

## NOTES FROM THE COMPOSER

No one is more surprised than me at the existence of Hipster Zombies From Mars. While I did learn piano early in life and have bashed away merrily on the instrument ever since, I wouldn't say it has been my main musical focus. Sure, the piano can be and has been immeasurably valuable in the compositional process, but also for that very reason, easy to dismiss as a logistical means to a creative end. So an hour-and-a-half of piano music: how did that happen??

The oldest piece on the album, *Terraformation* (1999), was commissioned last century by Ars Musica Australis to promote contemporary 'art' music in western regions of metropolitan Sydney, Australia. Being at the time a serious, hyper-intense young thing, I found the ambition of the project appealing enough to accept the designated instrumentation without question. My focus instead was the work's three main parameters, which I decided should be an extramusical programme, clear forms reflecting traditional classical music, and an uncompromising high-modernist surface. The idea was the transparency of the first and second would cast the third in a more appealing light, as per the commissioner's intent.

Inspiration for this piece was drawn from Kim Stanley Robinson's 'Red Mars', a popular science fiction novel about human colonisation of the red planet. Among the author's speculative forays is the notion of 'terraformation', a series of geochemical processes whereby an uninhabitable planet is made habitable. The four movements of the work are musical descriptors of technology used in these world-changing events.

The first movement revolves around the soletta, an artificial satellite orbiting Mars. Made up of a multitude of adjustable mirrors, its function is to focus the rays of the sun to boil great tracts on the planet's surface (Prelude). This in turn causes considerable quantities of carbon dioxide gas to be released into the atmosphere, contributing significantly to global warming, a crucial factor in creating Earth-like conditions (Double Canon).

The subject of the second movement, the windmill has a similar function. Scores of these structures are placed all over the surface of the planet, converting Mars's endless wind-flows and sandstorms from kinetic energy to heat.

*Cyanophyte primares*, the focus of the third movement, is a form of blue-green algae genetically engineered to survive on pre-terraformed Mars. Ideally, its life cycles would pump oxygen into the atmosphere, creating the foundation for more complex ecological systems. The exact nature of its long-term effect is unclear, however; for all anyone knows, it may cause a major environmental disaster.

The last movement centres on a piece of machinery known as the permafrost pump. Designed to melt the frozen tundra of the Martian poles, these devices end up releasing vast quantities of liquid water onto the lifeless surface of the planet. The hope then is this newly aquatic environment would let life to take its own course, just as similar conditions had on Earth.

With this programme in mind, I hoped the unfamiliar, often confrontational surface of the music would be more palatable for the target audience. For one, its 'alien' quality is quite appropriate, given the subject matter. The scenarios' narratives also might help the listener navigate through the arcane musical language, which owes much to high modernism and new complexity. Along similar lines, the forms of the four movements – Prelude & Double Canon, Scherzo, Passacaglia, Rondo-Sonata – are long established and therefore more familiar to traditional classical audiences, if not the general public. The nominally initiated may well enjoy the friction between model and remould; for instance, a 'Scherzo' which takes the playfulness of its 19<sup>th</sup> century predecessors to disturbing extremes.

So did this work succeed in its aim? Does it continue to do so? These questions are impossible to answer, as the whole piece has never been performed in western Sydney (or anywhere in Australia, for that matter). What is certain, however, is the monumental ambition behind it: the music expects everything, and it expects it now! *Terraformation* is therefore ferociously difficult to play; indeed, it takes Herculean musicality and technique just to get through the whole thing, let alone at the interpretative level Ryan has in this recording.

There are no less than twelve years between *Terraformation* and the next piece on this album, *Uncanny Valley* (2011). Obviously the piano took a compositional backseat over that time, albeit as an integral component of various chamber works. The ambition which drove the earlier work, however, only gained momentum. I spent much of that period in the United States, mostly in the Boston area, moving in circles which could be broadly characterized as 'neo-high-modernist', with all the avant-gardism that implies. In that context, the piano became evermore removed from its original sound world, its traditional palette increasingly subsumed into extended techniques and electronic augmentation. While I found the corresponding performative and engineering feats impressive, the musicality of these approaches was largely underwhelming. The piano may have remained an important part of my private music-making, but as a vehicle for public expression, it seemed even more of a dud.

It took some very special circumstances to reverse this situation. First off, I met the other half of the trendy, undead, alien marriage known as Hipster Zombies From Mars, Ryan MacEvoy McCullough. We were both participants in the 2010 Tanglewood summer programme; he as a pianist, I as a composer. While Ryan was clearly their star, I was clearly not; fortunately for me, however, he didn't give two hoots about that, and a formidable friendship was born. It would be a while, nevertheless, before I gratuitously exploited Ryan's prodigious talents.

Later that same year, I was approached by Australian pianist Zubin Kanga about a new commission. He was asking various Australian composers to contribute to Piano: Inside/Out, a project designed to produce and showcase piano repertoire which made extensive use of the inside of the instrument. Perhaps if this opportunity had come up a few years earlier, it would have been less compelling. As it happened, however, I was due to relocate to Sydney for a job at Zubin's old high school, and this seemed like the perfect way to connect the aesthetic world in Boston that I was about to leave with my new life.

So the stage was set for *Uncanny Valley*. As it would effectively be cultural outreach – much like *Terraformation* – I decided this new piece would benefit from some sort of extramusical influence. This ended up being the 'uncanny valley', a strange perceptual phenomenon often associated with the fields of robotics and animation. Common sense suggests as a visual representation of a human being becomes more and more 'human-like', we have a more and more positive response to it. And yet, at a certain point when the resemblance is especially close, our reactions switch to discomfort, disquiet or even revulsion. There are many possible explanations for this reaction, but one compelling argument is that leading up to that point, we see an increasingly pleasing estimation of a person, while beyond it – that is, in the uncanny valley itself – our perception is actually of a 'real' human being with something wrong or off.

When I composed this work in 2011, the 'uncanny valley' concept was not obscure. The artistic and financial failure of certain big-budget animated and CGI features some years before and subsequent discussions in the press had placed it squarely in the public consciousness. It had even been used creatively; for instance, as a fleeting plot feature in the sitcom 30 Rock.

That said, sonic exploration of this visually orientated phenomenon is hardly an obvious choice. Nevertheless, when confronted with a graphic representation outlining various human-like entities and their relative position to the valley, I immediately thought of an old musical

form, namely theme & variations. This became the foundation of the piece, with a bona fide, healthy person being the theme and facsimiles of varying quality – an industrial robot, a humanoid robot, a stuffed animal, and a corpse, zombie and bunraku puppet combined – the variations. Since the representation traced progress towards, descent into, and ascent out of the uncanny valley, the variations in this case precede, rather than follow the theme as they usually would.

The analogies don't stop there, however. As a contemporary 'art' music composer, I deal frequently with extended instrumental techniques, which produce sounds not originally associated with the given instrument. This of course gelled nicely with the commission, whose focus was the inside of the piano, the site of many such sounds, as well as my musical community over the previous decade, which was utterly obsessed with such sounds. What's more, the friction between 'natural' and 'unnatural' timbres maps rather well onto the uncanny valley concept. The first variation features almost entirely atypical piano noises: just as the industrial robot is only vaguely human, the instrument being performed is only vaguely a piano. As the variations progress, the non-standard timbres peter out, until the drop into the valley, where they become pervasive once again, and even more alien in the instrumental context. It is only with the theme – the real person – that the piano reverts exclusively to conventional sounds.

The most noticeable 'flaw' of this variations and theme is a lack of immediate aural connection between the former and the latter; that is, no obvious recurring melody onto which the ear can latch. Nevertheless, score analysis reveals an ongoing thematic line, which at least on paper, is treated somewhat traditionally. This is yet another reflection of the uncanny valley phenomenon: our conscious mind perceives neither melodic nor physiognomic connections, but somehow our subconscious does, and reacts accordingly. It is perhaps only there, beneath the perceptual surface, that the bizarre grotesquerie of *Uncanny Valley* becomes truly human.

While I can't speak for every listener, it is safe to say *Uncanny Valley* errs more towards avant-gardism than the middle-brow space I originally envisaged. Ten years in Boston had made me forget just how different sensibilities were in Australia, and especially in those strata of Sydney I had left behind after high school, and to which I had now returned. Comparing the rapturous reaction to Ryan's performance of the work at the 2014 Summer Institute for Contemporary Performance Practice at New England Conservatory with the various muted ones at home, for instance, only further highlighted this divide.

So how to live and work in an environment where the last ten years of my artistic life – and indeed the last fifty years of 'high' Western culture – were irrelevant? Fortunately, past aesthetic angst suggested the late 19th, early 20th century composer I had been when I was sixteen was not dead, and in time, he did return, albeit with the burden of another century of Western (and non-Western) music. Similarly, having moved from an expressive environment to a functional one, I now had opportunity and reason to write music for purpose, which brings its own satisfaction. One such purpose was to provide repertoire for secondary music students in New South Wales, who as part of their graduating exams, must perform a work less than five minutes, written in the last twenty-five years. And many of these students play which instrument? The piano, of course. These young pianists are perpetually hungry for new music which is both playable and entertaining for them, their teachers and – most importantly – their examiners. Hence *Indie Ditties* (2014-17).

*Indie Ditties* is essentially a book of preludes in the classical tradition, with twelve movements, each in a different 'key'. Like Debussy, the notion of key is substituted for a space with a specific tonal centre, around which a variety of scales, modes, et al. are explored. Like Chopin or J.S.Bach, these tonal centres are organised in a strict pattern; in this case, based on thirds.

The piece's overarching title refers to ideas, objects, situations and the like – twelve 'scapes', each with its own title – which reflect the now familiar phenomenon of indie/ alternative/ hipster subculture. The take on this social stratum is complex: part fascination, part affection, part puzzlement and part satire. This stems from a genuine personal ambivalence. On one hand, I certainly wouldn't consider myself a card-carrying member, and even if I had a card, my pigeon-holing of the real deal has been strongly criticised by the real deal – which of course is to be expected from the real deal – to the point where that card would surely have been cancelled. On the other, I myself have been labelled a hipster, albeit by people whose aesthetic and generational distance doesn't make them the best judges. So like with hipsterdom itself, my exact stance is hard to articulate...

Some effort has gone into designing *Indie Ditties* as a complete or partial cycle by balancing key, structure, mood, etc. Nevertheless, as the work was written with the New South Wales Higher School Certificate performance requirements in mind, each movement stands quite well on its own, having a narrative particular to itself. These narratives are satisfying enough in purely musical terms; however, for the sake of the compositional process – and now those reading these notes – I had in my mind the following extramusical analogues:

- I. The lumbersexual in *Grease on the Handlebars* treats his moustache like he treats his motorcycle: like he should treat his lover. Tired of the war between grease and gravity, he trades up to gel, but will that be his final undoing...?
- II. In *organic, VG, fair trade*, an inner-city greenie devotes herself religiously to a healthy, ethical lifestyle. The temptation of GMO- and fat-laden fast food may be too great, however...
- III. The well-coiffed urbanite of *Bad Appletude* knows she should love the sleek lines of iRelated products, but just can't resist the homely functionality of other, daggier brands...
- IV. In *20/20 frames*, an intellectual wannabe with perfect sight contemplates how brilliant she must look, wearing her black-framed glasses without prescription lenses...
- V. The dandy in *HRH Prince Albert*, while immensely proud of his 'romantic' skills, still yearns for greater prowess. He gets himself pierced in a certain area, thinking this will surely heighten the magic, but things go horribly and painfully wrong...
- VI. In... *my love is like a dead, dead pose...*, a post-feminist commits wholeheartedly to acting out an acknowledgment of the significance of love, maybe...
- VII. The peaceful hipster in *Crucifixie* achieves almost spiritual elation riding around on her fixed-gear bicycle. But without brakes, will her mechanical guru also be her doom...?
- VIII. In *skinny, skinny jeans*, a spunky funkster is pretty sure of his own pop-star qualities, but something is missing... It's skinny, skinny jeans, which when eventually donned, do amplify his cool, but also deprive him of oxygen...
- IX. The misunderstood bohemian of *... and the freaks shall inherit the earth...* contemplates with increasing catharsis his inevitable rise to (sub)cultural hegemony...
- X. In *Bob Springmones Holed My Pink Stones*, a culture vulture tries to fight her love of pop with a steady diet of alt-sanctioned music, to no avail...
- XI. The suave foodie of *Microbrew IV* enjoys the careful aestheticization and documentation of drinking a boutique-brewery beer at least as much as the beer itself...
- XII. In *Too Much Ink*, a stigmatophile just loves his tats, getting a new one whenever he can. But what happens when there's no more surface area...?

These pieces may have been written with skilful young pianists in mind, but learning and performing the entire cycle is a whole other level of proficiency. The length alone – some fifty

minutes – is daunting, to say nothing of the ever-changing stylistic and psychological expectations. Naturally, Ryan has done a spectacular job here, though it is not his technique and memory work that are most impressive – their quality is a given – but the hard-fought, often painful acquisition of the late-teen mindset, which required dismantling many years of accumulated performative wisdom.

So as this diatribe comes to an end, I must admit I'm thinking perhaps the piano IS an important creative outlet for me... It's not just having to consider and write about a hour-and-a-half of my own piano music; it's remembering its part in almost all the pieces I've ever composed, the endless hamfisted sight-reading of standard repertoire and transcriptions, the innumerable improvisations – brutally atonal, saccharinely pop and everything in-between – for students, friends, or just myself. Because the piano has been so much part of my private life, I guess I haven't seen it – until this point – as a voice for public expression. Maybe the true sincerity in this post-ironic menagerie of an album is found here, in the fact I have used my 'private' instrument, in the face of everything else I'm making it do, to communicate something of myself.

A thousand and one thanks to Ryan, without whose intelligence, hard work, musicality and (largely) unwavering tolerance for my pedantic and obsessive ways, this album would either not exist or be 100-135% worse.

*Nicholas Vines, February 2018*