

Peter de Jager & Chris Dench

present a private pre-première performance of the

Piano Sonata

in its definitive 100 minute form

October 9, 2016

Australian National Academy of Music

210 Bank Street, South Melbourne, 3205

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>	12'
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'Esopé* 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 of the year was hearing a broadcast of a performance by a woman—I have always assumed Yvonne Loriod, but I could be wrong—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 fourteen, I had already been composing for a half-dozen 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 eight 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 in a couple of my chamber works, and we began to talk about a 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 *Symphonie*, Szymanowski's *Third Piano Sonata*, and the Barraqué *Sonate*, was irresistible. I would be hard-pressed to think of a group of composers who had a more personal meaning, and inevitably this prospect coloured the nature of the music I went on to write, in terms of scale, difficulty, and piano colour. 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* last August, 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 last 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?).

And so, here we are, at the pre-première tryout of a nearly hundred minute unbroken, dare I say Lisztian, edifice. I must confess to being torn; it seems to me only fair to provide a route-map for such a large, unfamiliar work; however, I do not wish the piece to be seen as a literary *Pictures at an Exhibition*. I have therefore cast what follows in the form of an extended Saganesque conceit which reflects some of my more playful thinking as I wrote the piece. It is useful insofar as it goes, but ultimately tangential—the piece is what it is, not what I say it is, or even what I set out to make it. And certainly not entirely what the titles of the movements suggest; I'm keen on ambiguity/irony.

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 solution, in that it takes as its starting-point, as *Prelude*, the moment in Greg Bear's novel *Blood Music* 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 Dick who quotes the parable from Bede of the bird which flies from the winter cold into the warmth and richness of a banqueting hall but then flies out through the opposite window into the cold 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 abruptly kicks aside the brooding THREE WINDOWS. He imagines pragmatic aliens that have developed a completely energy-neutral form—spherical Silver Ghosts—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, in a music that tries to hint at another mode of being entirely, by providing a stream of chimerical photino birdcalls.

With the stars now born, and space-time well under way, the ensuing GALLERY OF SPACES (15') presents a constantly 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 grace to consider the 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 FLIGHTS (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 nōosphere 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, 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 nōosphere exhibits what is probably a characteristic of all such cultures, urgent acceleration: the structure is expounded a first time (I), in eighteen minutes; then a second time (II), in three minutes; then a third time (III) in one minute.

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. 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 POINT (15') is also described by Teilhard de Chardin in rather more theological 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.

I would point out that I only barely comprehend the physics I have outlined as contributing to the teleology of the piece. I would not want to give the impression that I have any fluency whatsoever in science. 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. Similarly, I regard both Teilhard's and Tipler's versions of the Ω Point as irritatingly supernaturalist (but entertaining) nonsense. These 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 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.

Chris Dench, August 2016

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Peter de Jager

Peter de Jager is a Pianist, Harpsichordist, and Composer based in Melbourne. His repertoire is diverse, stretching from early music to standard and contemporary repertoire, as well as cabaret and music theatre. He has three times attended the Lucerne Festival Academy, directed by Pierre Boulez, and in 2011 was the first winner of the Australian International Chopin Competition. He was awarded fifth place and best Australian competitor at the Southern Highlands International Piano Competition in 2013. His compositions are starting to gain attention, with recent commissions by Astra, the Melbourne Chamber Orchestra, and Speak Percussion. He joins Oboist Ben Opie on the album *French Oboe Sonatas*, which has received critical acclaim, and a solo album is forthcoming.

He co-wrote *Reception: The Musical* with actor/writer Bethany Simons, which has been delighting audiences Australia-wide, and was nominated for a Green Room Award. Peter was a finalist in the 2015 Symphony Australia Young Performers Award, and was awarded the 2014 Freedman Fellowship, an annual prize of \$15,000. He was awarded second place in the 2016 Australian National Piano Award.

Chris Dench

Born in England, Chris Dench came to Australia in 1989 to escape the Old World and obtain some proper weather; he now lives in Ballarat. He has been writing music for fifty-five years and has produced an extensive catalogue of works performed, broadcast, and issued on CD, world-wide. He is a finalist in the inaugural Beleura Award for Composition, Melbourne 2016.

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