

### Jonathan Harvey and Spectralism as “Spiritual Breakthrough”

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### Abstract and Keywords

This chapter explores Jonathan Harvey’s understanding of spectralism as enabling him to connect his spiritual concerns with technical developments in electro-acoustics. After his early contacts with the thinking of Milton Babbitt and Karlheinz Stockhausen, Harvey was instinctively drawn to retain aspects of traditional techniques and approaches to sound alongside the new possibilities emerging from electronic and digital technologies. Nor did the evolution of a particular interest in Buddhism require the exclusion of Christian or more secular associations. Rather, he relished the multivalence and ambiguity that he believed to be the essential quality of art in his time. The “spiritual breakthrough” that spectralism represented for him was also a technical breakthrough facilitating an approach to harmony and form that has been called “spectral tonality.”

Keywords: Jonathan Harvey, spectralism, spiritual breakthrough, electro-acoustics, spectral tonality

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Writing about one composer’s life and work from the primary perspective of a technical process or specific historical period presents the familiar challenges of balancing the particular, the personal, against the comprehensive and collective. Given that Jonathan Harvey (1939–2012) was already 50 in 1989, “the year that definitively instituted the idea of *spectral music* and the ambiguity over what it meant,”<sup>1</sup> it can be anticipated that his musical development is likely to have involved intense engagement with initiatives in pre-spectral modernism by composers as diverse as Webern, Messiaen, Babbitt, Stockhausen, and Maxwell Davies; the kind of engagement unlikely to be entirely erased in later years by the innovations emerging from IRCAM and also from the composers conventionally regarded as spectralism’s initiators after 1980.

As a 20-year old British music student in 1960, Harvey was particularly sensitive to essential differences in style between such prominent and successful British-born composers in their 40s and 50s as Benjamin Britten, Michael Tippett, and William Walton and the likes of Alexander Goehr, Harrison Birtwistle, and Peter Maxwell Davies—still under thirty, and writing music which seemed much more progressive and less narrowly “English.” By the mid-1980s those close British contemporaries of Harvey were reinforcing

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their predominance, and Birtwistle had emerged as the most formidable exponent of a brand of later modernism that was beginning to dig down deeply into aspects of Englishness that had no truck with nostalgia and was equally resistant to such contemporary alternatives as minimalism or experimentalism—alternatives explored mainly by composers born during and after the 1940s.<sup>2</sup> By 1980, it was obvious that Goehr, Maxwell Davies, and Birtwistle—though each had had contact with Britten at Aldeburgh during the 1960s—owed little or nothing to that composer’s style: but his example, in professional technical finesse, in writing genuinely fresh music for young performers, and in regarding Mahler as a major source of inspiration, was far from irrelevant to his more radical juniors. Harvey, whom Britten informally advised in his early years, benefitted practically from that advice in the short term:<sup>3</sup> and in the much longer term he developed penetrating perspectives on musical features and compositional practices which can be aligned with spectralism but also reflect Britten’s supremely flexible view of tonality.

This view no more implied a return to diatonic traditions than twelve-tone technique necessarily required the exclusion of all tonal implications. Composers of Harvey’s generation were well aware of the judgement (expressed most intransigently by Pierre Boulez in 1952) that Schoenberg had failed to respond with sufficient imagination and resource to the progressive initiatives he himself had been involved in pioneering between about 1908 and 1920, before the codification of the twelve-tone method.<sup>4</sup> From Boulez’s essentially avant-garde perspective, the weight of admired traditions had dragged Schoenberg into the futile attempt to blend post-tonal, twelve-tone techniques with forms and textures heavily dependent on those of the baroque and classical pasts. But by the 1980s, as various interviews and lectures show, Boulez himself would take a quite different attitude to the idea of how a composition could actually communicate to a listener.<sup>5</sup> And well before that, in the remarkably diverse compositional world around 1960, the would-be purism of an atonality-embracing avant-garde found itself challenged by the continued vitality of a “mainstream” that took strength from enhanced awareness of the potential remaining in a line of development that linked Mahler to Berg and, in the process, found new possibilities for expressionistic intensity that could allude to both serial and tonal ways of thinking.

With an emphasis on confrontation and interaction rather than some idealized kind of classical synthesis, much music composed during the second half of the twentieth century embodied such post-tonal modernism. One result of this has been the twenty-first century possibility of seeing the Schoenbergian “failure” as a striking and far-from unsuccessful attempt to realize his constructive ideal of an atonality-rejecting pantonality.<sup>6</sup> It is from within this complex of post-tonal ideas and initiatives that the concept of spectralism, or “frequential harmony,” seems to have emerged, and prospered. And its essential character is clearly indicated in Gérard Grisey’s early note in his journal to the effect that “for me atonality is non-existent. From the moment when two different notes ring out one after the other or simultaneously, a relation is established. All music possesses one or several tonal centres, veritable poles of attraction.”<sup>7</sup>

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Harvey was brought close to this post-Schoenbergian ethos at an early stage. With the advice of Benjamin Britten he began to study as a teenager with Erwin Stein, the Schoenberg pupil who worked for Britten’s London publishers, Boosey & Hawkes. After Stein’s death in 1958, Harvey had contact with Hans Keller, not a Schoenberg pupil but a perceptive advocate and commentator on a composer he once memorably characterised as “musical history’s most tragic figure—its most uncompromising clarifier and its leading confuser at the same time.”<sup>8</sup> Keller’s special eloquence in expounding the masterworks of the German string quartet tradition added to the difficulties faced by anyone in his orbit who attempted to defend the 1950s avant-garde as the perfect model for legitimate atonal composition. Around 1960, when Harvey was embarking on doctoral research in musicology, he certainly did not turn his back on classical traditions of the kind that Keller placed at the centre of his teaching practice.<sup>9</sup> If anything, it was stimulating to acknowledge the force-field created by the opposing poles of classical organicism in Haydn and Mozart and the comprehensive post-tonal systematics being explored by Babbitt, Stockhausen, and Maxwell Davies. And that force-field was soon complemented by another, between the long-established sonorities of traditional voices and instruments and the new sonic possibilities emerging in electronic studios. In this context, the particular appeal of Stockhausen’s pioneering work for Harvey is understandable—and that appeal was greatly enhanced by the value Harvey attached to Stockhausen’s spiritual concerns. The consequent linkage was neatly summarized later on by Harvey in his bold declaration that while electronic music was a “technological breakthrough,” spectralism was a “spiritual breakthrough.”<sup>10</sup> Harvey’s longstanding concern to focus on spiritual states in his music was reinforced by the connections he explored between such states and the musical qualities he himself defined as spectral—something that always involved the character and color of sounds, not just their “frequential” identity as vibrations in space and time.

## The one and the many

One of Harvey’s most detailed descriptions of the association between tone color and spectral thinking came in a publication connected with his opera *Wagner Dream* (2006):

Timbre is a very important dimension for contemporary music, especially significant for electronic composers such as myself who work intensively with spectrum concepts. The spectrum is the natural harmonic series or its distortions, and we can either put it into an orchestra or have it on a computer and manipulate it. Imagine at first there is an object, an *objet sonore*, just one thing, a note with a specific brightness, a fundamental with partials; if it’s the normal harmonic series, the natural series. Then, perhaps, the composer makes one of the upper partials go into vibrato, or slide off pitch, or do a glissando, or change in some other way; it becomes evident that this object consists of parts, many parts; the one contains the many. Finally, the errant partial will perhaps slot back into its place and become merged back into just one “note with its brightness”: a game of hide and seek, backwards and forwards into the spectrum, and into polyphony; back into colour and again into intervallicism. This kind of to-and-fro motion is very common

in contemporary music: “fusion” and “fission” are the terms generally adopted to describe it.<sup>11</sup>

In another context, Harvey observed that “the process of moving in and out of different timbres, hearing them from different directions and with different combinations of partials emphasized, is both enjoyable and spiritually enlightening in that it awakens our awareness of the insubstantiality of phenomena that we take to be coherent identities.”<sup>12</sup> Such comments about the special nature of timbre in an age of spectralism and electro-acoustics were the fruit of many years of thinking and practicing, of imagining and envisioning. In his early years Harvey wrote several pieces involving tape, starting with the Babbitt-inspired *Time-Points* (1970) for tape only, and progressing to a pair of scores with unambiguous spiritual connotations: *Inner Light 2* (1977) for voices, instruments, and tape, and *Smiling Immortal* (also 1977) for eleven instruments and tape. Meanwhile, in 1976—well before spectralism emerged as a compositional concept—he had provided what Liam Cagney calls “the first discussion of Grisey’s music in English,” reviewing the première of *Vagues, Chemins, le Souffle* at the ISCM Festival: “Harvey and Grisey first met on this occasion.”<sup>13</sup> In 1980 he made his first visit to IRCAM, producing *Mortuos Plango, Vivos Voco* for computer-manipulated concrete sounds. The materials combined recordings of the great bell at Winchester Cathedral with the voice of his chorister son, and Harvey might well have had in mind his comment about Stockhausen’s *Telemusik* (1966)—that “the development of the sacred bells is perhaps the most musically significant element.”<sup>14</sup> These emphases help to explain why Harvey’s short article, called “Spectralism” was preceded by another called “The Metaphysics of Live Electronics,”<sup>15</sup> both initiatives mattering to him primarily because they facilitated and enhanced his concern to deal with spirituality in music quite different from Stockhausen’s. Other attributes of Stockhausen’s exploratory attitude to musical materials, like the breathing sounds and rhythms in *Hymnen* and the use of sacred names in *Stimmung*, also find echoes in Harvey’s later work.

In his book about Stockhausen, written and published while work on the *Inner Light* trilogy was proceeding, Harvey engaged in a particularly provocative attempt to explore Stockhausen’s ideas about serializing rhythm in terms of classical, tonal hierarchies. He also noted harmonic features in *Stimmung* (1968) and *Mantra* (1971) which are notable for their anticipation of what are now seen as “spectral” qualities. *Stimmung*, he says, “is based on the harmonic series. The lower harmonics (except the fundamental) are sung by the voices as main pitches ... but they must train themselves to produce exactly certain spectra on their main pitches, scored in their parts as vowel sounds.”<sup>16</sup> With *Mantra* he also refers to “an interesting attempt to bring back the hierarchisation of tonality,” which even involves emphasizing “a very clear background tonic of A, which is much clearer than any other tonic except E flat.”<sup>17</sup> But it is in one of his compositions from 1977—the String Quartet No. 1—which does not involve electronics, that Harvey’s increasing interest in color-composition by way of the exploration of harmonic spectra can be heard in a very immediate way.

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Here composing with color-change more directly than with pitch-change has the effect of suggesting a strategy of enriching and gradually moving away from and back to a center which would remain a fundamental feature of Harvey’s musical language in the years ahead. This music can be thought of as a celebration in sound of Rudolf Steiner’s spectrally-perceptive suggestion that “the future development of music will ... involve a recognition of the special character of the individual tone.”<sup>18</sup> Harvey’s concern with that “special character” in his quartet led him to require in his performance notes with the score that “every open string should be tuned against every other equivalent one in the quartet as a whole until all ‘beats’ have disappeared”: and the single-movement piece as a whole, lasting some fifteen minutes, is organized in such a way that material without specifically notated color effects (for example, the unison melody between bars 15 and 20) is very much the exception. On the very first page, the first violin is instructed to “touch the harmonic so lightly that the open D fundamental begins to sound. Attempt to make both sound together, accepting whatever rhythmic alternations may occur”; meanwhile the cello plays D about middle C very near the bridge, so that “only harmonics [are] audible,” and moves from this to bring out “strong harmonics over [the] fundamental.”<sup>19</sup>

The mid-1970s, when Harvey’s first quartet was written, was a time of great significance in the reinforcement of later twentieth-century modernist pluralism, a time when the emergence of minimalism alongside the establishment of IRCAM and Boulez’s own rethinking of the nature of harmony (affected in part, according to his own account, by the experience of conducting Wagner at Bayreuth)<sup>20</sup> were less dissonant with early spectral initiatives than might once have seemed to be the case. As for Harvey, after his initial phase of work at IRCAM in 1980, he returned to the first quartet’s kind of purely instrumental color-composing. Indeed, *Curve with Plateaux* for solo cello (1982)—an instrument on which Harvey himself was a skilled performer—can be seen as an encapsulation and refinement of the quartet’s D-centred timbral processes. From the beginning of this arch-like form the D-rooted melody is inflected by microtones, harmonics, different kinds of bow stroke, and quadruple-stopped glissandi, moving from *sul ponticello* to *sul tasto*, in which sounds turns towards noise. As the cello line returns to the low D at the end the coloring of single pitches becomes more salient than the melodic grouping of inflected pitches, a kind of *ne plus ultra* for Harvey. However, the major work which Harvey completed in 1982—the fifty-minute *Bhakti* for chamber ensemble and quadraphonic tape—is not only longer but much more ambitious in its aspiration to respond to the Hindu religious connotations of the title—devotion to a god as the path to salvation, and also a form of yoga, suggesting musical states combining the meditative and the celebratory.

Harvey provided a vivid description of how *Bhakti* evolved from a “rigorously combinatorial, intensively serial” pitch structure, owing much to Babbitt, to an electronic “meditation” on one note: “a very low G, the one which lies at the bottom of the piano, and the thousands of partials which are clearly audible above, that are filtered in a way not unlike the way we filter partials when we make vowel sounds in speech”—a pointer to spectralist concepts that would reach fulfilment in the orchestral work *Speakings* (2007–8). The grand sweep of *Bhakti* demanded the greatest possible concluding contrast to the rapt simplicity of the beginning, opening out through elaboration and transformation into rich

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counterpoints and an ending—on a high E<flat>—remote from the initial center of G. That “elaborate three-minute movement of spectral exploration,” as Harvey described it,<sup>21</sup> and which included as contrast brief, explosively dense, non-centred noise-tending clusters on the tape, showed that harmony can be foundational in the absence of melody.

Along with such “spectral exploration,” inversional symmetry remained an important foundational feature of *Bhakti*. The composer’s own commentary, printed in the score, highlights the point that “the musical syntax is symmetrical around a central axis. The ear is unconsciously attracted to hear the harmony not as dissonant over a fundamental bass but as floating free from bass functions and yet rigorously controlled.”<sup>22</sup> This might suggest the Schoenbergian idea of “floating tonality,” especially when linked with Harvey’s striking comment elsewhere that “the bass moves into the center. This is our revolution.”<sup>23</sup> While not in itself entirely convergent with spectralist textures that derive solely from spatial projections of a harmonic series from the bass upwards, such a statement is also at odds with another aspect of contemporary music emerging around 1980, the so-called “new complexity.” Though Harvey would remain as respectful of the work of Brian Ferneyhough<sup>24</sup> as he was of composers closer to his own generation like Peter Maxwell Davies and Harrison Birtwistle, *Bhakti* and the stream of compositions that followed it were powerful evidence of the potential of Harvey’s own particular brand of post-tonal modernism, and of his confidence in deploying it on the largest scale.

## After *Bhakti*

After the breakthrough of *Bhakti* Harvey continued to explore the formal and timbral possibilities of combining live and recorded sound, for example in *Madonna of Winter and Spring* (1986) for orchestra, synthesizers, and electronics, and *Ritual Melodies* (begun in 1985, completed in 1989–90) for quadraphonic tape. At thirty-seven minutes, *Madonna of Winter and Spring* marked a major advance in Harvey’s thinking about the transformation from live/pre-recorded tape interaction to the live-electronic manipulation of sound in real time. As he said in 1999, “electronics has a very important role, not only in the growth of spectralism, which is so revolutionary and crucial in the development of music today, but also in its own right as an extension of timbre, and also of speed, making it possible for music to be faster and slower than ever before.”<sup>25</sup> His own understanding of spectral composition in the later 1980s emerges most strongly in *Ritual Melodies*, which derives all its materials from a single harmonic series.

Created at IRCAM with the assistance of Jan Vandenheede, it “required a revolution in programming” in order to enable “sounds generated artificially by computer” to inter-modulate, establishing individual identities and at the same time to transform themselves into each other. The close connection between sound-colors and non-Western spiritual qualities which fuelled Harvey’s inspiration is especially vivid here as the computer is used to evoke “Indian oboe, Vietnamese koto, Japanese shakuhachi, and Tibetan temple bell,” as well as “Western plainchant” and “Tibetan chant voice.”<sup>26</sup> As for the harmonic spectrum shared by the various melodic strands,

the partials used were six to forty, and those thirty-five partials were the sole content of the melodies. Sometimes they would be transposed up a few harmonics but they would always use the same rungs of the ladder, so to speak, to move around on. That meant that each interval was different, no two intervals are the same in the harmonic series, and it was unified in the way that I have been talking about; although the melodies were full of dotted rhythms and trills and glissandi and so on, they nevertheless belong to a larger whole of which they were fairly obviously a part.<sup>27</sup>

## Towards “Spectral Tonality”

After *Ritual Melodies*, *Advaya* for solo cello (1994) is a particularly powerful demonstration of the complex and sophisticated electronic elements discussed by Harvey in his comments on spectralism. *Advaya*'s spiritual focus also embodies his characteristic avoidance of the melancholic cast of music by contemporary British modernists like Maxwell Davies and Birtwistle, while not rejecting the intensity and explosive energy that goes with an expressionistic tone of voice. The generative core of *Advaya* is, again, a single pitch, the open-string A, which reinforces that sense of “a cogent hierarchy, the natural series as an equivalent of the tonic in tonality,” while no less strongly dramatising the distance between such working, and spectra “that sound less stable and more complex” than traditional, well-tempered diatonicism.<sup>28</sup> In addition, the full description in the score of *Advaya* as for solo cello, electronic keyboard, and electronics, with two players and two or three technicians required apart from the cellist, reflects the crucial advance into live electronics which had transformed the sound-world and performance procedures of many of Harvey's most ambitious compositions by the early 1980s.

As already suggested, in later years Harvey habitually connected the basic compositional element of tone-color with spectralism—“the art of composing with harmonic and inharmonic series, fused conglomerates of sound.” Claiming that “spectralism has effected a fundamental shift: music will never be quite the same again,” he boldly declared that “spectral music is symbiotically allied to electronic music; together they have achieved a rebirth of perception.”<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, at much the same time (1997), and in what is in many ways his most extended and penetrating discussion to be found in print, Harvey said to John Palmer that “I am not a very monolithic composer. For instance, I don't think I could ever write much that is purely spectral, as some French composers do. I would always want to flit in and out of the spectral thought, back into intervallicism or atonality or whatever. I like that.”<sup>30</sup> Marilyn Nonken has argued that Harvey aimed at “circumventing dualities,” and that “this rejection of dualist philosophy was perhaps the most revolutionary and shocking aspect of spectral music.” And it is true that, “influenced by his Buddhist practice as well as his IRCAM-based research, Harvey sought to evoke a musical continuum encompassing elements otherwise construed, within a dualist framework, as antithetical.”<sup>31</sup> Yet he prized such a “continuum” as a way of allowing not just for connection but for fundamental ambiguities which did not result in incoherence. In one of his

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last interviews (2009) he recalled his time at Princeton in 1966, when he became more than ever concerned to challenge his own commitment to serial systematics. “I wanted to gather from Babbitt how much one could hear, how possible was it to get a real sense of structural depth, which one has almost automatically in the great tonal works. I came away, having made my own experiments in [integrally serial] composition, with a feeling that that was not really the path.”<sup>32</sup>

It was evidently from a similar perspective that, much later, he would think of spectralism as “a great leap forward toward finding a new grammar based on nature,” and even in conjunction with “a rebirth of the triad” which brings “a new, higher-level idea of consonance into play.”<sup>33</sup> As Julian Johnson has observed, the harmonic world of Harvey’s later music is “strictly speaking, not atonal. Perhaps one could begin to speak here of a ‘spectral tonality,’ a harmony based on inclusiveness and balance of its elements rather than hierarchical opposition, a harmony in which the individual line freely elaborates its own identity through time but which is, at the same time, completed by the revelation of its place within a greater timeless order.”<sup>34</sup> Harvey would often cite Rudolf Steiner’s proto-spectralist prophecy that “in the future man will be able to experience the single tone with the same inner richness and inner variation of experience that he can experience today with melody.”<sup>35</sup> But as Michael Downes has noted, his music, “in sharp contrast to that of the ‘holy minimalists’—draws sustenance from the fact that he is both deeply convinced of the spiritual truth of the texts he engages with, and fully engaged in a world that is sceptical of them.”<sup>36</sup> Together the spirituality and the scepticism mark the boundaries of Harvey’s fundamentally modernist aesthetic. Aspiring to convey a sense of “real structural depth” without simply retreating to the ancient world of fully diatonic tonal harmony, he was willing to accept that—of all the technical concepts available to an early twenty-first century composer—spectralism probably had the most to commend it, even if the composer in question had Harvey’s own reservations about music that claimed to be “purely spectral.”

It is in this spirit that in the mid-1990s Harvey spoke of “this aesthetic of hide and seek with spectralism that has preoccupied what I have written in recent years,” mentioning just two examples, *One Evening* (1993) for two singers, instruments, and electronics, and *Tombeau de Messiaen* (1994) for piano and digital audio tape. He then described *One Evening*’s first movement in terms of transformation from an initial section “constructed intervallically—on the principle of symmetrical inversion round a [central] axis ... giving a poised stillness to the harmony,” and a repetition “with the addition of very deep, soft notes on a synthesizer. In these pitches I found the most plausible fundamentals for a reading of the symmetrical harmony as *partials*, i.e. spectrally. So the floating harmonies acquire a ghostly hierarchisation, intervallicism seen in a spectral light.”<sup>37</sup>

In his brief comments on *Tombeau de Messiaen* Harvey again underlined the interactive tensions that converging forces and forces that resist fusion provide. Here the tension is not so much between symmetry and (ghostly) hierarchy, as in *One Evening*, but between a



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normally-tuned grand piano and material on tape drawn from “12 pianos all tuned in harmonic series, each on one of the twelve pitch-classes.” If, in performance,

the balance is good (so that taped and live pianos are indistinguishable) the [live] piano has the role of providing the grit, the resistance to the spectra without seeming to be altogether outside them, partly because it often plays the same, or nearly the same, spectral pitches. The fact of partly not fitting makes the discourse interesting for me, as it changes constantly from spectral fusion to micro-tonal polyphony and back. Either of these principles without the other seems a less rich and attractive option for composition as I see it at this point in time.<sup>38</sup>

For Nonken, *Tombeau de Messiaen* “is a landmark work in that it heralds the ideological shift brought about by the rise of spectralism,” and she cites the composer’s comment that “one is aware of a single entity with multiple parts, yet their interaction is so complete that one cannot put the metaphorical sword between them.”<sup>39</sup> It remains the case, however, that this “single entity” does not exactly replicate well-tempered “classical” unity and integration. As late as 2009 Harvey was still affirming that “I love music which dissolves and makes ambiguous whatever exists,” as well as the kind of situation in which “well-known instruments can be made ambiguous, made to be both themselves and something else.”<sup>40</sup> It was the driving-apart of dualism that he abhorred, interactions so intricate that multiplicity itself seems indivisible that he relished.

Very different British compositional perspectives on spectral harmony are to be found in Julian Anderson’s concept of “macrotonality,” excluding both microintervals and inharmonic spectra and using “only the lowest partials of harmonic spectra ... going up to partial 16.” Anderson thereby distances himself from devices “much used by Grisey, Murail and in some Jonathan Harvey,”<sup>41</sup> in order to emphasize basic perceptual elements that can appear to be of less immediate concern to composers whose modernist aesthetics have strongly felt religious elements built into them. Michael Downes has drawn particular attention to the link Harvey proposed between the Buddhist notion of “emptiness” and the inherently “insubstantial nature, not only of musical form, but of *sound* itself.” As Downes explores the point,

whether by achieving a delicacy of orchestration such that the sound of a violin appears to merge into that of a clarinet (as Debussy sometimes does), or by using electronics in such a way that the violin-ness of violin sound and the clarinet-ness of clarinet sound are shown to be part of a continuum, both interrelated and ultimately devoid of identity (as Harvey and other recent composers have done) such music exposes the unreality of what we conventionally consider to be sound. The process of moving in and out of different timbres, hearing them from different directions and with different combinations of partials emphasized, is both enjoyable and spiritually enlightening in that it awakens our awareness of the insubstantiality of phenomena that we take to be coherent identities.<sup>42</sup>

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Such an intensely modernist attitude, that not only questions coherence but brings the ambiguous and the open-ended to the fore, is at the opposite extreme from the “macro-tonal” clarity that Anderson aspires to, and involves quite different assumptions of the role of perceptibility and understanding in relation to musical structures. It seems clear that from the beginning Harvey thought in appropriately diverse terms about ways of describing his characteristic materials and compositional processes: for example, a paragraph about *Bhakti*—cited above—moves from describing its “pitch structure” as “intensely serial” to identifying “symmetrical harmonic fields” as well as “an elaborate three-minute movement of spectral exploration of this harmonic series on G.”<sup>43</sup> What separated spectralism from serialism and symmetrical harmonic fields was an element of the mysterious or magical, turning towards something transcendent: and Harvey was evidently thinking about his Buddhist predilections, and the “wheel of emptiness,” when he explored the thought that “when you are dealing with spectral matters you become very aware ... of the dialectic between fission and fusion”: the

fascination is in the hide-and-peek process where sounds which you took to be individual, highly characterised sounds ... can hide themselves and blend so perfectly you can't see them any more. They come in and out of identity. They are highly individual beings and yet they are also empty, lacking inherent existence, just part of some whole. ... For me, it is the very nature of reality itself—that behind individuality one discerns a unity. And that is heard all the time in spectral music, and that's the fascination of it.<sup>44</sup>

In this context, *Ashes Dance back* (1997) for choir and electronics, is especially notable for the vivid description of its timbral character and use of various frequency bands that Harvey provided. *Ashes Dance Back* sets poems by Rumi,

the thirteenth-century Sufi poet whose work concerns the dissolution of the self. The self is scattered like dust in the air, is consumed by fire, drowned in water. Having made recordings of these three elements, I as it were “blew” them through electronic filters. Through a filter sound can be pushed, but only of a certain width, and so a designated band of frequencies (for example, part of the wind) is all that is audible. When the filter was opened wide the wind sounded as if it were blowing through it, but when it was gradually closed it became more and more like a musical note, until eventually it was a pure note, with a slightly wavery pitch and a wind-like rhythmic envelope. By varying the openness of that filter I could change from nature to culture, and back again, moving seamlessly from music to wind. Blowing fire through the filter, or spouting water through it, achieved similar transitions. Through the use of filters I could produce a wind/choir, a fire/choir, and a water/choir. The hall was flooded with nature's power, as the choir dissolved and changed, humans audibly turning into the elements.

Here, perhaps, there is a sense of what Harvey meant by describing spectralism as “a spiritual breakthrough.” Sufi's focus on the “dissolution of the self” becomes, in Harvey's

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musical imagination, a very contemporary yet timelessly transcendent motion “from nature to culture, and back again.”<sup>45</sup>

Harvey was never more essentially modernist than when making grandly general statements like this: “Music ... can bring together violent and unexpected musics from different styles, tonal and atonal, it can bring together world musics from abrasively different cultures; ... any of these conjunctions will more and more freely, I feel, become integrated in this basic purpose of music to somehow integrate and heal, heal things which seem necessarily individual and different.” While he came to feel that “ultimately spectralism is at the basis of music, it is the nature of sound,”<sup>46</sup> he maintained a role for difference in his work. It is therefore notable that Michael Downes, in the most extensive published discussion of the compositions that followed from *One Evening* and *Tombeau de Messiaen*, continues to demonstrate (often referring to Harvey’s sketches) the conjunction of symmetrically disposed pitch fields (“harmonic spaces” or “Ur-spaces”) and spectra conceived in terms of a harmonic series built up from a fundamental pitch, and leading the music into more consonant, tonal regions. As early as his essay “The Mirror of Ambiguity” (1986), discussing *Song Offerings* (1985), Harvey had declared that “I love the effect of opposing spectralism with intervallicism. They’re two separate principles, but they change into each other,”<sup>47</sup> and in his analytical notes on several of the more substantial later works—especially *White as Jasmine* (1999) and *Wagner Dream* (2006)—Downes shows how important Harvey’s earlier commitment to symmetrical fields or spaces remained as he continued to explore the electro-acoustic implications of spectral thinking.

Such transformational immediacy as is found in *Ashes Dance Back*, and also *Bird Concerto with Pianosong* (2001, rev. 2003), can be even more richly explored in the opera house, where live electronics can be thought to fulfil their “natural” potential for creating ambiguity and mystery. As Harvey explained, “when electronics are performed in real time like instruments and combined with instruments or voices, the two worlds merge in a theatre of transformation and legerdemain. No-one listening knows exactly what is instrumental and what is electronic any more. Legerdemain deceives the audience as in a magic show.”<sup>48</sup> Then, commenting on *Inquest of Love* (1991–2) he said that “for two hours the synthesizers, tapes and live electronic treatment of the orchestra, and to a lesser extent of the singers, weave in and out of the electronic and instrumental worlds, with the border between them completely blurred. The point is to show the unity of normal reality and a spiritual world of life and death, of physics and metaphysics.”<sup>49</sup> A decade and more later, with *Wagner Dream*, the electronic element is even more intricately imbricated into the textural design and musical character of the drama. What starts as various binary oppositions—Wagner’s last day in Venice alongside Harvey’s version of his projected drama about Buddha, *Die Sieger*, singing and speaking, acoustic and electro-acoustic sound—begins to converge as the cataclysmic event of human death occurs. Harvey saw this convergence reaching its fulfilment in the electronic music at the end of the opera, suggesting that the oppositions are dissolved, if not positively integrated: “the death-process and all its strange inner landscapes are suggested by electronic transformation. This also has the function of unifying two cultures, two aspects of Wagner, two time and space worlds

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in the ‘one’ which is beyond illusory dualism.”<sup>50</sup> However, Harvey’s admission that “*Wagner Dream* is composed between musics—music which sounds objective and music which sounds subjective, more like Wagner’s ... which bleed into one another” led me at the time of its première to pose a series of questions as to whether “the striving for convergence paradoxically enhances the duality represented by Wagnerism on the one hand and Buddhism on the other.”<sup>51</sup>

Harvey’s major works from the first decade of the new century—apart from *Wagner Dream*, the orchestral trilogy... *towards a Pure Land* (2005), *Body Mandala* (2006), and *Speakings* (2007–8), the only one of the three to involve electronics, represent his most far-reaching musical exploration of Buddhist perspectives. In a late essay called “Music, Ambiguity, Buddhism: a Composer’s Perspective,” he outlined the specifically Buddhist principle that

we ... are the constructions of our minds, which themselves change constantly. What I fear has no existence, once, as the Buddha taught, I learn to control the mind. Such control brings a joyful celebration of the ultimately real world, traditionally that’s associated with bliss and happiness, and concomitantly a state of great tranquillity. Music aids and abets that control. The “seeing through” that the control brings constitutes the pleasure of great music. We see through the delusions of conventional reality and experience liberation.<sup>52</sup>

Yet even when Harvey’s compositions, like the orchestral trilogy, are concerned with various principles of purification on the way to that contented “state of great tranquillity” he refuses to move into modes of expression in which all ambiguity is resolved. In that same essay he declares that “interesting music is undecidable music,” and discusses his overriding concern to strive for a balance in which ‘statement and ambiguity must both be strong. All statement, the music is tediously obvious: all ambiguity, the music is irritatingly vague. ... Like the impermanent and ever-shifting world, good music seems to set up strong thematic personalities but constantly dissolves them in ambiguity.”<sup>53</sup> If Harvey’s music can also be thought of as involving both spectralism as the projection of a fundamental and symmetry as radiating outwards from a center, some kind of musical dualism might remain salient to its appreciation, helping to account for the importance of its position within the uniquely resonant world of British late modernism.

## Author’s Note:

As the References indicate, this chapter cites various previously-published English-language writings of mine about Harvey. In addition, it includes translated extracts from my essay “Jonathan Harveys Farb-Denken,” in *Klangperspektiven*, edited by Lukas Haselböck (Hofheim: Volke Verlag, 2011), pp. 229–48.

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- (1) Liam Cagney, “Synthesis and Deviation: New Perspectives on the Emergence of the French *courant spectral*, 1969–74” (PhD diss., City University London, 2015), 44.
- (2) See Arnold Whittall, “‘Let it drift’: Birtwistle’s late-modernist Music Dramas,” in *Harrison Birtwistle Studies*, ed. David Beard, Kenneth Gloag, and Nicholas Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 1–25.
- (3) See *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters of Benjamin Britten*, vol. 6, 1966–1976, ed. Philip Reed and Mervyn Cooke (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2012), 99–100, 242–4.
- (4) Pierre Boulez, “Schoenberg is Dead,” in *Stocktakings from an Apprenticeship*, trans. Stephen Walsh (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 209–14.
- (5) Pierre Boulez, *Music Lessons: The Collège de France Lectures*, trans. Jonathan Goldman, Jonathan Dunsby, and Arnold Whittall (London: Faber and Faber, 2018).
- (6) See Arnold Whittall, “Metaphysical Materials: Schoenberg in Our Time,” *Music Analysis* 35, no. 2 (Oct 2016): 383–406.
- (7) Cagney, *Synthesis and Deviation*, 111.
- (8) Hans Keller, “Schoenberg and the Crisis of Communication,” in *The London Sinfonietta Schoenberg/Gerhard Series*, ed. David Atherton (London: London Sinfonietta, 1974), 47–48.
- (9) Jonathan Harvey, *Music and Inspiration*, ed. Michael Downes (London: Faber and Faber, 1999).
- (10) Jonathan Harvey, *In Quest of Spirit* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1999), 39; also Jonathan Harvey, “Spectralism,” *Contemporary Music Review* 19, no. 3 (2001), 11. For an extended monograph focusing primarily on aspects of spirituality, see Suzanne Josek, *Jonathan Harvey: “... towards a Pure Land”: Stationen einer kompositorischen Reise* (Mainz: Schott Campus, 2016).
- (11) Jonathan Harvey and Jean-Claude Carrière, *Circles of Silence* (Lewes: Sylph Editions, 2007), 35–36.
- (12) Michael Downes, *Jonathan Harvey: “Song Offerings” and “White as Jasmine”* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 138.
- (13) Cagney, *Synthesis and Deviation*, 225–26. For Harvey’s review, see *The Musical Times*, 117, no. 1595 (Jan, 1976): 33. For additional documentation concerning Harvey’s early explorations of the spectral aspects of harmony, see Paul Griffiths, “Formulae and Spectra: The Quiet Pioneering of Jonathan Harvey, 1967–73,” *Mitteilungen der Paul Sacher Stiftung*, no. 31 (April 2018): 54–59.

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- (15) Jonathan Harvey, “The Metaphysics of Live Electronics,” *Contemporary Music Review* 18, no. 3 (1999): 79–82.
- (16) Harvey, *The Music of Stockhausen*, 111.
- (17) Harvey, *The Music of Stockhausen*, 126–27.
- (18) Jonathan Harvey, “Reflection after Composition,” *Tempo* 140 (1982): 3.
- (19) Jonathan Harvey, “Notes on performance,” in score of String Quartet no. 1 (London: Faber Music, 1977).
- (20) Arnold Whittall, “From Wagner to Boulez: A Modernist Trajectory,” *The Wagner Journal* 9, no. 3 (Nov 2015): 42–53.
- (21) Arnold Whittall, *Jonathan Harvey* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999).
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- (26) Whittall, *Jonathan Harvey*, 61.
- (27) Whittall, *Jonathan Harvey*, 22–23.
- (28) Jonathan Harvey, “Spectralism,” 12. See also Harvey, *In Quest of Spirit*, 43–44.
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- (30) John Palmer, *Conversations* (Vision Edition, 2015), 152.
- (31) Marilyn Nonken, *The Spectral Piano* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 145–46).
- (32) Nonken, *The Spectral Piano*, 142.
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- (36) Downes, *Jonathan Harvey: “Song Offering” and “White as Jasmine”*, 44.
- (37) Harvey, “Spectralism,” 14; *In Quest of Spirit*, 42–43.
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- (46) Whittall, *Jonathan Harvey*, 34.
- (47) Downes, *Jonathan Harvey*, 68.
- (48) Harvey, *In Quest of Spirit*, 62.
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- (51) Arnold Whittall, *The Wagner Style* (London: Plumbago Books, 2015), 238.
- (52) Jonathan Harvey, “Music, Ambiguity, Buddhism: A Composer’s Perspective,” in *Contemporary Music: Theoretical and Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Max Paddison and Irène Deliège (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 282.
- (53) Harvey, “Music, Ambiguity, Buddhism,” 283, 288.

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