' in material from Berg's *Wozzeck*). His two large sets of transcription for piano, the *Verdi Transcriptions* and *Gershwin Arrangements / More Gershwin*, were both begun in the 1970s, but following the grief that came from the composition of the ultra-abstract ensemble piece *alongside* in 1979, almost all of Finnissy's music explicitly engages with pre-existent musical material. This is clear in the Verdi and Gershwin sets, and with other cycles such as the *Strauss-Walzer* and *Obrecht Motetten*, as well as other works whose titles are taken from other pieces of music, but on a deeper level the vast majority of Finnissy's musical material is at some level derived from from a 'found object'.

The fundamental belief of Finnissy is that all composers are dealing with a vocabulary that has both natural and cultural / historic connotations, and thus that a truly 'original' idea is well nigh impossible. He deals with the fundamentally *diachronic* nature of music; to achieve the 'not-yet-heard', one must find new ways of treating that which already exists, de-emphasising material in favour of its modification.

In an article on Finnissy's work, the composer Richard Barrett suggests that one might treat the output like 'an entire (relatively small!) musical culture', which continues to adapt and assimilate new elements. Finnissy's musical personality is strong enough to be able to engage with such disparate sources as Machaut's *De toutes flours*, late 18th-century French opera, radical contemporary Germanic music-theatre, Hebrew psalms, Japanese court music or the Beatles, and still produce works that are unmistakably Finnissy's own. This has little to do with the 'shopping mall' approach of post-modernism, however, where composers cynically exploit canned musical quotes and clichés. It is notable in this respect how extremely infrequently Finnissy uses direct quotation; he eschews the easy option of providing easy gratification by appealing to the familiar, and it would be very hard for a listener to approach his music in this way (providing the performance does not aim for this ideal!). Finnissy has described his transcription materials as like 'fish out of water'; the alteration of their contextual surroundings and foundations prevents the end result from being in any way regressive.

But Finnissy is not merely a latter-day Liszt, able to transform even the most paltry or banal musical material into a work of substance and distinction. Finnissy always takes a 'critical' view towards the music which he transforms, be it Hungarian gypsy music or Bach, and uses his works to express his feelings *about* the music. He has often used the music of composers towards whom he feels ambivalent or even hostile, such as Mozart, Brahms or Johann Strauss, and embeds this ambivalence into the musical surface. It is in this respect as much as anything that his 'transcriptions' relate fundamentally to late-20th century musical concerns as much as anything from the past.

FINNISSY'S GERSHWIN ARRANGEMENTS

The two cycles, *Gershwin Arrangements* (1975-88) and *More Gershwin* (1989-90, rev. 1998) present for the most part a highly intimate sound-world, some of the most personal music Finnissy has ever written. Finnissy heard Gershwin's songs on his parents' radio as he grew up, so they are for him infused with many memories of childhood and lodged deeply in his psyche.

Finnissy is not of course the first composer to transcribe Gershwin; as well as the transcriptions of Percy Grainger and Earl Wild, there are of course Gershwin's own set of piano versions of selected songs. Finnissy chose not to use any of the songs that Gershwin himself had arranged. Unlike the *Verdi Transcriptions*, he uses the term 'arrangement', as the musical material is generally more identifiable than in the other set.

The individual pieces often went through several versions before the ones heard here; generally the earlier versions are closer to the originals. However, the final versions hardly conform to the conventional notion of an 'arrangement', and so the term must be understood relatively. The degree of distance from the original also varies from piece to piece, from the relatively tonal *Love is here to stay* (in the second version), to the utterly undanceable *Shall we dance?* Overall, the melodies of the songs are the only constant feature. This is complex and multi-layered music which arises from a variety of different considerations and determinants.

Like any music, Gershwin's tunes are heard through the medium of a performer, frequently making free with the musical 'text'; often Finnissy's arrangements are influenced by a particular rendition, such as Fred Astaire's. In the second book, allusions are made to particular styles of 1920's piano playing, as in *Wait a Bit, Susie* or *Dixie Rose*. He also makes cross-reference to other music, as for example in the lower part of *They're writing songs of love, but not for me*, which relates to Liszt's *La Lugubre Gondola I*.

When a young man, Finnissy would question the conventional construction of the Western musical canon, preferring Handel to Bach, Verdi to Wagner, Tchaikovsky to Brahms. Throughout his career, he has found ways of creating a type of modernism that has a broader history behind it than is usually the case. But this is not to suggest that his music is in any way anti-modernist; like all thinking composers, he will question aspects of the modernist legacy, but would not dream of trying to create some artificial pre-modernist haven. Consequently, when setting Gershwin, the pieces do not ignore the chromaticism of the Second Viennese School, which was happening at the same time as the Gershwin songs were being written. The opposition that Berg's student Theodore Adorno perceived between these two worlds is rendered more problematic by these arrangements. The

narrow melodic tessitura of *They can't take that away from me* is echoed intervallically to produce a form of quasi-expressionism, in which the harmonies become almost too close and claustrophobic, provoking a violent interruption.

The two books are quite different in nature: the first is intricate and tight, in which almost every note is invested with much harmonic potency, through voice-leading, producing huge intensity. Counterpoint is ever-present, sometimes even suggesting Renaissance polyphony. A sense of alienation is reinforced by the ambiguous and enigmatic nature of many of the endings, which resist rhetorical 'closure' and often seem more of an afterthought.

These pieces are also informed by an awareness of the appalling poverty and deprivation in the 1930s, the period from which most of the songs in the first book originate. The songs may have served to divert people's attention from their terrible circumstances, but they also spoke a little of these conditions in the lyrics (although not so explicitly that Gershwin could be branded a dangerous subversive). When writing his arrangement of *Shall we dance?*, Finnissy had in mind the degrading dance contests that many entered in the vain hope of winning a sum that would help them out of their hardship, later immortalised in Sidney Pollack's film *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* The piece was intended to suggest couples dancing directly on top of a crevice in the earth, which threatens to open up and swallow them.

Elsewhere, *Love is Here to Stay* is considerably slowed down, and given a luminous and sensual harmonization, *Blah, blah, blah* is a relentless gabble, while *Innocent Ing nue Baby* presents a musical evocation of childlike innocence, with darker, Lolita-esque, undertones. The words and titles are often rethought as if spoken by a gay man, and the music subsequently modified.

The second book relates to earlier and rather more upbeat songs from the early 1920s, with the tautness of the earlier pieces replaced by a freer, more improvisatory feel. *Limehouse Nights* parodies a certain stereotypical portrayal of Chinese music (Limehouse was, at the time the song was written, home to the major Chinese community in London), *I'd rather Charleston* is transformed into a wild stomp, whilst the coda of *Swanee*, coming after what would have been the final lines, 'I love the old folks at home', is very slow and desolate (though I have elsewhere called it 'magical' - continued reflection on this piece has altered my perception), perhaps an evocation of the bleakness of old age. One of Finnissy's most angry and defiant statements, *Nashville Nightingale*, was written when the dedicatee, Andrew-Worton Steward, was dying from an AIDS-related illness. The woozy blues of the opening leads to the expropriation of a single line, often an omen of trouble ahead in Finnissy's music, leading to a brazen hammering out of the melody in a ravaging,

dissonant environment.

It would not be too fanciful to also perceive some form of latent autobiography in the music; indeed some groups of pieces seem to be forming themselves into a type of narrative. The memories and associations, often painful, of earlier days, the attraction but futility of looking back, the need to form some perspective on one's life and times; all these things and much more suffuse these beguiling and perhaps ultimately unknowable pieces.

Part of these texts are adapted from Ian Pace - 'The Piano Music' in *Uncommon Ground: The Music of Michael Finnissy*, edited by Henrietta Brougham, Christopher Fox, Ian Pace (Ashgate, 1997).

PERFORMANCE NOTE

Having performed all of Finnissy's huge number of piano works, I have found that the *Gershwin Arrangements* present perhaps the greatest interpretative difficulties of all. Gone is the grandiose rhetoric and arching changes of register or dynamics that are such a prominent feature of *English Country-Tunes*, which provide a level of immediacy that is not so difficult to realize, or the frequent cross-cutting between material types that characterize much of the recent piano music. The Gershwin pieces, particularly the first book, tend to stay for long periods within central registers, textures are more static, the verse-refrain structure of the originals are usually preserved. Yet these pieces are just as 'complex' as Finnissy's earlier works, if not more so. The complexity is achieved not by huge chains of long irrational rhythms and large quantities of manic piano writing, but by intricate, murky harmonic and contrapuntal working, rhythms that are frequently unstable, and above all the sense of hidden motivations, concerns and problematics, artistic, personal, sexual, historical and political, that form the substance of the music.

Finnissy and Gershwin are both present in this music in a complex, dialectical relationship; attaining the uneasy equilibrium between the two takes much doing. However, precisely because of his 'transcriptions', a view is prevalent of Finnissy as just another pianist-composer like Godowsky, Sorabji or Grainger; consequently his work is sometimes taken up by those who specialize in this repertoire. I would not want to deny that this element is present in the music, but I believe its importance has been vastly overestimated. Finnissy is a *modernist* composer, one whose work would not have been possible without the achievements of Boulez, Stockhausen, Barraqué, Kagel, Bussotti, Cage and others, and it is this tradition that one would, in my opinion, do best to consider when approaching his work.

The Gershwins are probably the most frequently played of Finnissy's music, but also the most frequently misunderstood. So often one hears the Gershwin melody over-

to the expense of other things, the dissonant harmonies underplayed, whole pieces subsumed within an all-purpose expressive gloss, or an arbitrary application of types of colouration. Such performances reduce the pieces to potpourri which sounds relatively harmless but undistinctive. The performers are playing safe; their performances will not disturb and will always be considered 'musical'. These types of performance attributes may have their place occasionally, but their wholesale application represent an extremely partial and restricted view of the music.

When Finnissy writes a dotted quaver within a series of three-quaver groups, he is not just giving a generalized approximation of a rubato, he is fracturing the sense of pulse; when one line has the identifiable melody, that does not mean that the others are any less important; when a violent *sfffz* interrupts a passage of great stillness, it should not be muted; when the music moves suddenly from stillness to activity, the discontinuity is intentional. Finnissy's music does not represent nostalgia; rather it *addresses* its futility given the fragmented nature of late 20th-century existence. The end of *Nashville Nightingale* should not be grand and heroic, but expressive of an anger and violence the sound of which should not be beautiful, but almost painful to the ear. This is music which is beautiful in places, yes, but also challenging, estranged, darkly humorous and passionate. To reduce it to cheap entertainment is to deny the extent in which it addresses the real world of now.

One of the major problems with so much interpretation of contemporary music is that performers see only two alternatives: an unthinking application of received notions of musicality, or a clinical, objectivist approach, supposedly just 'playing the notes' (and then the music sounds like nothing more than a collection of notes). This seems to me an unfortunate by-product of the ever-increasing chasm between composers and performers; an active engagement with the particular demands of each composer, and each piece, is surely necessary if one is to project music with conviction and authority.

Notwithstanding all these things, Finnissy's music is still open to a great many different interpretations, and it would be a mistake to think that any one constitutes some sort of 'definitive performance'. In this case, the particular sound of the Fazioli piano at the recording studio, and the type of acoustic that David and I decided upon, enabled a type of sound reminiscent of some older piano recordings (though without the buzzes and crackling!). Combined with an attempt to produce, where appropriate, the type of *legatissimo*, in passages of intricate polyphony, that was a feature of an earlier generation of pianists, this helped to create the impression of something from the past, made strange when viewed from the present.

ARRANGING GERSHWIN

I had started by improvising on some of these songs as recital 'encores'. They developed as part of an evolving discourse on popular culture, the British fear of élitism, the potency of cheap music, Forster's Scudder rescuing us from inherent moral turpitude, the annexing of inverted snobbery by aesthetics, legitimised rough trade and kitsch. Gershwin, as focus, came highly recommended by Grainger ... and Woody Allen (the construction of Manhattan in 1979 as an archetypal cinema of memory). Jerome Kern or Irving Berlin would have done equally well, the point being to explore an era - 1918 to 1939 - that apparently re-defined society, and in which jazz and modernism variously evolved in response to facism and capitalism, but via that most intimate and everyday of sentimental / romantic emotions.

Following Judy Garland and Ella Fitzgerald, I personalised the material of the original songs, necessarily distorting and deliberately misreading (as Nattiez reminds us all analysts do), freely re-associating from my own brain- and soul-digest. These texts (palimpsests) are then, in their turn, open for various habitation. Each one, contestably, authentic.

Ian Pace has had a long association with Finnissy's music, and his interpretations have been widely admired for their immense virtuosity and penetration of the heart of the music. In 1996, to celebrate the composer's 50th birthday, he gave a landmark six-concert series of the complete piano music, which was received with unanimous critical acclaim. This series inspired Finnissy to embark upon his mammoth five-and-a-half hour cycle, *History of Photography in Sound*, premiered complete in the summer of 2000 by Ian Pace, and which, at the time of writing, he is recording for future release on Metier. He has premiered a great many of Finnissy's piano works, and been responsible for increasing worldwide awareness of his music. He co-edited, and was a major contributor to, the book *Uncommon Ground: The Music of Michael Finnissy*, which was published by Ashgate Ltd. in 1997. Other of Ian Pace's forthcoming Metier Finnissy releases include the *Verdi Transcriptions*, the complete *Folklore* cycle and a disc of virtuoso works from the 1970's.

Ian was born in Hartlepool, Cleveland, England in 1968. He studied in Manchester, Oxford, then at the Juilliard School, New York with the Hungarian pianist György Sándor, whom he regards as an important influence upon his work and thinking about the piano and music. He has a busy international career, having played at major festivals in 14 countries, with a particular focus upon 20th Century music. He has given over 100 world premieres, by composers including Julian Anderson, Richard Barrett, Luc Brewaeys, Chris Dench, Christopher Fox, Volker Heyn, Howard Skempton and Walter Zimmermann. Forthcoming commissions include a new piano work of Brian Ferneyhough. He also plays much of the piano repertoire of the 18th and 19th Century, producing radical re-interpretations which combine elements of historically-informed performance with a modernist perspective.

Ian is also a regular chamber and ensemble performer: he is artistic director of the group Topologies, and has often performed with other groups, most notably with the Arditti Quartet. He is co-director, with pianist Philip Mead, of a course for the study of contemporary piano music at the London College of Music and Media.

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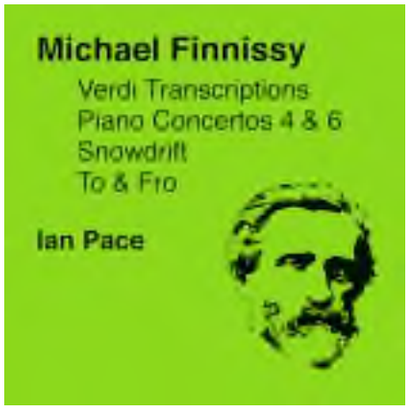

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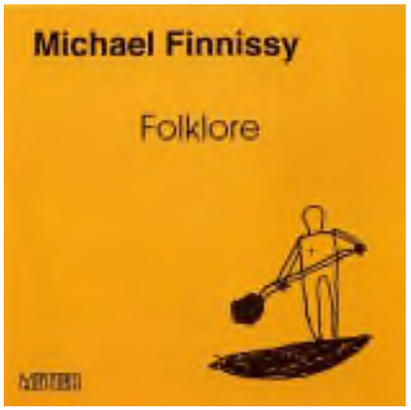

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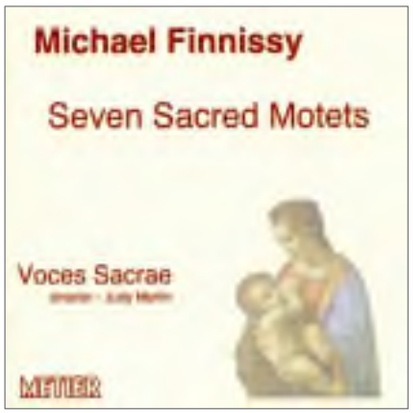

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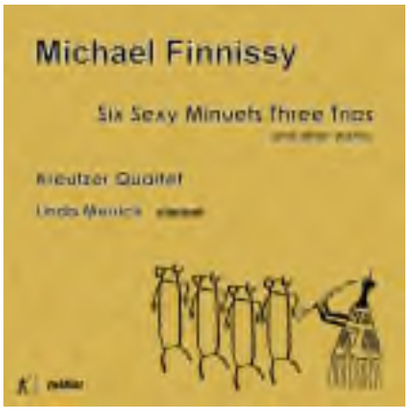

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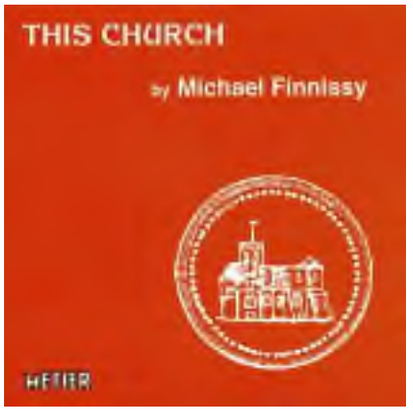

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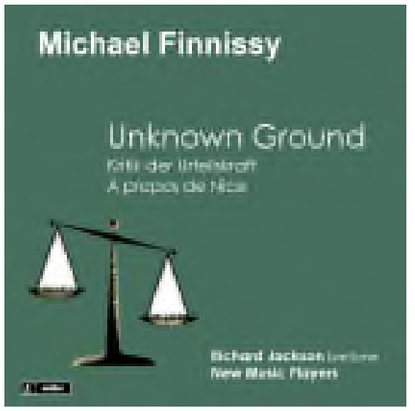

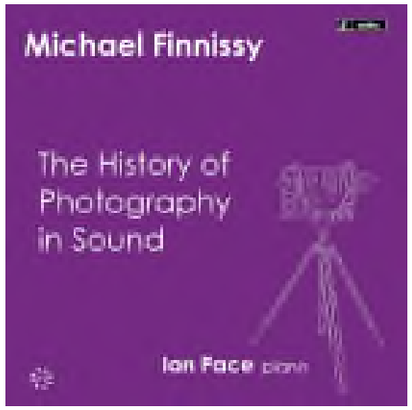

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Michael Finnissy

Gershwin Arrangements

Ian Pace - piano

Gershwin Arrangements

1	How long has this been going on?	3:53
2	Things are looking up	2:56
3	A foggy day in London town	3:13
4	Love is here to stay	4:57
5	They can't take that away from me	4:22
6	Shall we dance?	2:29
7	They're writing songs of love, but not for me	3:32
8	Fidgety Feet	1:51
9	Embraceable you	3:32
10	Waiting for the sun to come out	3:28
11	Innocent ingénue baby	4:02
12	Blah, blah, blah	1:47
13	Boy wanted	3:28
14	Love is here to stay (first version; not published as a part of either set)	2:11

More Gershwin

15	Limehouse nights	3:32
16	Wait a bit, Susie	2:36
17	I'd rather Charleston	3:05
18	Isn't it wonderful!	2:58
19	Nobody but you	1:45
20	Swanee	4:23
21	Dixie Rose	1:03
22	Someone believes in you	3:01
23	Nashville Nightingale	7:53
	Total:	76:07

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