

## Case Study

PARAM VIR



### Dye the mind in colour

#### I. HAVE A FABULOUS IDEA! THEN ZOOM IN!

Ideas for music arise from the world in which we live, from our lives. It is important to start with a really good idea. Maybe, hopefully, a stunning idea! The initial impulse can be a story, a work of visual art, a political happening, perhaps just a feeling about someone, or something, special or unusual, or it could be a pure sound captured in a fleeting sonic imprint. That first impulse must have the potential to generate deep feeling, or the work will be lacking in energy. Many unsuccessful works started their lives as dull ideas. Are we awake as composers, responding consciously to life around us? Is there a necessity to compose this piece of music? Why do we want to write it? Does it truly move us, excite us? If we are bored by it, we can be sure our audience will be, too. So we must ensure a good idea, something that is compelling and extraordinary.

I would like to share a personal experience. When I was 16, in my last year of high school in Delhi, I heard about the Czechoslovak revolution against Soviet repression. The Czechs hoped for political freedom from Russian control and the typical Russian response was to suppress this brutally and send in tanks to crush them. I was hugely upset by this as a teenager, and even more dismayed that the then Indian Prime Minister refused to side with the Czechs in the United Nations debate. I wrote a critical article for the newspaper (published the very next day!), and soon an idea for a new opera sprouted in my mind, an opera in which this sort of resistance to authoritarian rule would form an important theme. That opera has yet to be written, but the experience of the Czech revolution has remained vibrant and will certainly form the backdrop for my next large-scale work of music-theatre. I have been thinking about it's sound world for many years now. When I write it, I hope it will be as compelling and urgent as when I first experienced the news of the Czechoslovakian revolution in 1968.

With my work 'The Theatre of Magical Beings', written for Birmingham Contemporary Music Group, the source of inspiration was mythological, rather than political. I wanted to connect with four imaginary non-human creatures, from different world traditions, and to visualise what sound impulses arose from encountering these creatures (Garuda, Uroborus, Elephant and The Simurgh) in an inner space, a theatrical space within my own mind. I wanted the creatures to talk to me through their sound, through sonic phenomena in a highly dramatic personal encounter. Thus arose the aural images for the work.

Both of these two examples contain extra-musical sources of inspiration. That is usually how it works for me. But sometimes one can get an image directly: wake up one morning and hear a viola da gamba playing in one's inner ear, loud, insistent, clear. Then one just goes to one's studio and takes aural dictation, puts it down on paper! I wrote my gamba piece 'Tender Light' in this way.

What form do the musical ideas take? Usually I start with a bird's eye view of the piece. But I know from experience that once the picture has developed sufficient form and shape, one must zoom in, get inside the picture, for amazing new sound objects that present themselves - not always apparent in a large overall view.

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There is an interesting stage when one must leave the stratospheric bird's eye view and get down to the detail, to the surface of the music itself. This is scary, exciting and produces many surprises. This introduces the domain of technique where specific methods and procedures are utilized to make ideas (internal notions) become embodied (hence externalized).

Ideas come from the world we live in, and from the quality of our contact with it. Music arises from meeting life, and is an expression of that meeting point. Is the music immediate and emotive? Is it remote and cerebral? Does it contain brilliant line and colour or is it drab, featureless and grey? Does it have vibrant physical energy? Or is it, alas, rather boring? Is there enchantment? Sometimes we forget what music is for! Music isn't there to satisfy the music theory pundits who undertake mind-boggling analysis... Music is there to enchant and delight. That's quite simple! It must reveal! The basis of Indian classical music is the Raga - and Raga means 'that which dyes the mind in colour'. What a marvellous notion! If music cannot do that, then all that technique and cleverness amount to little. But if the music can truly contain a vibrant, extraordinary sound-image, if it can 'dye the mind in colour', then good technique is a trusted ally.

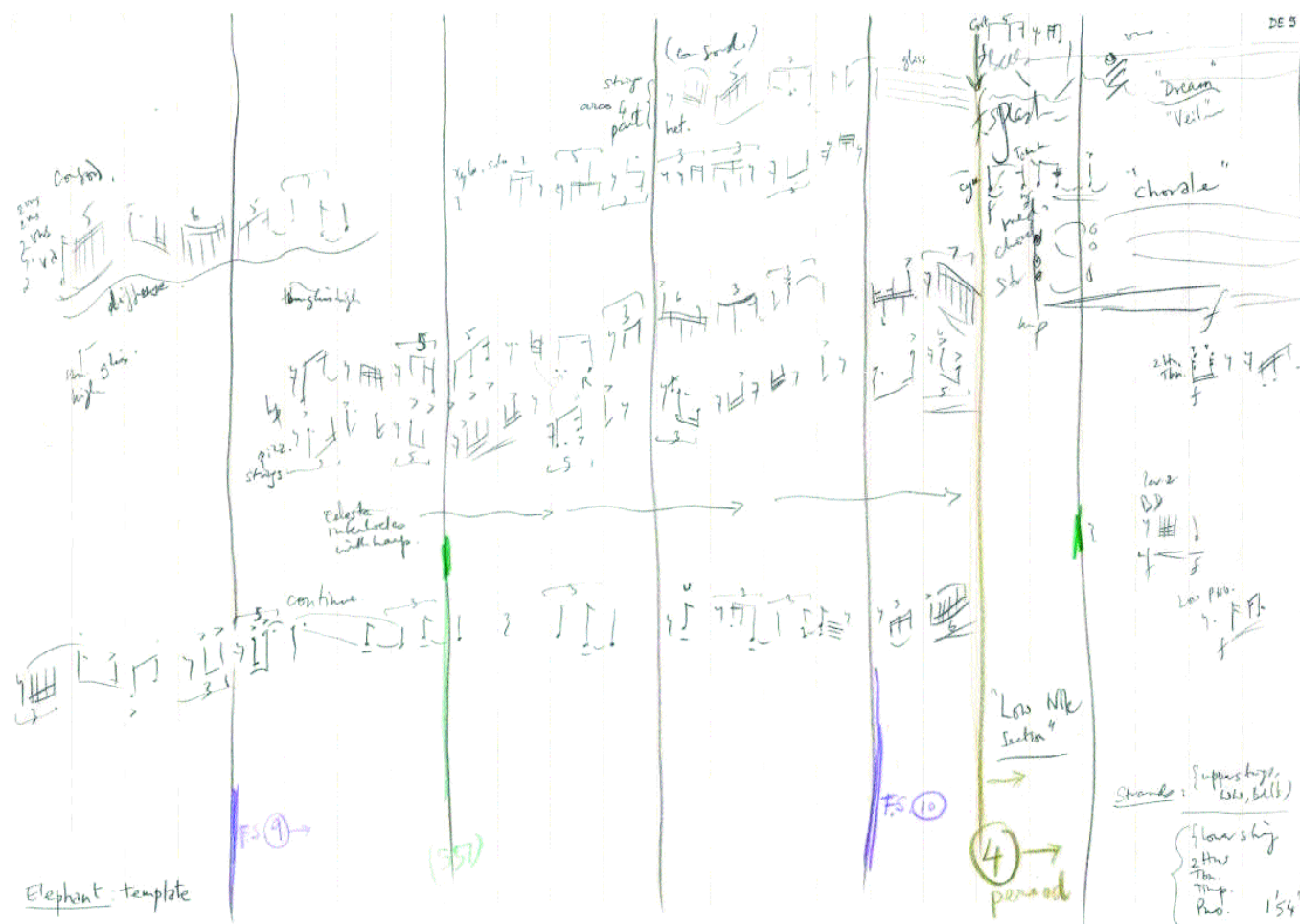
#### Ex. 1 A page from the Elephant Energy Template



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The energy-template leads to great security in the overall design, pacing and shape of the work. This leads necessarily to the next stage - a 'rhythmic template' (see Ex. 2), where I zoom into the large-scale picture and create detailed rhythmic definition, including strands of counterpoint and texture paced out rhythmically in exact bar-lengths. I now know roughly what the final score will look like, how many bars and at what speeds, and with what level of textural activity in each part of the work.

### Ex. 2 A page from the Elephant Rhythmic Template



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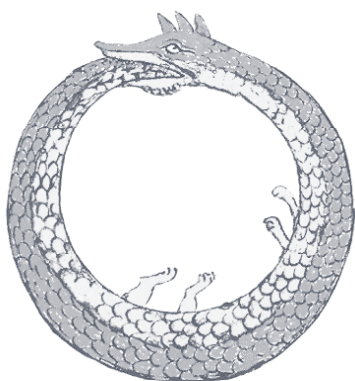


The third stage is to work at the piano and find the notes, pitches, harmonies that embody the piece, flesh out that template in real pitches. This is the pitch-zoom-in! In the fourth and final stage I put this all together and produce a detailed full-score that marries the rhythmic and textural template with the pitches and harmonies. Finer details are placed at this stage - we have left the stratosphere. We are now at ground level, and all the nitty-gritty of articulation, dynamics and phrasing absorb our attention. The work has become manifest!

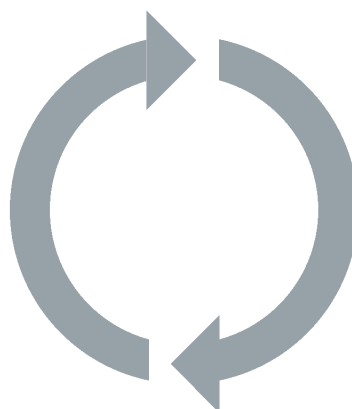
There are many mysteries in the creative process. One may well ask: how do the extra-musical ideas with which one started become musical ideas? There isn't any formula. I believe one attunes to the basic energy for the idea emotionally, and then by some magical process of transformation that becomes something musical. This is a miracle, a gift of our unconscious mind, that realm where thoughts and feelings are translated into artistic images. All one can do is prepare oneself to be open to receive this gift: to sit in the empty space, empty even of expectation. The best musical ideas come naturally, rather than being something one had to slave over. Sometimes they may well carry an additional gift - a technical or structural idea, embedded within it, that could help to achieve the required focus.

Structure is integral to the music, not something separate from it. How does it arise? How does it relate to the extra-musical ideas behind a piece of music? It's part of the same mystery of transformation of energy. When I was thinking of Uroborus, the 2nd movement of 'The Theatre of Magical Beings', at the outset I only had a visual and intellectual image of a serpent that eats its own tail (see Ex. 3), signifying renewal, wholeness and infinity. As I considered this shape, I saw the circle forming as two semi-circles, one going down and one going up (see Ex. 4).

Ex. 3 A drawing of the Uroborus



Ex. 4



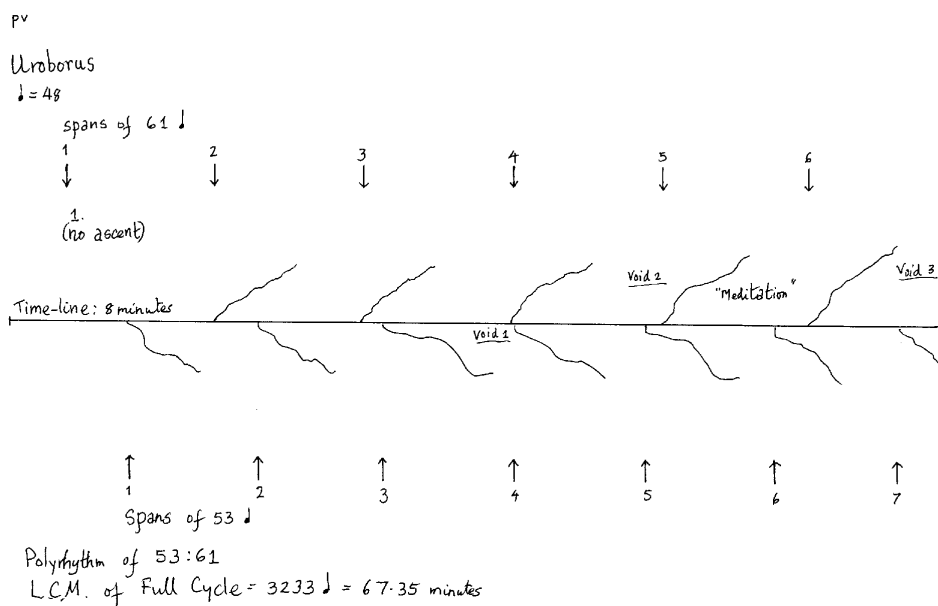
This then led me to visualise a magical empty space, in which the main temporal scaffolding would be a polyrhythm of 6 against seven, 6 rising string glissandi every 76 seconds against 7 descending string glissandi every 66 seconds. They would not coincide and would help produce a space that was constantly reaching into itself, stretching the fabric outwards to maintain the emptiness within, where other meditations could take place.

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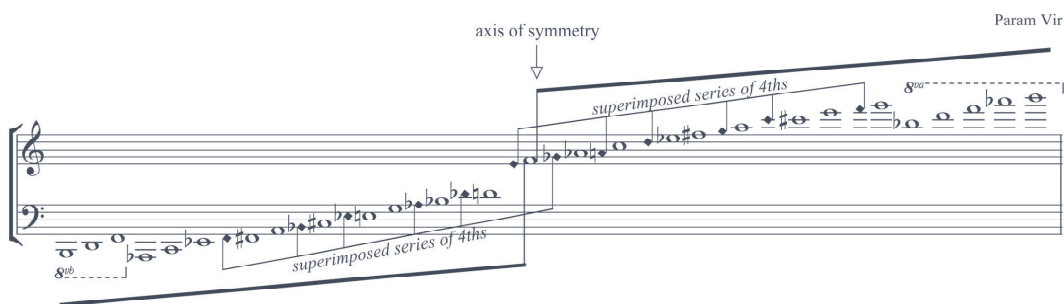


#### Ex. 5



This was the most stratospheric bird's eye view of the movement (see Ex.5). As I got closer to it, many details began to appear, ideas for the meditations within this empty space. I then created a pitch structure, analogous to the rhythmic space - and this was in the form of a 39-note harmonic field, completely symmetrical from low to high notes around a central axis.

#### Ex. 6 Harmonic Field for 'Uroborus'



N.B. The basic 27-note field made up of major and minor 3rds (semibreves) is enriched by the superimposition of two interlocked 6-note series of perfect 4ths (diamond shaped notes in order to produce an enriched harmonic field. All notes of UROBOROUS are taken from these 39 fixed note positions. The entire field is completely symmetrical around the central axis of F.

All the notes of the work lie only on this pitch field, thus it served as a pitch-regulatory engine for the melodic and harmonic content. The harmonic field allowed different harmonies, embedded within it as possibilities, to be drawn out and emphasised at different points in the composition. Against this pitch scaffolding the constant glissandi created a sense of infinite cavernous space - my very intention. When people heard this work in concert they sometimes commented that the glissandi sounded like slithering serpents, though this illustrative intent had never been there in my head!

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#### II. VIBRANT EMPTY SPACE

I like to invent a work away from the piano, sitting either at my desk or in my easy chair. Or sometimes by the sea. A peaceful garden will do! I want an empty space. It's good to meditate, to become quiet, to get away from the constant buzz and noise of daily life. That's when an idea pops in! And further ideas! A sequence of them! Then the piece begins to begin to have a life. That empty space... That's where I think about the shape of the work, what sort of sounds it will contain, what sort of ideas will go into it, what will inspire it, and how the work will develop from the basic ideas. At this stage I really don't want the piano sonority to influence my mind, or confuse my ear (unless it is a work for solo piano). I want a 'blank slate' (tabula rasa) on which to visualise the music, to have limitless possibilities, not to be restricted by how my fingers wander on the keys of the instrument, creatures of long habit (sometimes rather bad habits!) and learnt repertoire. A composer's mind should be capable of roaming freely over sonic landscape.

For the same reason, it bears pointing out that I rarely compose music at the computer. As with the piano, I don't want my mind limited by music software (don't believe all that hype about notation software, you don't need it to create wonderful music) and the dimensions of a 19-inch computer screen. I want a much larger canvas! And to hear instrumental sounds as they are imagined, with the memory and knowledge of acoustic instruments, rather than synthetic and degraded approximations of them. I would adopt the tabula rasa approach even for electronic music - imagine the basic ideas away from the computer initially, before I mess about with them. Whilst there will always be exceptions to this - these are basic rules of thumb and work for me.

Once one has defined the basic sound world that one is creating, once one is satisfied that there is a strong overall shape, one can then test everything at the piano in terms of pitch. Pitch and harmonic formations are very primary to the way we appreciate and listen to music (don't we all love good melodies?). We must therefore be at great pains to make the best pitch choices. Every melody, harmony and counterpoint should have been heard, and tested aurally. However the whole nature of this enterprise assumes a unique quality, as these pitch choices are now serving a larger design that has been thought through away from the piano. This is what makes a composer so much more than a mere tune-spinner! A composer is the architect or the sculptor of sound.

#### III. TECHNIQUE AND JUDGEMENT

Here is a simple test for the validity of an idea. I ask myself - does it have ENERGY? Music is pure energy in sound. I prefer to feel this energy, to sense it in my whole body. Then it is an embodied idea, not just one that sits on paper or in my head. If I cannot feel the idea, then it is not ready yet to be manifest, indeed may be spurious goods, or just plain dull. When there is real energy, we will know! We will never get bored or run aground. There are exciting things one learns as one goes through with an interesting and engaging idea. If one doesn't have the technique to realise the music, one finds what one needs very quickly. Many composers were self-taught - they learnt what they needed to learn in the saddle.

But technique can certainly be taught, and a good teacher can empower a student to explore many different ways of organising sound. There are diverse procedures that can be used to achieve specific sonic results, whether in the realm of melody, harmony or rhythm. I learnt different things from different teachers. The most important thing



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to learn in this regard is when to use what technical procedure and to understand how it affects the sound of the music. Every technique, in a way, is a kind of controlled regulation of musical space. What does each such control achieve and how does that serve the music? (For example, the 12-tone row is a way of regulating pitch to produce certain types of motivic/thematic or cellular connections.) These are important questions, for the inappropriate application of an abstract technical procedure will not serve our sonic idea. This is part of the adventure of discovering how the structure can illuminate the surface and emotional intent of a work at a profound level. The rhythmic technique I used in *Uroborus* was consciously chosen to produce a very different kind of time-flow, a kind of energised stasis that manifested itself for the first time in my work and opened new directions for the future.

Some composers like to set themselves 'challenges', to solve a problem in a piece of music they are writing. That sometimes works well, but I generally prefer not to make music-creation into a problem-solving venture! I think creation is about discovery, rather than about problem solving. It's a difference in emphasis.

#### IV. GOOD KARMA

Regular work, every day, to a set schedule, works miracles and accumulates merit! Musical ideas then begin to flow on tap, as the mind gets accustomed to regular concentration at set hours in a familiar space. The composing studio gets a charge of energy.

I used to get stuck, ages ago. When I look back at that time, I see that those were occasions when my initial idea was not strong enough, or unclear, or perhaps I didn't have enough emotional commitment to it. If the blockage was major, then I would have needed to go right back to the first ideas, and perhaps re-start with something more clearly defined. And I certainly did so, on more than one occasion. This is an issue most composers face at one time or another: when creativity runs dry, when a work stops dead in its tracks. The key can often be found in rethinking the formal aspect of the work, thinking through its overall direction afresh. The plan may be crying out for new ideas. If the plan is secure, and one is still stuck, the best remedy is to drop the composing of that section, and do something else. This can unblock the mind, and produce a new insight within hours, maybe within minutes. The solution often lies outside the problem, and comes from another vantage point. We all know this puzzle, which I often use with students:

**Ex. 7** Join the following 9 points with just 4 straight and connected lines, without passing through any point more than once. (For the solution, see the end of this essay.)





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Another way to ventilate the mind (and lungs!) is to go for a walk. If you don't have the countryside or seafront handy, walk around the neighbourhood on quieter roads.

As composers, what should we aim for? I would suggest the goal is boundless creative energy, the ability to create music out of anything that engages oneself! A large store of ideas, multiple projects queuing up on back burners! One should be able to pluck musical ideas out of thin air, effortlessly. Through being true to oneself, it is possible, in time, to achieve this degree of creative stamina and enjoyment thereof.

And so, I would say that the best advice anyone can ever give to others is to be true to themselves. For a composer this must translate into being true to one's inner ear, to listen to the sounds in one's inner ear. The ear will always guide us right, and part of the training to be a composer is to learn to do just that, and refine what one hears in one's inner ear. Music doesn't come from 'rules' – rather rules are abstracted from the actual practice of composers. Music arises from sounds within. By trusting our ears rather than some intellectual notion of how music should be made, we trust a natural process. That has the potential for wisdom far deeper than what can be determined through a purely mental process. Now isn't that good karma?

[Solution to Ex. 7 puzzle: As can be seen, the answer lies outside the contained geometrical space of the 9 points, and the 4 straight lines have to be extended beyond the points to achieve the required result.]

