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RANGING OVER THE FOREST: A CONVERSATION WITH ANTHONY POWERS

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Anthony Powers (photo: Malcolm Crowthers)



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Nicholas Jones

The following is an edited transcript of a conversation between Nicholas Jones and Anthony Powers in Lower Breinton, Hereford, on 28 April 2003. Square-bracketed dates and other parentheses are editorial.



NJ: *I understand that you are currently taking a sabbatical this year from your teaching at Cardiff University so you can concentrate on composition. What are you working on at the moment?*

AP: I've just finished a big choral and orchestral piece for the Three Choirs Festival called *Air and Angels*, which is settings of John Donne poems [selected from *Holy Sonnets* and *Songs and Sonnets*]. That's now in rehearsal and I'm finishing the orchestral score at the moment. The first performance will be in August. I'm also writing a piano piece for William Howard, for whom I wrote *The Memory Room* [1991], which is going to be done at the Cheltenham Festival in July. It's about 12 minutes long and called *Vista*, and is the first in a series of projected pieces based on ideas and imagery from Italian Renaissance gardens. And then I'm doing a piece for an ensemble in Germany [Ensemble Musica Viva], which will be done in Hanover in October, which is a setting of extracts from Seamus Heaney's cycle of poems called *Station Island* for speaker, baritone and an ensemble of six instruments.

NJ: *Am I right in saying that Vista is the first in a series of five pieces?*

AP: Yes, all of which involve the piano. We start with the piano solo, and then the next piece will be for piano and small ensemble. And it will grow, eventually, into a 'triple concerto' for piano, violin and cello and orchestra for the final piece. Each piece will include parts of the previous pieces within it. The whole thing will be like, as it were, a walk around a garden where you keep finding things that you've seen before. On the way there will be pieces for violin and chamber orchestra and cello and chamber orchestra, but all including the ensembles from the earlier pieces. It's a kind of massive variation form. The piano piece is triple variations – i.e. three themes or three kinds of music which become varied. And that sets up all the material for the subsequent pieces. So it's proving very hard to write, and not just because it's a piano piece – which is very hard to write anyway – but because of having to get this material right for what I know is going to be a big journey for it.

NJ: *Could you please say something about your musical education.*

AP: I very luckily got to meet Richard Rodney Bennett when I was 16. He was living in London then, and I took some pieces to him and he was very nice and he said, I don't teach anymore, but the person

who helped me most when I was your age and really got me going was Elisabeth Lutyens, and why don't you go and see her? So I did that. And I had lessons, if you can call them lessons, or at least long conversations (mostly rather one-sided conversations!) in school holidays, I suppose, when I was 16 or 17 [1969–71]. That was very inspiring because she was the first really professional composer I had encountered. She was in her sixties, and at that time, looking back on it, she was writing probably what is her best music. And then I went to Oxford to read music, and left after a year because I didn't like the course and they didn't particularly like me either! But by that time I had finished the time with Lutyens and I started seeing Harrison Birtwistle. He was doing classes at Morley College where I used to go, and I had some private time with him as well which was also great (and a couple of summer schools at Dartington), but Oxford didn't allow me to go on having lessons with him, which I thought was outrageous.

Anyway, I left Oxford at the end of that year [1972], wrote a letter to Wilfrid Mellers at York, saying Look, I've made a mistake, I went to Oxford when I should have come to York when you offered me a place; can I come to York? And he said, Yes, of course, but we're full for next year – you'll have to wait a year. So that was when I went to Nadia Boulanger in Paris [1972–73]. She was, as you can imagine, amazing and a huge influence probably in all sorts of ways. I didn't actually do any composing – we were doing harmony, counterpoint and analysis. She ran what was basically a three-year course for composers and performers, and her famous Wednesday afternoon analysis classes, which she had started in the 1920s, ran from 2.00 to 6.30 without a break(!) when all the students attended and any visitors could come as well. That was a series of classes which that year took set works from Machaut through to Xenakis via Bach, Beethoven, Schumann, Fauré, Stravinsky – the sort of people that you might expect, but a full range of 'history', as it were, but taught through what was really analysis and interpretation. And then we had the individual lessons with her when I was doing the harmony and counterpoint, and so forth.

And, by the time I went to York, I was actually very well equipped to get the most out of the course, which was quite a freely structured course for its time – now very similar to all sorts of modular courses everywhere. You could almost design your own course through a series of modules, or 'projects' as they called them then. There were a lot of composers at York then: nearly all the staff were composers, and there was a number of postgraduate composers; there was a real sense of a composing community, which was very exciting. I did three years at York [1973–76] and then I stayed on to do a PhD [1976–81]. I was there for five years altogether before moving on and doing the PhD part time.

NJ: *What was it about York that made it such a stimulating environment in which to study?*

AP: I suppose it was because Wilfrid Mellers wanted a faculty of practising musicians rather than academics. We did academic courses, but these were taught by composers and performers. Bernard Rands was there; David Blake and Alan Hacker were also there. Actually, Lutyens came for a year as composer-in-residence so I re-met her, which was nice. It was just a very lively, exciting time, and I found that I could do a great deal of the degree just by writing

music rather than writing essays! We did all sorts of new music and performance, and a number of student pieces got done, and that's when I really 'took off' as a composer.

NJ: Another Part of the Island of 1980 is one of your earliest published and acknowledged works. What kinds of things did you write before this?

AP: At York I did all sorts of things. There was a great vogue for music theatre at the time (I guess elsewhere as well) – something that Bernard Rands was very interested in as a result of his work with Berio. I did a number of pretty incompetent, but at the time I thought exciting, theatre pieces. But I also did two orchestral pieces, a cello concerto, and a piece for a large chamber orchestra, which were done by the university chamber orchestra, and various pieces for the New Music Ensemble and performers who were there. But they're not pieces that I would now consider to be the real me. And you're right that *Another Part of the Island* was one of the very early ones – and *Souvenirs de Voyage* [1980]: so those two were really the first. *Another Part of the Island* came about from a commission by Peter Maxwell Davies to write a piece for The Fires of London, which was wonderful. You don't turn that down!

NJ: Am I right in saying that you worked on an opera in the early 1980s?

AP: I had a couple of years in the early 1980s [1980–82] as composer-in-residence to Southern Arts. One of the pieces I wrote in those two years was a children's opera, which hasn't been published and hasn't been done since then, but I'm fond of it. It's a piece that's sort of fallen by the wayside, as did quite a lot of them from that time. When I got the publishing contract with OUP they took quite a lot of pieces that I had already written, but not all of them. So that sort of defined the pieces that survived and the ones that I let go. There was also a piece, part of a much bigger project which was based on Baudelaire texts called *En Voyage*, and one section of that was done by Oliver Knussen and the London Sinfonietta in an SPNM event. I'd be happy if that was made more available than it is, but that was one of the ones that OUP decided that they didn't want.

NJ: Some of your pieces around the mid-1980s (Nymphéas of 1983, for instance) reveal your attraction to late-Romantic French music. It is an influence that has stayed with you, but of course you have absorbed other stylistic influences along the way. What music and composers, then, would you identify as having an effect on your own creative voice?

AP: I've always been – and still am – very interested in and *passionate* about Debussy and Ravel in particular. But I think, along with other composers I guess, that there's so much in that music of the turn of the last century from those composers – and Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Szymanowski – that is still full of potential. I'd decided that I needed to find a way of writing music that could accommodate the things that I had found in serialism that were going to be useful, but also things from a kind of expanded tonal language which I reckoned I also needed, including octatonic and modal harmony. And those composers from that period seemed to provide a very good model for ways of expanding tonality into areas that I thought I was going to need. That was on the technical level, part of it, but above all it was a love for the sheer noise that that music makes – and of course Mahler, Elgar and Strauss as well, in their different ways.

I once mentioned to Nadia Boulanger of how fond I was of Strauss – and that was a mistake – because I got a long diatribe about

what a dreadful composer he was! But I didn't get the treatment that apparently Elliott Carter had when, as a student, he asked Boulanger what she thought about *Salome* and she got the full-score out of her library and played through the entire opera to him pointing out, bar by bar, all the various 'faults' as she saw them. She was quite a formidable woman! But yes, I still have a great love for that period (roughly 1890 to 1914) and those composers.

NJ: *It seems to me that the start of the 1990s marks a watershed in your stylistic development: with such works as the Second String Quartet and The Memory Room things start to become more reflective and intimate; there is a different tone to your compositional voice. In fact, this difference is epitomized by the dissimilarity of character and rationale between the Horn Concerto of 1989 and the Cello Concerto of the following year, the former being very confrontational and aggressive, and the latter more reflective and introverted. Is this just a neat coincidence, or is there some substance to this?*

AP: I don't know; I've never thought about that, and it's not the kind of thing you do think about much as a composer, because these things just happen. But I suspect you're right. I think around about that time I started to feel confident in the materials I was using and had found a way of writing which I felt happy with. Possibly the reason for those two concertos being as different as they are is that actually that project was again designed to be a bigger one: it was going to be a trilogy of concertos and, in spite of the difference of manner, there's a certain amount of shared material between the pieces and this was going to be clinched in a third concerto, a piano concerto that was going to absorb the two characters. So in a sense, the Horn Concerto was the first movement of that kind of 'mega-concerto' plan and the Cello Concerto was like the slow movement in itself, and the piano concerto was going to be a sort of glittery finale that was going to wrap in aspects of the other two pieces as well in a kind of recapitulatory way. It was a crazy idea, of course, because they would never be played as a set of three, but that was the plan. And then, for various reasons I never got round to writing the piano concerto, although I have got quite a lot of sketches for it. It might even happen one day – who knows! – but as is the way of things, other pieces came along and other projects took over so that it never got finished.

But that period, especially the Second String Quartet [1991] (which is a piece I am very fond of and I think works very well), I managed to write pieces which included, in a kind of coherent way, lots of different sorts of music and moods within them, rather than writing a piece which did one thing predominantly. *The Memory Room* is an example of that in miniature because it goes through many ways of writing for piano, historical allusions and all sorts of things in a short space of time. But one thing that did become clear around about then was a division in my own mind between pieces to which I gave abstract genre titles, like quartets and symphonies and piano sonatas, and the pieces that had more poetic or descriptive titles which were more to do with extra-musical sources and images. And that stayed with me.

NJ: *Is that division a sort of juggling act?*

AP: It can be a juggling act sometimes, but maybe it's not. When you're composing, you're only concerned with the sounds and structures of the material you're dealing with and that is, of necessity, a purely musical process. The idea and images which may

affect the way those sounds and structures are arrived at is something which is probably extra-musical. But then again, if you had asked Beethoven or Mahler the same question they might come up with a similar kind of answer. You can call a piece Symphony No. 1 and it can be full of all sorts of much less abstract things than that title might suggest. And quite often these generic titles are useful camouflage ...

NJ: *A lot of your music is characterized by the tension achieved by the development of (mostly two) sharply contrasting ideas, most obviously in Sea/Air and In Two Minds, but also in the string quartets, the opening movements of the first and second symphonies, etc: it is an idea that seems to permeate all of your work. This seems to go hand-in-hand with the idea of 'duos' between different instruments and groupings of instruments. Is the idea of 'pairing' something that is essential to your compositional thinking?*

AP: Well, it does seem to be, and it's one of the reasons why in the symphonies – and elsewhere – I find myself willy-nilly writing movements that seem to relate to sonata form, as a kind of archetype. But I think it's more to do with inventing a musical idea and immediately seeing possibilities for its opposite and accommodating that opposite rather than ruling it out. I can't account for this; I'm sure there's deep psychological reasons why that should be the case, but I don't think it's particularly unusual. I think lots of composers find that that's the way they work. Alexander Goehr said something along those lines at some stage about his work which I immediately found rang very true for me as well – not that my music is at all like his. But it did seem to me a way, as I say, of allowing a piece to include a great deal of contrast within it and being able to pack into it perhaps a greater density of musical incident and material than a lot of contemporary music has – by reverting to this idea of juggling with, as you say, two or more different kinds of music. And to do that in a solo piece, like I did in *Sea/Air* [clarinet, 1985] and *In Two Minds* [oboe, 1991] as you mentioned, is intriguing in itself and not as easy, obviously, as doing it with orchestral forces. But yes, that seems to be one thread that is fairly constant.

NJ: *No doubt one can trace this idea back to Stravinsky, through Tippett ...*

AP: Well sure, and right back to Haydn and Beethoven as well. As I say, it is an archetypal kind of thing, but it depends on what you do with it.

NJ: *You also make reference, in some of your programme notes, to 'first' and 'second' subjects ...*

AP: Yes, but that's a kind of useful shorthand that everyone understands. It's not necessarily that they're functioning in a way that they would in Haydn or Beethoven, or even in Tippett or Stravinsky. In my First Symphony [1994–6], the first movement consists of, in fact, three different kinds of music, but predominantly two, and one of those two becomes the substance of the second movement, which is a big scherzo; the other one becomes the substance of the third movement, which is a lyrical slow movement; and the third one, which is a kind of chiming refrain that occurs in the first movement, emerges in the finale as an important thing and the finale attempts to synthesize the two different kinds of music that were laid out in very clear blocks in the first movement and attempts to pull them together into a whole by the

end. I say 'attempts' because I don't think it does it entirely successfully. Writing finales is difficult, and in any case rather better composers than me have found that a problem...! But it seemed to me that since I found myself writing a symphony – which was not actually what I set out to do, but that's what it became – it was necessary to confront this question of what a finale could be. And that was one attempt at that. In the Second Symphony [1999] it works very differently, because that's a piece that plays continuously and the final section doesn't have the same function as the finale in the First Symphony, although it returns to the opening material but from a quite different route.

NJ: *That happens a lot in your music – a sense of recapitulation.*

AP: Yes, it goes back to this sonata idea, I suppose, and probably a frustration with a lot of music which is one-dimensional and formally open-ended – which can be brilliant and successful in many composers' hands, but it didn't seem the thing that I was ever going to be able to do very well.

NJ: *Perhaps you could say a few words about how you go about tackling a new work. Obviously, this changes from one piece to the next, but is there a general, common approach?*

AP: Sometimes pieces start with a very big, general, often not specifically musical, idea or ideas; and it's a question of refining it down and gathering in the material to the point that you get to know it well enough to actually start writing the notes. And that is something that happens towards the end of the process, as it were. And that's very often the way. But sometimes it goes the other way and you start with a clearly-formed musical idea, but not necessarily a very clearly-formed idea about how that idea's going to work itself into a big piece. But generally speaking, most of the pieces seem to work in the first way – and quite a lot of the instrumental pieces, even, which are not involved with a text explicitly; somewhere in the background of all of them is either a visual or literary or an extra-musical stimulus at any rate. And I think all of these stimuli have, to me, very obvious musical equivalents, either as process or structure, or as imagery that triggers specific musical sounds and ideas – or ideally both.

NJ: *Wasn't Terrain written as a response to where you previously lived?*

AP: I had lived there [Michaelchurch, Escley, Herefordshire, 1984–97] for about ten years before I wrote that piece. *Terrain* [1992] is a piece that deals with both the cycle of the seasons and a kind of slow panning around 360 degrees of a landscape view, which in fact was the landscape I could see from where I was living at that time, which was a landscape of huge contrasts with, on the one side, the Welsh border and the escarpment of the Black Mountains, and on the other side, the Golden Valley and the view across England to the Malvern Hills on the other horizon. So it was to do with horizons, perspectives, changes of light, changes of weather, the cycle of the seasons, and that was more than enough for the structure of one piece!

NJ: *How does the shape of the landscape translate into musical terms?*

AP: It affects the form. The music which relates to the Black Mountains landscape was associated with winter and is a music of mass. It's largely vertical and harmonic, whereas in the music of the Golden Valley section, which is summer, the orchestra is

broken down into a number of little ensembles and it's more a music of line and detail, which does reflect the nature of that landscape, which is a much more detailed patchwork of fields, woods, etc., as opposed to this monolithic escarpment of the Black Mountains on the other side.

NJ: *Have you ever worked with any compositional 'systems', such as serialism, for instance?*

AP: Yes, and I still do to some degree. I very often worked with proportions of time which are quite strictly organized, often on a mathematical basis – Fibonacci series, modular blocks, and that sort of thing – applied mainly to the architecture of the piece rather than to the actual details of intervallic working, which I know some composers do. But, having said that, virtually all the pieces, whether they're abstract pieces or not, are very tightly motivically composed with a number of cells which work in the harmony and in the lines. So I do work with systems, but increasingly I find that those are cropping up almost unconsciously because eventually you get familiar with the material you're using and you find that these things are inherent in the music rather than having to be imposed to start with. And they quite often turn out that way. I'm not by instinct a constructivist kind of composer. But certainly earlier on I did find it very useful as a way of getting things going to use those kinds of methods. But they are not really important to the meaning or the effect of the music, and certainly nobody listening to the piece needs to know any of that. And I don't, in any way, now use any kind of serial technique, although the various techniques I use for generating and controlling harmony are not that different from the kind of techniques that a lot of post-serial composers use. I think the thinking and the rationale of serial music has affected all of us, obviously, and that's still present at some level, but it's not twelve-note music and never has been.

NJ: *So how many notes do you work with?*

AP: Sometimes there are less than twelve, sometimes there are more; many of the recent pieces are basically octatonic. I often play around with sets and patterns at the start of a piece to get things in motion; sometimes they are used quite rigorously throughout the piece. And rather like scaffolding on a building, they just fall away in that formalistic way and the material takes on its own life.

NJ: *So these sets generate harmony as well as lines?*

AP: Yes, in fact much as in Schoenberg or Stravinsky for example. But I think that one of the things I learnt quite early on, and I guess from Boulanger as much as anybody, was the need to have a real, functioning harmonic rhythm in pieces, to be able to control the speed at which things were happening and to be able to achieve a sense of movement and speed in music. A lot of contemporary music has a sense of speed and movement about it, but it is very often movement on the surface above what is actually a very static deeper level. And that always struck me as being exciting but essentially limited, so I've tried to rediscover – and this goes back to all that music at the turn of the 20th century that we were talking about earlier – ways of creating real harmonic movement, tension and variety of harmonic rhythm, which to me gives music much of its depth and meaning. Harmonic rhythm was not something that serialism could ever do well, and a lot of minimalism doesn't do it well either.

NJ: *Could you say a few words on the role of tonality, or tonal properties in your work. It does surface from time to time – the ‘time pieces’ in The Memory Room, the D major coda in the Double Sonata [1993], the A major ‘cadence’ at the end of Fast Colours [1997] ...*

AP: You’re right; it often occurs on the surface of the music and this is part of this kind of inclusive approach I have to harmonic material that can be anything from the explicitly tonal to the densely chromatic ‘atonal’, via all sorts of modal modulators between those two extremes. But almost all the pieces, right back to *Another Part of the Island*, have an underpinning of a tonal structure and it works a little bit like a Schenker analysis in reverse: I often start with a very simple tonal outline for a piece and from that build forward towards the surface which is rarely overtly tonal but occasionally offers clear glimpses into that background. So the idea is that there should be a tension – an interesting musical tension – between the surface activity of the piece and the motivic interplay, which is rarely explicitly tonal, and the deeper background which is often very simply tonal, often using cycles of fifths and things like that. For instance, *Another Part of the Island* is, if you like, ‘in F major’ and ends in a slightly modally-inflected F major, but all the preparation for that arrival at F starts right at the beginning of the piece, which is actually a harmonic field based on an added dominant chord on C. So there is a very simple tonal movement from a dominant to a tonic over the 25 minutes of the piece, via all sorts of different, as it were, modulations, as you would expect.

NJ: *Does tonality, therefore, have a viability for today’s composers?*

AP: Absolutely; but not necessarily the straightforward functions of tonal harmony as they used to be. But the strength of tonality as an undeniable acoustic truth in music is still there. And it’s very useful when writing pieces, as I’ve done from time to time, say, for children or amateurs, where – especially in vocal works – it is inappropriate to write complex atonal music. I think that you need to find a way in which you can honestly and comfortably reintegrate tonal music into the vocabulary and this was definitely part of the project.

NJ: *I suppose this brings us naturally to the role – the central role, it seems to me – of ‘tradition’ in your compositional thinking. By tradition I mean the use of tonal properties; the use of sonata form; a penchant for counterpoint; the use of generic titles; the challenge of absolute music, especially architectonic frameworks; ‘the friendly ghosts of the symphonic tradition’. All of this seems to point towards a kind of ‘classical’ rationale. But, as we’ve already discussed, extra-musical influences also play a large part in your works: landscapes, seasons, poetry ...*

AP: I don’t know if you could call me a ‘classical’ or ‘romantic’ composer, or any other kind. I guess almost everything I’ve said has suggested that I want to have the best of every possible world, to have my cake and eat it – which I do! And it’s not necessarily the easiest route to take. But there’s so much music of so many different kinds that I love that it seemed to me to be unnecessarily restrictive just to occupy one part of the forest, as it were, and I want to range freely over all the possibilities that there are for me. But you’re quite right, there is, and there has to be, a classicizing restraint on the ideas, which I am happy to work to. I don’t feel it myself to be anything to do with neoclassicism or neo-anything: it’s an attempt to take stock of the things which are valuable to me from the music I love and to take them forward in what I hope is a slightly new and different way.

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