

Abstract

In that solitude, a composition for violin and piano, was the winner of the 2015 Creative Responses to Modernism Prize, hosted by King's College London. The work addresses the notion of the musical fragment as a part of modernism, building on analytical work on the same theme. The manner in which it was composed, its form and its sonorities all add to its fragmented nature, and are explored in this brief study. A recording of the work accompanies the article online and it is suggested that this should be heard first.

Keywords: Modernism, composition, music, fragments, creativity, brevity

As a composer reading the call for submissions for the Creative Responses to Modernism Prize, I could not help but think that anyone composing in the Western art music tradition is inevitably writing a response to modernism. This is not true for all composers,¹¹ I will use the term composer exclusively to mean those working in the tradition of western art music, as the context for those working in other traditions and in commercial music may be very different.

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and I can think of plenty I know personally who would not agree; however, I have always felt it necessary to consider, even confront, the history of my profession in order to work within, challenge and to advance the tradition. Whilst I find it crucial to be aware of music from every period, modernism has proved the most important area against which to place my work. Although musical modernism has many facets dating back to the late nineteenth century, I find the early twentieth century and post-war era to be the most relevant: the music of Anton Webern, Arnold Schoenberg, Edgard Varèse, Igor Stravinsky and others. I also engage with the music of contemporary composers, but whilst I find it useful to place my work amongst the multitude of approaches found today, it is the historical notion of musical modernism to which I find myself responding in my broader compositional outlook.

Despite this awareness of history, finding a 'place' for my music and understanding where I fit is rarely at the forefront of my mind when composing: the compositional process feels, on the whole, hermetic and each work stands as an example of a personal style I am still yet to understand fully. However, the nature of my PhD (which I began in 2011 and have recently completed) put my work face-to-face with specific modernist issues as I decided to use composition as a means to explore a set of research questions. Bringing this together with musical analysis, the thesis approaches issues related to musical brevity, with each original composition, or set of works, as an exploration of one of four themes – fragmentation, miniaturisation, continuity and organicism – that sits alongside an analytical case study.

Over the course of three and a half years, much of my compositional work engaged very specifically with these themes: In that solitude (2012) formed a part of this, being composed to explore musical fragmentation. But, whilst it had a specific role within a research project, this did not prevent me from engaging with the usual demands of a creative act, nor did it move my attention away from a concern for the aural result (something that is always of prime importance for me). However, working within the specific notional framework of the fragment, the end result is self-consciously

situated against other compositions, ideas and theories. As these are all facets of one aspect of modernism, the work can indeed be seen as a response.

This brief article should act as a background to the conception of *In that solitude* and a guide to my thinking behind it, more than as an elongated programme note. Whilst I would encourage one to listen with some of the following in mind, I do not aim to provide a prescriptive reading of the work: consider this a meditation on my relationship with the modernist fragment illustrated by a single composition, a recording of which accompanies this article online.

Musical fragmentation

The literary fragment has associations with Romanticism, with similar trends emerging in the late nineteenth century in music.²² A useful discussion of this can be found in Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 41–115.

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The starting point for this work, however, was the musical fragmentation of Hungarian composer György Kurtág (born 1926), whose music is pithy, intense and often characterised by brevity and economy. In particular, a study of his use of fragmentation in *Kafka Fragments* (1985–7), which formed part of my PhD thesis and a subsequent analytical article,³³ See Martin Scheuregger, 'Fragment, Time and Memory: Unity in Kurtág's *Kafka Fragments*', *Contemporary Music Review*, 33.4 (December 2014), pp. 408–27.

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provides the background here. Kurtág's hour-long work takes fragments of Franz Kafka's personal writings – his letters, notebooks and diaries – setting them in forty distinct movements for violin and soprano, ranging from a few seconds to seven minutes. Separate parts of Kafka's writings are chosen, splintering the texts in the process, whilst many parts appear fragmented in their original form. The starting point is therefore already fragmented, but in their setting to music, further techniques are used to enhance this sense of fracturedness. The specifics of this approach are inevitably unique to Kurtág – although seen elsewhere in his oeuvre – but reflect a wider use of the fragment by modernist composers. I conclude that *Kafka Fragments* creates unity despite its fragmented nature, and is best understood in terms of its connections;⁴⁴ Scheuregger, 'Fragment, Time and Memory: Unity in Kurtág's *Kafka Fragments*', pp. 425–6.

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however, I acknowledge this is only one way to address the fragment. In composing my own works in response to this theme, I have developed an approach that is in its own way a response to Kurtág's, but more importantly a reflection of a personal engagement with the fragment that demonstrates how my compositional voice operates within its bounds.

In my compositions prior to *In that solitude*, brevity was an overt theme, with several works taking the form of miniatures. In these, musical material is used in a way that emphasises a sense of

completeness within distinct movements or sections: they share the characteristics of larger works, but with honed and concentrated structures and themes. This self-containedness proved to be a stumbling block when trying to generate more extensive, developmental forms, as the structural completeness was difficult to move beyond, whilst the musical material was not pliable enough to evolve. My interest in fragmentation proved a catalyst for change; as I comment in my thesis:

a paradigm shift would allow my practice to move forward: by reconsidering my starting material not as rarefied, complete, and hermetic, but as open-ended, splintered and implicative, I could move on to creating more dynamic forms. In short, miniatures became fragments, and these could be used as building blocks.⁵⁵ Martin Scheuregger, 'Conceptions of Time and Form in Twentieth- and Twenty-first-century Music' (PhD diss., University of York, 2015), p. 49.

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Fragmentation proved the first step in a journey towards writing music concerned with organic, flowing development as it opened up the possibility for brevity to form a part within something more extensive. This switch from miniaturisation to fragmentation highlighted that the concepts in themselves were most useful for me as an impetus for composition. The idea of the fragment simply helped me put pen to paper and begin writing with a degree of certainty: I knew how I might approach material, the sort of structure I would employ and the character for which I was aiming. Whether the notion of a fragment is then useful for a listener is another matter: having had *In that solitude* performed several times and presented on this topic at a number of conferences, many listeners hear the work as complete and unified. Nevertheless, the consideration I had for fragmentation in the process of composition – in both how and what I composed – gave rise to its specific characteristic, relating it unquestionably to this concept.

In that solitude is one in a series of three compositions that address fragmentation: *Be silent for solo piano* (2012) and *Be still for harp and marimba* (2015) complete the triptych. Writing these involved creating a personal vocabulary of compositional approaches and sonic devices that reflected ideas of fragmentation. Each of the three works brings new facets to this, some ideas overlapping, others remaining unique to each piece. *Be still*, for example, represents the most overt structural fragmentation in its ten separate movements, whilst *In that solitude* has more of a surface relationship to miniaturised works. Taken together, the three works offer an approach to the fragment that complements the findings of the interlinked study of Kurtág, whilst demonstrating the specific hallmarks of my own approach. Although much of what can be taken away from these works is concerned specifically with music, I suspect there may be some fruitful parallels with literature and other creative practices. The following exploration of *In that solitude* will demonstrate how some of these ideas are heard and how they informed the compositional process, in turn illustrating my reaction to the modernist fragment.

Compositional process as fragmentation

The manner in which *In that solitude* was composed was in itself an act of fragmentation, and whilst this is not apparent in performance, it does provide a useful context in relation to ideas traditionally

associated with the fragment. A naive approach might have been to take an extant work, or write something new, and break a section off. The resulting shard would have previously formed a part of a whole: it is a genuine fragment, or what David Metzger describes as a 'remnant'.⁶⁶ David Metzger, *Musical Modernism at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 105.

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On the other hand, by composing a work to mimic the true fragment, Metzger's 'invented' fragments are created:⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

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it was with this idea in mind that I approached *In that solitude*.⁸⁸ For a more detailed discussion of Metzger and others in reference to Kurtág, see Scheuregger, 'Fragment, Time and Memory: Unity in Kurtág's Kafka Fragments', pp. 408–27.

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The first movement began with the jotting down of an idea for which I had no place, purpose or piece in mind. A single, resonant piano chord was the starting point. I filled this out with a little more detail, composing a few bars so as to capture the mood and type of music suggested by the chord at that moment. This is how I record any musical idea that has no immediate place; composing enough detail so that when I revisit the manuscript paper I am able to continue with the same sounds and ideas in mind. This sketch, however, remained undeveloped for nearly a year until I began composing with the specific aim of creating fragments. The sketch itself – undeveloped but suggestive – was the perfect starting point for the first of these fragment works and is found in its original state, bar some slight editing, as the first movement of *In that solitude*. Sitting somewhere between a true remnant and an invented fragment, this process suggested an approach in which I would conceive material not with the explicit intention of creating a fragment, but simply as the starting point of a new work. By leaving it as an undeveloped idea, I am left with my own fragment. I have elsewhere described the result of this process as 'a series of brief shards of music, windows into many possible pieces that were never completed, which retain their identity of fragments in their potential to form part of larger wholes'.⁹⁹ Scheuregger, 'Conceptions of Time and Form in Twentieth- and Twenty-first-century Music', pp. 50–1.

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There is a sense of potential energy in the music that results from this process, as its capacity for development implies a whole world of notes left unwritten. This is exhibited in the first and third movements of *In that solitude* and can be heard to an even greater degree in *Be still*, the majority of whose ten movements are left as undeveloped ideas and sound distinctly incomplete. This approach can be seen in contrast to that taken in the third and fourth movements of *In that solitude*. Here, the musical material itself rather than the whole movement is treated as the notional fragment. In the first and third movements the listener is presented with a static sonic object that is not taken beyond simple statement; the second and fourth act as frames in which a fragment of musical material is explored, rotated and viewed from different angles. This approach is similar to Cubism in visual art – a musical equivalent often cited is Stravinsky¹⁰¹⁰ In particular, see Glen Watkins,

Pyramids at the Louvre: Music, Culture, and Collage from Stravinsky to the Postmodernists (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), pp. 229–76.

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– and is quite distinct from creating a movement that is itself an invented fragment. There is still a sense of incompleteness created with this technique, however, as no extrapolation takes place: the fragment is examined only to understand its intrinsic characteristics, not to infer a larger whole. The musical result is the use of varied repetition and limited augmentation of material, as if a solid object is being constantly rotated. I consider this quite different to traditional concepts of musical development – where an idea is expanded in ways that can take the music far away from its starting point – and an integral part of my approach to musical fragmentation.

The spiralling melody of the final movement aurally conjures this notion of repetitive spinning, but the more varied second movement is also conceived with the idea of limited development in mind: once again, the movement is a window onto a fragment of material. The material here employs a quarter-tone scale: the octave is split into twenty four notes rather than the usual twelve of standard western tuning (the smallest interval is halved from a semitone to a quarter tone). This scale is the notional fragment, presented as a melodic line unfolding from the violin as it moves between different pitch centres. The approach collides with that seen in the first movement, however, as the piano starts to interject with a single chord and, acting as a resonant body, juxtaposes its static material with the flourishing line of the violin. The two instruments come together in the final bars, presenting a fragment within a fragment: by combining the contrasting material types, a new voice is found in this brief coda. The piano accompanies the violin melody with chords which, for the first time, exert a sense of tension and release as they move from one to the next, demonstrating rich harmonic and melodic potential. The lack of development once again brings us back to the approach observed in the first movement.

The sound of fragments

The issues addressed so far have been concerned with form and process, but by attempting to conjure sonorities redolent of fragility, delicacy, fracturedness and dislocation, fragmentation is approached more viscerally. These are some of the notions that might come to mind when we think of a fragment and through composing several works with these ideas in mind, I have developed a set of sonic tropes which I associate with a fragmentary sound.

The third movement of *In that solitude* exhibits some of these characteristics, as instrumental techniques, tessitura and tempo come together to create sonorities that aim for delicacy. This is not the delicacy of an intricate wooden sculpture, but that of a hollowed-out artefact on the verge of disintegration: it is delicate both in how it is presented (its physical form of fragile sounds) and what it presents (a melody almost wholly decayed). The movement presents a high melodic line that hints at a lost theme, delivered with sonorities that are in themselves fragile. This is achieved in the violin with the use of harmonics – a technique in which the player lightly touches part of the string to isolate a note higher than the fundamental frequency – which can sound unstable and pizzicato

(plucked) chords which have little resonance. The piano plays in a similarly high range, although acts once again as a resonant body, its notes sustaining for much longer than those of the violin. A melody hovers around a few pitches only semitones apart and is heard in the sustained notes of the violin, whilst being echoed and partly shrouded by the piano. Its exact shape is never completely clear, although its presence is certainly felt.

This sense of a fragmented soundworld in the third movement is quite clear in the accompanying recording, but even in the other movements, techniques are used to create sonorities that are associated with the fragment. In the first, the clear, bell-like chords of the piano sound almost tonal, but carefully chosen dissonances provide cracks in their sonic surface. The second movement slices the very building blocks of the music, halving the semitone to create quarter tones that create an unsettling sonority throughout. Even in the final movement – the longest of the work – the extremely high violin line floats with a degree of certainty, but in its searching repetition of similar material, this certainty is undermined. Here, and indeed across the work, the music sits between tonal and non-tonal spheres creating an unresolved tension between consonance and dissonance. The overall soundworld might be heard as damaged or imperfect, as if a classical violin sonata has been skewed in its tonality, form and themes.

Tonal decisions and other aspects of sonority will inevitably be in part dictated by my own stylistic traits, but they nevertheless produce specific effects that maintain connections with fragmentation in my aesthetic. The same can be said for the compositional approaches, but once again these represent idiosyncratic methods that are specific to my ideas surrounding fragmentation, even if similar results might be seen in other works. In that solitude utilises all of these approaches to fragmentation, presenting only one way of tackling a theme that could, no doubt, create countless other responses.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

In_that_solitude.mp3

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2 A useful discussion of this can be found in Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 41–115.

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5 Martin Scheuregger, 'Conceptions of Time and Form in Twentieth- and Twenty-first-century Music' (PhD diss., University of York, 2015), p. 49.

6 David Metzger, *Musical Modernism at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 105.

7 Ibid.

8 For a more detailed discussion of Metzger and others in reference to Kurtág, see Scheuregger, 'Fragment, Time and Memory: Unity in Kurtág's Kafka Fragments', pp. 408–27.

9 Scheuregger, 'Conceptions of Time and Form in Twentieth- and Twenty-first-century Music', pp. 50–1.

10 In particular, see Glen Watkins, *Pyramids at the Louvre: Music, Culture, and Collage from Stravinsky to the Postmodernists* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), pp. 229–76.