

Piano Sonata

(2015-16)

Chris Dench

performed by Peter de Jager

	WHITEOUT	<i>Prelude</i>	30''
I	THREE WINDOWS	<i>Sonata-rondo</i>	12'
	<i>...interrupted by</i>		
II	HEAT SINK	<i>Intermezzo I</i>	3'
III	PHOTINO BIRDS	<i>Scherzo I & Trio</i>	8'
IV	GALLERY OF SPACES	<i>Passacaglia</i>	22'
V	LÉVY FLIGHTS	<i>Scherzo II</i>	8'
VI	EM FUGUE [A—B—C]	<i>Fantasia</i>	22'
VII	K = +1	<i>Intermezzo II</i>	5'
VIII	INFALLSCAPE	<i>Scherzo III</i>	4'
IX	TOMBEAU/Ω POINT	<i>Elegy-finale</i>	15'

Anecdotes Impersonating a Sonata

The point of departure of this whole undertaking can be said to have been 1967. In that year I first heard Alkan's *Festin d'Esopo* from Op. 39 (pioneeringly played by Ronald Smith on an 1850's Erard), the Szymanowski *Stabat Mater*, and Stockhausen's *Gruppen*, either on LP or as BBC broadcasts. I was fourteen, and they each made a significant impact in their various ways. But, important though these were for my personal development, by far the most overwhelming experience was hearing in 1969 a broadcast of a performance by Claude Helffer of Barraqué's immense *Sonate pour Piano*. The work was still quite young then, closer to me in time than *OK Computer* is today, and its musical language was dramatic and enthralling, whatever we may think of it now. At sixteen, I had already been composing for nearly ten years, and I immediately vowed that I would write a companion-piece for this extraordinary monster.

In retrospect it feels to me inexplicable that it took another forty-six years before I would actually embark on this companion-work. In the meantime the appeal of Barraqué's language has dwindled, to the point of seeming a touch dated, but there is no question that the ambitious vision and intensity of the work endures—not least, because the work is in the repertoire of many younger pianists, and nowadays is performed frequently, enthusiastically, and well. Its original notoriety was due to jazz musician and critic André Hodeir's polemical comparison of the work to Beethoven, but the fact of its endurance is entirely due to the work's own distinctiveness.

By 2014, Peter de Jager had performed a couple of my chamber works and some solos, and we began to talk about a larger solo work—I immediately broached the idea of my long-intended Sonata. Peter’s refinement of the idea, for me to write a work to form part of a program that also included the Alkan *Symphonic*, Szymanowski’s Third Piano Sonata, and the Barraqué *Sonate*, was irresistible. This was a mirroring of my musical pantheon, and inevitably coloured the nature of the music I went on to write. Designing a piece that could match the grandeur and intensity of these three monuments of the piano literature was not the least challenge.

When Peter first performed my Piano Sonata in August 2015, in the company of the Alkan, Szymanowski and Barraqué works, he and I already knew that it was destined to be much larger. I originally set out to write a piece of about thirty minutes that exemplified a structure I had been wrestling with for most of my career: the history of a discrete universe from beginning to end. To achieve this, I designed the architecture almost exactly as it exists today. In the process of writing, it became very clear very quickly that thirty minutes was far too tight a timeframe to accommodate the cosmic history that I envisaged. The unfolding piece felt seriously cramped; indeed, the six movements that Peter played that August all felt too large for the 45-minute framework in which they sat. I therefore allowed the architecture of the remaining three movements to expand (would this be compositional *Inflation* at work?) as they came into shape over the summer of 2015/6.

By April 2016 the piece had reached a provisionally final form, and that October Peter gave a remarkable performance of the

work in front of an invited audience at the Australian National Academy of Music (ANAM). For that occasion I produced these brief, Carl Sagan-esque, notes on the piece and its structure in the hope that they would make its character and unfolding somewhat less baffling. In the event I only made a few changes to the score after that 2016 performance, and they have all been incorporated into what is now the Definitive Version, which we hear for the first time today.

The Piano Sonata opens with a Big Bang... except that of course, with no medium through which to propagate, the Big Bang would have been entirely silent. My piece adopts an alternative imagining, in that it takes as its starting-point, as *Prelude*, the moment in Greg Bear’s novel *Blood Music*¹ when all of reality has been reduced to a blizzard of quantum fluff—an ontological WHITEOUT (30”), which we hear as a gusting snowfall of notes. The only possible outcome of such a storm is a landscape of deep cold, which conforms, in my cosmic structural metaphor to the informationless radiation era—the movement is called THREE WINDOWS (11’), and is analogous to a *sonata-rondo*. After three phases of icy stasis, through which a melody weakly threads, a sudden explosive breaking of symmetry heralds an extended Bachian three-part invention. The image here comes from Philip K Dick² who quotes the parable (from Bede) of the bird which flies from the winter cold into the all-too-brief warmth and richness of a banqueting hall but then flies out through the opposite window, returning

¹ Gregory Bear *Blood Music*, p 255

² Philip K Dick, Conversion of King Edwin of Northumbria, as paraphrased in *The Penultimate Truth*, p 59

to winter again (in my *sonata-rondo*, three times). This is of course a metaphor for the human condition, but it also conceptually maps onto the cosmic ‘dark ages’ and the gradual emergence of the first stars in the early cosmos as we see it at the extreme limits of our telescopes.

Stephen Baxter provides the concept for the next, brief, movement, which peremptorily kicks aside the brooding THREE WINDOWS. He imagines pragmatic aliens that have developed a completely energy-neutral form—spherical Silver Ghosts³—who refer to the space between the stars as the HEAT SINK (3’), referring to its frigid, warmth-absorbing 2.7°K. A series of semiotically isolated gestures, this *intermezzo I* ultimately flares up briefly only to freeze again.

By now, the cosmos has become inhabited. Living in the gravity wells of the newly-accreted stars, the dark-matter PHOTINO BIRDS (7’) resemble nothing in our baryonic world. A *scherzo & trio*, this movement derives from Stephen Baxter again,⁴ in a music that tries to hint at another mode of being entirely, by providing a stream of chimerical photino birdcalls. The movement ends with a fragment from a non-dark matter magpie, heard repetitively in my back-garden at 4am every night for weeks, year after year.

With the stars now born, and space-time well under way, the ensuing GALLERY OF SPACES⁵ (22’) presents a constantly

³ Stephen Baxter, *Vacuum Diagrams*, p 4

⁴ Stephen Baxter, *Vacuum Diagrams*, p 334

⁵ John Barrow describing Luigi Bianchi’s Classification of three-dimensional spaces which admit a continuous group of motions in *The Book of Universes*, p 16

morphing *passacaglia* of musical environments. Unlike most *passacaglias*, though, this movement is structurally palindromic, with its predominantly ascending, then descending, strains. Time is slow, the unfolding of the cosmos is leisurely. There is ample opportunity to consider the formal panorama.

We have reached the centre of our edifice; solar systems are forming, and the inanimate stuff that inhabits the accretion discs surrounding the stars perform LÉVY FLIGHTS⁶ (8’) as they gravitationally jostle, in the *second scherzo*. There are regular and irregular orbits, impacts, and escapes: turbulence. The kinetic energy peaks and dissipates, bedding down into a low-energy equilibrium.

Out of which emerges, again, melody. The *nöosphere* has appeared in the appropriate form of a *fantasia*. Electromagnetic creatures, under centuries-long siege by machine intelligences, perform a microwave frequency song to attract assistance from any passing biont. Their song, as described by Gregory Benford,⁷ is an EM FUGUE (22’); unlike most fugues, though, this one is palindromic. It is also heterophonic, teetering into canon as the singing EM creatures move in and out of phase with one another. This *nöosphere* exhibits what is probably a characteristic of all such cultures, urgent acceleration: the structure is expounded a first time (A), in eighteen minutes; then a second time (B), in three minutes; then a third time (C) in one minute.

⁶ Albert-László Barabási, *Bursts*, p 157

⁷ Gregory Benford, *Across the Sea of Suns*, p 133-144

By now, the universe itself is changing. Having stalled expansion, gravity has reasserted itself and started to contract the fabric of space-time. The cosmos is spatially closed; it has negative total energy.⁸ The Friedmann equation is set at $k = +1$ (5'); aspects of the HEAT SINK reappear. The collapse is progressive, this *intermezzo II* takes us further and further into the gravity well. The movement is a homage to Kristian Ireland.

The vortex is upon us: akin to the accretion discs of LÉVY FLIGHTS, the condensing musical fabric coalesces, resulting in palpable density. This *third scherzo* conflates Gerard Manley Hopkins' *inscape* ('the essential inner nature of a person, an object, etc') with the astrophysical notion of *infall* ('the falling of matter to a celestial body from space under the influence of the body's gravity'). The INFALLSCAPE (4') gradually becomes sonically supersaturated, and after an extended climactic seizure, ultimately, instantaneously, evaporates.

This is not the end, however. Frank Tipler conceives of a singularity at the end of time where all the universe's world-lines converge and a meta-intelligence is formed, recreating all possible sentient creatures including you and me, in an eternal suspended moment of resurrection. This Ω POINT⁹ (15') is also described by Teilhard de Chardin in rather more theological

⁸ John A. Peacock, *Cosmological Physics: the Isotropic Universe* 3.2: '...The Friedmann equation shows that a universe that is spatially closed (with $k=+1$) has negative total "energy": the expansion will eventually be halted by gravity, and the universe will recollapse'.

⁹ Frank Tipler (from Teilhard de Chardin), *The Physics of Immortality*, pp xiv, 1.

terms, as something like heaven. Almost all of the previous musics of the Sonata are recapitulated—in reverse order, and abbreviated—in this *elegy-finale*, which inexorably flows towards oblivion. It is also a TOMBEAU, memorialising my late friend Robert Schuck.

The piece is, in a sense, signed-off. The last thirty seconds of music entirely consist of the names of my wife, Kate Sullivan, and myself, converted into musical material. This is in fact the basic material of the entire ninety-odd minutes of the piece, but here at the end it is heard unadornedly.¹⁰ Simply put, without Kate's support this piece would not have got written ...and this is equally true of any other work of mine of the last fifteen years.

¹⁰ ...and, I suddenly realise, formally parallels the ending of the Barraqué.

I'm no scientist: most of the ideas in this piece are only barely comprehensible to me, and remain semidigested. But I do not think that matters—some models contributed primarily to the teleology of the piece, other ideas functioned merely as prompts, as mental images that I could translate into sound. The Sonata is, as I see it, a piece of abstract music utilising structural and textural devices that I derived from the physical and literary sources I've mentioned; at least for me, conceptual metamorphosis is an essential element of creativity. *Caveat*: I am however fairly convinced by the arguments of those I trust, that the once-canonical Big Crunch will not in fact happen: in reality k is almost certainly less than zero, the cosmos will expand forever ...and the last quarter of my piece was cosmologically obsolete even before I wrote it. *Tant pis*.¹¹ Also, I regard both Teilhard's and Tipler's versions of the Ω Point as gratingly supernaturalist (albeit entertaining and fecund) nonsense.

I am retrospectively struck by the absence of any influences deriving from works by women in this piece. While it is true that the material I have chosen is rather narrow in its purview, there are these days many women working in such fields—*vide* the remarkable opera *Hypermusic Prologue* by Hector Parra and string theorist Liza Randall—and I can only say that my choices were driven entirely by contextual applicability.

Chris Dench, August 2016

¹¹ To own up: I was fully aware of the current astrophysical eschatology but a future where everything extragalactic slowly disappears over the horizon seemed hardly conducive to interesting music. I may have changed my view on this.

Biographical Note

Born in England, Chris Dench came to Australia in 1989 to escape the Old World and obtain some proper weather; he now lives permanently in Ballarat. Over fifty-five years of writing he has produced an extensive catalogue of musical works performed, broadcast, and issued on more than fifteen CDs, world-wide. He was a finalist in the inaugural Beleura Award for Composition, Melbourne 2016 for his Piano Sonata, and Peter de Jager's October 2016 performance of the same work is a finalist in the Performance of the Year category of the 2017 APRA AMCOS Art Music Awards.