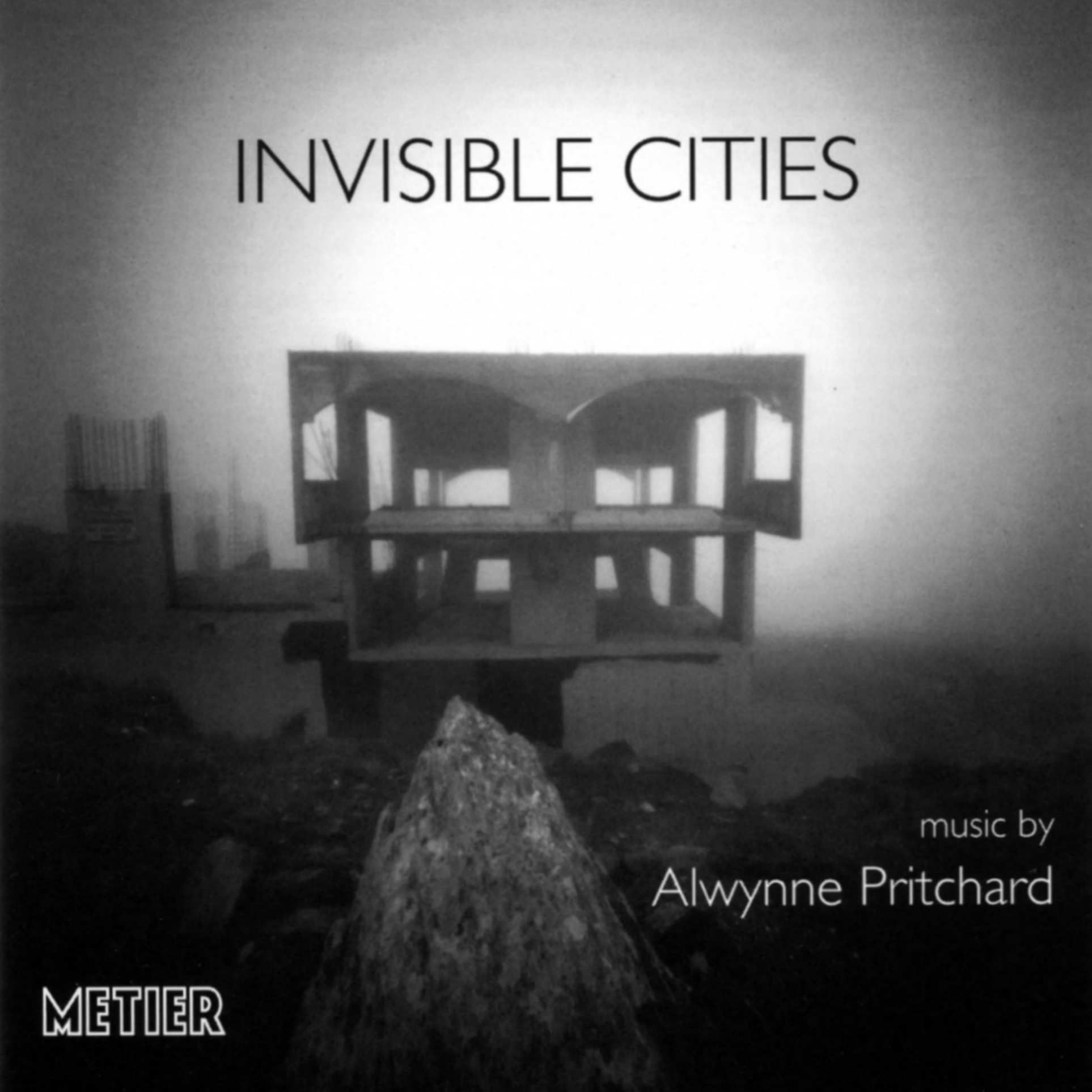
INVISIBLE CITIES



music by

Alwynne Pritchard

METIER

ALWYNNE PRITCHARD in interview with IAN PACE

Ian Pace: Alwynne, your pieces seem very different, idiomatically, from each other. Do you consciously strive for stylistic pluralism?

Alwynne Pritchard: No. But when I sit down to write a piece, I'm always aware of how easy it is to make assumptions about what it means to write music, or what it means to write for a particular instrument. From the moment I sit down in front of a piece of paper (and it won't be a piece of manuscript paper for quite some time), I'm asking myself questions like 'Why write music?' or more specifically, 'Why write music today?' or 'Why write music for this particular instrument?'.

IP: So each new piece of music involves a rethinking of all the basic assumptions about what composition entails?

AP: Yes. And for that reason, with each new project, I really don't know what the solutions or the answers to the particular questions I'm asking will be. I don't have a detailed idea about how a piece is going to sound before I write it. I may have a *vague* idea, based on questions that have arisen from previous pieces but generally that completely changes as the work progresses.

IP: From piece to piece, then, it's more a case of a continuity being served by some recurrent concerns rather than any self-consciously adapted attempt at a personal style?

AP: Definitely, yes.

IP: So the whole idea of a 'Pritchard style' isn't something you aim for?

AP: No, but when you say the pieces are very different, and I think that in many respects they are (certainly idiomatically, as you point out), I'm nonetheless aware that certain ideas recur, albeit in often very different guises. These are to do with how music interrupts, and thereby creates a sense of time and space. In order to do that, there are certain things I find I'm doing again and again, less to do with sound, per se, as to do with how sound encodes or creates other abstract ideas.

IP: Do you think, then, that it would make sense to talk about a 'semantic level' with your music, in the sense that the sounds are means to an end rather than necessarily the end in itself? In more conventional terminology, I'm talking about the idea of the sounds being 'expressive' rather than autonomous.

AP: Yes, that's something that has always concerned me. In *Der Zwerg*, which is the earliest piece on the disc, I was beginning to be both fascinated and troubled by my own, subconscious attachment to my musical heritage, including particular linguistic and rhetorical qualities in music; my gestural heritage, if you like. The interplay between that, and the notion of music as a much more 'autonomous' thing, a much less 'expressive' thing is something I'm constantly assessing within the context of a piece of music. So I'd say

that both those notions concern me. In *Matrix*, for example, I'm not concerned with the expressive qualities of music at all. In that respect it stands diametrically opposite to a work like *Der Zwerg*.

IP: That's very interesting. For the sonic results you produce, there is, for want of a better term, a type of dialectical interplay between their existence in some form as 'pure sound' and on the other hand the extent to which they produce expressive connotations.

AP: Absolutely, and this is what I really wanted to explore by introducing elements of improvisation into pieces like *Invisible Cities*: to incorporate the expressive repertoire of the individual performer into a work that includes also expressions of my own alongside far 'cooler', more objective and autonomous musical constructs.

IP: Would you say, then, that your work stems from a modernistic tradition of musical composition?

AP: That's certainly my background, and some pieces are definitely written very much within that context. About five years or so ago, I felt that was the place, aesthetically, that I wanted to be, but now I feel that there really are many significant questions to be dealt with beyond the boundaries of that aesthetic.

IP: Do you think then, that some of the older assumptions upon which modernistic thinking was based are less tenable in such a didactic form nowadays as perhaps they were in the 1950s and 1960s?

AP: Yes, inevitably. But when I was around eighteen years old, I had a huge respect for the role that composers such as Boulez and Stockhausen played within the political and social framework of the time. I still do have immense respect for that, although now, looking back, I think that I was, in a sense, dragging many of their ideals unquestioningly into the 1990s. Looking around at the world I'm living in now, it's a very, very different place, and I'm concerned to consider my own work within a contemporary context. Nowadays I simply have less of a problem with doing something because I want to, because I really enjoy it, or because it stimulates me, rather than having to do something because it serves a cause in some way or other.

IP: So is that a fundamental way in which you would say that things have changed for you since the early 1990s, from when the first compositions that you now acknowledge date from?

AP: Yes, I think that's the most significant change there's been.

IP: Recent works such as *Kit*, or *Invisible Cities* involve elements of indeterminacy or improvisation. In the light of that, I wonder what your feelings are about the relationship between the composer and the interpreter, and what sort of role you see the interpreter playing in (for all the problems inherent in this statement) 'bringing your music to life'?

AP: I don't believe there is any one ideal relationship between composer and interpreter, or

indeed that there should be. In *Invisible Cities* in particular, I was considering the many things that go on 'beneath the surface', in the performer's mind, when interpreting a piece of music. I wanted to bring them right out into the open, so that the piece was as much about the act of performance as anything else. *Kit*, a slightly older piece, was something I had to write very quickly and I wanted it to have a lightness of touch and to allow plenty of freedom for the interpreters. I also wanted to incorporate a degree of humour in the work, which I had never done before: a cruel humour, perhaps, but humour nonetheless. So the reason for each being notated as it is, and the kind of freedom given to the performers in each work, is very different. And the notation *is* very different in each case.

IP: Playing *Invisible Cities*, I think of it as having an 'invisible narrative', something which holds the piece together, but which never appears on the surface, an invisible foundation, almost like Schumann's hidden melody in the *Humoreske*. Do you think that is a fair description of the piece?

AP: Yes, I do, and I think the narrative is invisible, as you put it, for a number of reasons. One very simple one is that the piece is really a *pool* of events, which can be moved around, many of them recurring but never precisely in the same guise. So obviously, when these events reappear one ties them together across the dividing time span and the intervening events, creating a narrative line. The piece engages the performer in a very particular way, moving from just 'playing the notes that are on the page', to interpreting a flowchart, where he or she has to generate all the pitches, the rhythms, and so on. The first thing the performer or listener does is to try and make sense of the disjunct elements of the piece, to tie them together, which causes them to engage with the music very actively. For this reason, it's a very creative process for both performer and audience.

IP: In a sense, when the notation moves through so many different modes, from fully-notated passages to flowcharts, inevitably, however it's done, the way the interpreter will 'interpret' those (in the purest definition of 'interpretation') will somehow reflect the fact that it is a single personality who is reading this score in real time, reacting and interacting with it. That, in its self, forms part of the musical narrative.

AP: Yes, absolutely, and that's something that's there even when one is playing a well-known piece of music, with a long history of interpretation. The only difference is that here it becomes a more active part of the process.

IP: Yes, but it's a work with a much greater degree of discontinuity and fragmentation, in every sense.

AP: Yes, and as I said before, it's precisely that which I think generates creativity within the performer and the audience. It's playing with the whole idea of how we constantly try to make 'meaning', we see music as a language, we read meaning into it on many levels, much of which may have nothing to do with the composer's original intent.

IP: It makes me think a little of an early piece of Mauricio Kagel, called *Metapiece/ Mimetics*, which has thirteen pages, containing some types of recurrences, some linking factors, but all very different. Presented with that type of surface discontinuity, one's natural instinct is to try to find ways of creating continuities from that, whereas in an extremely continuous piece, one conversely looks for ways of discovering maximum variety and differentiation.
AP: Yes, and a piece like *Der Glücklôse Engel*, in which everything is very fragmented, belongs in the former category. However, *Invisible Cities* is very fragmented, but within some of those fragments or sections there are wadges of continuity, so one is forced to think in both ways during the course of the piece, creating both continuities and means of differentiating between sections.
IP: Your use of small phrases and fragments, as opposed to expansive lines, particularly in *Der Glücklôse Engel*, suggests some sort of comment on 'the impossibility of lyric poetry', of 'expressing the inexpressible', to use two paradigms with which we are all familiar for post-war art.
AP: I think, certainly, that in *Der Glücklôse Engel*, I was concerned with 'expressing the inexpressible', implying extreme states, rather than actually presenting a listener with the 'fulfilment' of an idea. Perhaps I feel now that there's a romanticism about the piece, contained in that sense of loss that interests me less now than it did then.
IP: So, in the gaps, in the fragmentations, there's something implied there but manifestly non-present, which is how that sense of loss is created.
AP: Yes, absolutely, and for myself, when listening to the piece, I really enjoy the level at which I have to engage with it, when so much is implied. I'm not so inspired by music that 'fills out space'.
IP: That's what I would call music that 'makes its bed and lies in it'.
AP: (Laughter!) Exactly!
IP: Whereas, in your music there seems to be a continuous tension between the expectations that some of the material creates, and the course you make it take, so that the two things aren't necessarily identical. That energises and creates for a more interactive, rather than passive, listening experience.
AP: Yes. I don't think that any of my pieces really sound as if they have a beginning, a middle or an end. I'm not setting up a situation that demands I take the listener on a journey; rather it's the interplay and momentary expectations set up by the musical parameters that I find exciting. The method I use for composition is quite moment-to-moment, generating expectations that I can then either fulfil or not: the motion is constant but can also be circular. Even in *Invisible Cities*, where there is the sense of being taken on a journey, I don't think it starts at the beginning of the piece necessarily. Rather, the music

creates a space *within*, rather than *through* which one can travel.
IP: Returning to *Der Zwerg*, in the second part of that piece it seems to me as if the different parameters in operation there, to do with harmonic implications, the dynamics and especially the tempi, which are in a state of continuous flux, are working 'out of phase' with each other. It's not a simple relationship whereby one parameter reinforces another. For example, sometimes when the music seems to be dying away, the tempo actually gets faster, contrary to the 'natural' implication that it might get slower. That seems to me almost like a legacy from a type of serialist thinking, where you have this continual interplay and omnidirectionality occuring as a result of the disjunction between different parametric levels.
AP: Yes, this was a very simple way of questioning 'natural' phrasing in music, throwing a different 'light' on one musical parameter via another.
IP: Tell me, how have your experiences as a singer and in dance influenced your compositions?
AP: I think that relates to the last question. But also the way in which *Der Zwerg* in particular is a response to the influence of speech patterns and rhetoric in music. As human beings, we create and experience music within the confines of our physical experience of the world, via our voices and our bodies. That's certainly something I want to acknowledge in my work, particularly as singing and dancing are two things I've done a great deal of in the past. However, over the last ten years, my writing has to a large extent been about asking questions such as 'How can I explore the boundaries beyond these limitations?', 'How can I surprise myself?', 'How can I take the music that I'm writing into realms that I wouldn't expect, which are less rooted in history, in nature and the body, without rejecting those things altogether?' I have no desire to create completely mechanical-sounding or generated music.
IP: But neither are you interested , it seems to me, in the idea of 'para-nature' or 'super-nature', as it were? You don't have a problem with the idea that what you write is something man-made, cultural, artificial?
AP: Exactly. It's fascinating to me that music's cultural, artificial; but the artificiality of it has come about because of the way we move and speak. We've created it in our own image, if you like. I was very aware of that, even when I first started writing. What's interested me most, though, has been establishing a dialectic between culturally inherited and mechanised music, the latter being only a metaphor for what's outside our bodies, still very much existing within our own perceptions.

To answer your question more directly, as a dancer I spent a lot of time training in ballet. I've done some contemporary dance, and at the beginning that influenced (in a very subtle way) the rhythmical and metric structures of the music I wrote. In other words, I

experienced the music very physically as I was writing it. There is, also, I think, a very melodic quality, however expressionistic that might be, in much of my music, which certainly relates to my experience of singing. Again, that's something I don't always want to be there, so I find ways of 'composing it out', surprising myself, creating things which aren't what I would immediately and instinctively do.

IP: What are your thoughts on the directions new music has taken in the last 20 years or so?

AP: Hmmm. That's a big question! In the last two years or so I've become more interested in a much wider variety of music. And I'm less judgmental, less interested in the concept of right and wrong in life as well as in aesthetics. There's been a lot of music that I've rejected in the past and these days I feel a bit like a kid in a playground with it all! I tell myself less that I know what should or shouldn't be, or what works or what doesn't in music. I'm more aware that 'This is how it is'. This is the handprint of the society we're living in: it isn't right or wrong, it's there, it's real, and it's fascinating. So in that sense, I think at this point I couldn't really say whether things have gone in a good way or a bad way, whether they are interesting or not. I find it interesting that things are the way that they are, which has opened up a lot of areas for me.

IP: Music can just passively reflect the nature, values and aesthetics of the society from which it comes, but that which interests me most enters into a critical relationship with those qualities.

AP: Yes. I suppose I do still believe that the more responsible, interesting composers will be consciously entering into a dialogue with what's around them, and making a critique of it, whereas others will be happy just to reflect it. Personally, I find the creative process less interesting and rewarding when one is simply reflecting. But, on the other hand, what is fascinating and indeed inspiring, is that so many musicians, even within my own, Western culture are compelled to express themselves in such vastly diverse ways.

INVISIBLE CITIES

Spring was composed in 1996 to celebrate the 50th birthday of Michael Finnissy. The title refers not only to the time of year at which Michael was born but also to the form and character of the piece, which, through the use of partially repeated fragments and actual repeat marks, uncoils throughout its 1 minute duration in a highly energetic celebration of virtuouso piano technique!

The **Piano Quintet (Barbara Allen)** began life as *Barbara Allen: Fragments of a Lament*, which was commissioned by the Schubert Ensemble as part of their Chamber Music 2000 education project for children.
The inspiration for *Barbara Allen: Fragments of a Lament* came in the early spring of 2000, when I was listening to a radio program about the Silkstone Colliery disaster of 1838, in which eleven girls and fifteen boys drowned in a mining accident: the youngest was just seven years old. During the Nineteenth Century the tragedy was remembered and retold through words set to the folk-song *Barbara Allen*, which I had often used when giving singing lessons and particularly when teaching children. I was struck powerfully by the contrast between my own experience of children singing the song and the hardship of the children whose premature deaths were remembered to this simple and haunting melody. Several months after I had completed the original, I decided to expand the piece for more advanced players, creating a work in which the brittle, almost nostalgic, quality of *Barbara Allen: Fragments of a Lament* could be explored more fully.

Nostos Ou Topos: 'Nostalgia is the essence of gypsy song. But nostalgia for what? Nostos is the Greek for "a return home" – they have no home, and perhaps uniquely as a people, they have no dream of homeland. Utopia - ou topos - means "no place". Nostalgia for Utopia - a return home to no place.' From *Bury Me Standing* by Isabel Fonseca

When I first came across this quotation, I took immediately to the paradoxical idea of returning home to no place: the importance of the journey, over and above the destination, is something that has been at the core of my music for a long time and is explored again here.

Nostos Ou Topos is in three movements, presented one above the other: the player moves through the movements, weaving them together to create a single line. The piece is not complete until it has been played through twice, with a different route through the two movements being taken for each performance. The two versions do not, however, have to be played consecutively, but may be separated by one or more works by myself or other

My Collins English Dictionary describes a matrix as a "substance, situation or environment in which something has its origin, takes form or is enclosed". In the past, it could also be used to refer to the womb. I chose the title **Matrix** as a reference not only to the form of the piece but also to its material: overtones, explored by both the right and left hands of the player, are the substance and origin of all sound, and form the matrix within which this piece is enclosed. Formally, the piece can exists in a vast number of very similar manifestations, as the player plots his way through a matrix made up of eight spokes of material, as if tracing his way through a maze.

Der Zwerg takes its title from the Schubert song of the same name, which tells of the tragic love of a dwarf for his queen, whom he eventually strangles to death. In its original 1997 version, the piece alluded recognisably to the Schubert but has since been reworked and modified extensively to form the first half of *Der Zwerg* as it now stands. The second half incorporates an earlier work *Mesarch* (1996), a musical response to the work of the visual artist James Hugonin, the title of which describes the structure of plants in which the first-formed xylem (the tissue that conducts vital elements from the root to all other parts of the plant) is surrounded by that formed later - as in ferns.

Kit was composed quickly, with the intention of making a light, humorous drama for children: something that could be performed by children (in theory) as well as capturing the spirit of children's play. The notation consists almost entirely of written instructions with the addition of a grid of possible pitches from which the instrumentalist can select. The piece is otherwise made up of found objects (Handel's 'The Trumpet Shall Sound' from the *Messiah* that is heard in the background on the vocalist's walkman, extracts from Schönberg's *Erwartung* and the vocalist's texts) that are realised via the "primary colour" simplicity of the performers' instruction kits.

It is also important to point out that the vocalist is instructed to use only mathematical, scientific or instructive texts, to counteract the overtly expressive and emotional delivery required by many of the instructions (such as "enact a seductive, sensual dialogue between the spoken text and the aria"). In this performance of the piece I use the Spanish instructions for my food processor, along with extracts from Isaac Newton's *Principia*.

The Handel provides both the musical backdrop for the piece and the pitches making up the instrumentalists' grid. As a backdrop, it, again, creates an ongoing contradiction between the fragmented melodrama of the live performer and the elegant rejoicing of the recorded singer. It also creates a game of perspectives, with the unseen, barely audible Handel performance in the distance for the audience but very much in the foreground for the vocalist. This contradiction acts as a barrier between the audience and the performer,

who is aurally oblivious (like a child, totally absorbed in his own world) to those around him. It is yet another means of objectifying the emotional delivery of the texts, as the performer can make no direct appeal to the audience, from whom he is separated by 'The Trumpet Shall Sound'.

I began work on **Der Glücklose Engel** (The Luckless Angel) in December 1998 and completed the piece just six weeks later. The title comes from the Heiner Müller poem of the same name, written in 1958 and translated here by Bernard and Caroline Schütze.

> *The Past surges behind him, pouring rubble on wings and shoulders thundering like buried drums, while in front of him the future collects, crushes his eyes, explodes his eyeballs like a star wrenching the word into a resounding gag, strangling him with its breath. For a time one still sees the beating of his wings, hears the crash of stones, falling before, above, behind him, growing louder with each furious futile struggle, weakening, lessening, as the struggle subsides. Then the moment closes over him. The luckless angel is silent, resting in the rapidly flooded space, waiting for history in the petrification of flight, glance, breath. Until the renewed rush of powerful wings swelled in waves through the stone signals of his flight.*

I cannot now remember whether I came across the poem before or during the composition of the trio but certainly the dualities of motion/stasis, past/future and sound/silence described in the text inspired my own composition, as did the feeling of expectation and struggle expressed by Müller in his poem.

Invisible Cities was composed in 1999 as a maze or puzzle, setting the pianist musical problems which he must solve in order to give what he considers to be a "successful" performance of the work. Every detail of the music's notation forms an integral part of this puzzle, giving the performer varying degrees of freedom within specified but constantly changing parameters.

Each page of the piece is identified using one word or punctuation mark from the final sentence of Italo Calvino's book *Invisible Cities*: "seek and learn to recognise who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space". The pages must be ordered according to this sentence; certain words and punctuation marks are therefore interchangeable, whilst others are not. This provides several possible routes by which the pianist may travel through the piece and possible solutions to the puzzle of the music's overall form and structure.

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INVISIBLE CITIES

music by **ALWYNNE PRITCHARD**

performed by **TOPOLOGIES**

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1.	**Spring (1996)** Ian Pace (piano)	1:05
2.	**Piano Quintet: Barbara Allen (2000)** Ian Pace (piano) Darragh Morgan (violin) Chris George (violin) Bridget Carey (viola) Betsy Taylor ('cello)	8:19
	Nostos Ou Topos (2000) Alan Thomas (guitar)	
3.	I version 1	3:36
4.	II version 2	3:56
5.	**Matrix (2001)** Darragh Morgan (electric violin)	13:37
	Der Zwerg (1998) Ian Pace (piano)	
6.	I Im trüben Licht	6:17
7.	II Er spricht	4:48
8.	**Kit (1999)** Alwynne Pritchard (voice) Alan Thomas (electric guitar)	9:37
9.	**Der Glücklose Engel (1999)** Guy Cowley (E flat clarinet) Darragh Morgan (violin) Betsy Taylor ('cello)	9:02
10.	**Invisible Cities (1999)** Ian Pace (piano)	13:30
	Total Time	**73:47**

This recording was made in the Djanogly Concert Hall, Nottingham University on 27 July 1998 (track 1), in Big School at Christ's Hospital, Horsham, West Sussex on 25 April 2000 (track 10), 29 August 2000 (tracks 6-8), 31 August 2000 (tracks 2 & 9), 22 October 2000 (tracks 3 & 4) and in Holy Trinity Church, Weston, Hertfordshire on 5 June 2001 (track 5).
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