THE MUSIC OF HOWARD SKEMPTON.

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ABSTRACT.

Although the music of Howard Skempton is presently becoming available to a wider audience, there is little literature on his background and compositional method. Only a handful of articles are available specifically on Skempton's music, and these presume at least a familiarity with both the American and English Experimental movements.

This Project, then, attempts for the first time to connect Skempton's musical background to the development of his composition from 1967 through to the present day. It is written in such a way that it can be approached by someone who may never have studied Experimental music before. The first chapter examines Skempton's roots and influences from within the movement; the second explains his approach to composition and the clear aesthetic that has developed from the influences cited in Chapter One; the third and fourth chapters are analyses (primarily structural analyses) of the best examples of Skempton's compositional method as explained in Chapter Two; the final chapter, or Epilogue, discusses the recent success of the music and places it within a wider postmodern context.

Because of the lack of many works before this one, this Project does not contain a literature review. It does, however, deal with issues raised in previous articles on the subject which are listed in footnotes and in the bibliography.

<u>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.</u>

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Chapter I

THE EXPERIMENTAL LINE.

The music of Howard Skempton has grown from many sources. Rather than following one Experimentalist line he has absorbed both European and American ideas and related them to his own politics and identity with constructivist art. Since his early days with Cornelius Cardew and the Scratch Orchestra, however, much has changed and Skempton today finds himself with a variety of labels attached, from "popularist" to "post-Experimentalist" or even "new simplicitist". This first chapter follows the roots that will be explored latterly.

As a young composer, Howard Skempton was attracted as much to the study of composition with Cardew and the reading of Cage as to completing his degree in music, psychology and the history of art at Ealing Technical Collage. His earliest works date from 1967, the year he commenced private studies with Cardew at Morley College, London. In 1969 they together founded the Scratch Orchestra, along with Michael Parsons.

The Scratch Orchestra followed Cardew's own extension of original experimental ideas as propounded by Cage, exemplified in the former's "A Scratch Orchestra: Draft Constitution" which divides the fundamental work of the orchestra into the five categories which made up its concerts: Scratch music, Popular Classics, Improvisation Rites, Compositions and Research Projects. The main idea was that anyone and everyone--musician or not--could be part of the orchestra on every level, and that this could extend to the audience in the frequent concerts that were given all over the country. Scratch music was a form of guided improvisation, in which each

member of the orchestra would sketch an idea that would form part of an overall piece whether as accompaniment or solo. On this front, Cardew noted, they were most useful when waiting for latecomers to a meeting to arrive, as even a few people could start a piece of Scratch with others joining in as they arrived.

"Popular Classics" entailed the rendition of well known themes from works such as Beethoven's <u>Pastoral</u> or Mozart's <u>Eine Kleine Nachtmusick</u> on one instrument while others improvised an accompaniment. Such subversion was typical of the politics of the group. "Improvisation Rites" were, like Scratch music, intended as ideas <u>for</u> music rather than precise musical ideas on which performers were expected to improvise (as in Jazz). The first example in the relevant appendix is Howard Skempton's "Initiation of the pulse. Continuation of the pulse. Deviation by means of accentuation, decoration, contradiction"[1]. The main difference between the Rites and Scratch music is that the Rites were ideas for the whole orchestra to follow, rather than everyone "doing their own thing"; anarchy with rails. "Compositions" were simply works of people in the group, which were all allowed a hearing unless "emphatically rejected". However, as Cardew points out in a humorous note, the danger of a piece having success with the Scratch Orchestra was that it could be elevated to the title "Popular Classics" and subjected to those rules.

The final category, "Research Project", was Cardew's attempt to build a bridge between ideological thoughts and music or objective thought and metaphysical sound. Each member undertook a project in which he or she researched as many widely different aspects of his subject as he could think of. Then "journeys" were undertaken (Cardew's examples range from travels as diverse as "temporal, spatial, intellectual, spiritual, emotional"), and if possible the musician would try to relate an

aspect of his project to that journey and express it musically. The journey, then, became a performance: a trip to Mars became an amalgam of sound from the many different viewpoints from which it was being undertaken.

It is important to understand these activities in full, because to find similarities in the work of either the contemporary Skempton or the late Cardew would be harder: the activities of the Scratch Orchestra provide a clear picture of Skempton's foundations as a composer. As with all his influences, Skempton has learnt what he has needed to and moved on, absorbing styles and aesthetic principles along the way. Cardew now rests most famously for his exploration of the graphic score, exemplified in "Treatise", combined with his idea (which is only too clear from the constitution of the Scratch Orchestra) of allowing "the player (or players) ... an active hand in giving the piece a form".[2]

There is also a strong American Experimentalist influence evident in many of Skempton's early works. This springs primarily from the composers Cage, Feldman and La Monte Young. Skempton admits to being "caught" by the ideas of Cage from early on in his career: "Cage (and Silence in particular) exerted a powerful influence during my very late teens and early twenties. This is evident in the use of chance operations and also in the concern with structure."[3] Silence is a collection of the lectures and writings of Cage over more than twenty years, and as such forms a distinct picture of his early Experimentalist thought. Not that one message can be found weaving its way through the texts, but there are obvious threads that have effected a lot of music since. Cage's lectures themselves were unconventional, and

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[1] Cornelius Cardew, ed., Scratch Music, (London: Latimer New Dimensions Ltd, 1972). This piece has later become known as 'Drum No. 1'. Howard Skempton's Improvisation Rites from "Nature Study Notes", (ed Cardew, no publisher) are reproduced in Appendix Two.

[2] Cornelius Cardew, "Notation- Interpretation, etc.", Tempo 58 (Summer 1961), pp. 21-33. Cardew's own words in describing the term 'indeterminacy' p. 22.

are generally presented in poetic form, not as a means of confusion but attempting "to say what I had to say in a way that would exemplify it"[4]. The most obvious influences that Cage had on Skempton were the use of chance (which Skempton employed regularly between 1967 and 1972) and the message of naturalness in composition or music as organised sound which translates into Skempton's simple but strict treatment of sound sources.

The latter Skempton defines as the constructivist side of Cage: the idea of allowing sounds to "be themselves", freeing the composer from control or authority over a work is the kind of objective stance of the constructivist, although perhaps not the practical one Skempton takes. However the appeal was also a subjective one, to which Skempton adds: "Letting sounds be themselves and aiming to imitate nature in its manner of operation was a refreshing line for a young composer, both aesthetically and morally".[5] The similarity of thought does not only lie in theory, as one may think when considering the work of each composer, but in the fact that Cage did at times follow the line which Skempton has now made his own (Cage required less control than Skempton in general) which is exemplified in some of the early percussion and piano pieces such as "In a Landscape". With its opening shifting harmony below the haunting repeated pattern one could easily attribute this piece to the latter-day Skempton.

The direct influence of Feldman is found in Skempton's extra-sensitive treatment of sound. Feldman's music generally employs long structures of quietly sounded timbres spaced by silence. The same (but more concise) features are evident in Skempton's Chordal piano pieces which are often marked *pp* and at a slow tempo.

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[3] Howard Skempton: All quotes hereafter referred to as "Howard Skempton" and without other reference are from correspondence with the author over the period August 1995 to May 1996.
[4] John Cage, Silence, (London: Calder and Boyers Ltd, 1968): the quote is taken from the foreword.
[5] Howard Skempton.

For both composers there is also the urge to explore the smallest amount of material to the greatest possible degree by means of repetition. However in Feldman this is over much larger time scales (his String Quartet II of 1993 is six hours long) and in later work, much more precisely notated. Earlier, Feldman had used graphic scores; but to control the timbres of new instruments it became very necessary to have uppermost control over their spacing, using it to "measure other things"[6]. Skempton's quieter and more spatial works, on the other hand, deal generally in free timing; that is to say, the notes given have no specific time values attached.

Skempton was introduced to the music of Feldman by Cardew (whose composition and aesthetic was greatly admired by the American) in the 1960s. Another similarity in their work is a practical outlook (although Skempton has said Feldman "was never a constructivist").[7] Although Feldman's works are easily identifiable by their characteristic long and quiet notes, he does not view them as one style: "[My music is] very different to me with the change in orchestration ... these instruments are not dead for me because as yet they have not served my function."[8] Feldman approaches a new piece with the instrumentation in mind, his sole purpose to first find how best he can achieve the quietness he needs on the instruments chosen. This one can relate to Skempton's comment that "One studies the technical properties of the instruments, the abilities and limitations of the specific players, the amount of rehearsal time available, the place, the performance situation and potential audience ... once I know these things, the piece is there in all its essentials." The objective approach to composition is very similar in both composers, and something Skempton relates strongly to his association with constructivist art. The effect of this approach, then, is from time to time felt in their music; Edward Fox describes Feldman's as

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[6] Paul Griffiths, "Morton Feldman". <u>Musical Times</u> 113 (August 1972), pp. 758-759

"static music, with notes arranged like colour on canvas"[9]; Skempton's <u>Lento</u> or 'Eirenicons' (for example) have drawn very similar comment.

La Monte Young is similarly a detailed explorer of sound. Skempton himself described Young's work as "It's not a question of 'there's so little to hear': there's so much to hear."[10] The works to which this quotation refers are specifically the most open-ended that Young explored in the sixties: For example <u>X for Henry Flynt</u> (1960) which requires the performer to repeat a loud, heavy sound every one to two seconds as uniformly and as regularly as possible for a long period of time, or <u>Composition 1960 #7</u> which notates a perfect fifth (B-F#) with the instruction to 'hold it for a long time'. The interest, primarily, is in subjecting the performer to a necessity of control which requires not disinterestedness but absolute an concentration for whatever "long period of time" is decided upon: Howard Skempton played a chord for two and a half hours on a piano accordion at a Fluxus retrospective.

La Monte Young's other chief compositional interests lie in the exploration of drones (rising from the discovery of liturgical chant) and repetition. One can draw further parallels for the latter with Skempton who creates (as will be seen in Chapter Two) his own tonalities through the use of repetition. In his article, "Following a Straight Line", Dave Smith points to a connection with Skempton's 'Drum No. 1' which is as open-ended as any piece of La Monte Young's.[11] In addition to this one could include any of the pieces which have unspecified note values (especially those which are in open-score, and therefore would not be subject to the limitations of the piano) which technically could be performed indefinitely.

[7] From an essay written by Skempton before the first performance of Lento: held in the BMIC.
[8] Griffiths, p. 759
[9] Edward Fox, "Quiet, please...", <u>The Independent,</u> (July 1994), p. 35
[10] Dave Smith, "Following a Straight Line: La Monte Young"; <u>Contact</u> 18 (Winter 1977-78) pp. 4-9
[11] Smith, p. 10

As is common in musical circles, Skempton's influences have not just come from his teachers or the American school that served as such an inspiration, but from close friendships with other musicians, in particular with the composer and co-founder of the Scratch Orchestra Michael Parsons, and the pianist John Tilbury. After the Scratch Orchestra broke up, Skempton and Parsons continued performing together as a duo and no doubt continued to share thoughts on musical composition. Parsons has completed two articles on Skempton's music for the magazine Contact and written notes for recordings and concerts, which have provided the most possibly informed guide to Skempton's background and aesthetic for any new listener to date. John Tilbury has consistently performed his piano pieces since the 1970s, both privately and in concert, and he is a performer of great sensitivity and restraint, qualities which are so important in this music (Tilbury is also an accomplished performer of Feldman, whose piano music is notoriously hard to control). As such, his career must be seen as at least the equal of David Tudor, the pianist who worked so closely with the American Experimental movement. Howard Skempton has said that knowing his pieces "would be performed by John has probably brought out the best in me."[12]

Skempton also feels (as do many Experimental musicians) an affinity for the music of Satie, and no doubt the thoughts as expressed in Cage's humorous "Erik Satie", which is included in Silence. His commitment to constructivist procedure has been helped by friendships with artists Peter Lowe, Jeffrey Steele, Trevor Clarke and Emma Park, and musical influences have been found beyond the Experimental movement in both the "Avant Garde" and English trends. All these differing lines of

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[12] In interview on Radio 3's "Hear and Now" tribute to Tilbury on his birthday, broadcast 2.2.1996

thought make Skempton the composer is today, a position which will be explained

further in Chapter Two.

Chapter II

AESTHETIC AND COMPOSITIONAL METHOD.

In the first chapter we examined the multitude of Experimental styles which have influenced Skempton's own compositional method. Following the period of the Scratch Orchestra the development of a style which is singularly his own becomes increasingly evident. 'Waltz', one of the very earliest piano pieces (1970), employs four sections which are arranged randomly, each containing a simple melody and bass line. Many of his works in the 1970s employ aleatory devices contrasted with simple material, and Waltz is an extreme example in that the material would be almost tonally inane without the juxtaposition of the chance procedure, something Nyman described as "a new tonal language".[13] The works of Skempton can, from this point on, be divided into two groups for easy identification. The first are the Melodic pieces which are not always accompanied (for instance, 'Trace' (1980) or 'Passing Fancy for the Left Hand' (1975)). The second are the Chordal pieces in which material, often without measure, is presented, repeated and contrasted (for instance, 'Eirenicon' (1973) or 'Seascape' (1982)). Some works employ both compositional methods, for example 'Even Tenor' (1988) or 'The Durham Strike' (1985).

Structure, Notation and Performance.

Behind both types of composition there are strict structural (or in some of the earlier works, aleatory) ideas. This we may relate to Skempton's identity with the constructivist movement, where structure the <u>behind</u> a work is as important as the material used over the top, if not in fact the <u>only</u> important part (some constructivist

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[13] Michael Nyman, <u>Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond</u>, (New York: Schirmer Books, 1974), p. 145

sculpture has used framework alone). As Parsons says in his first article on Skempton, "constructivism is concerned primarily with coherence, intelligibility and the clear definition of form"[14] This has also played a large part in defining Skempton's compositional method. As mentioned in the first chapter, he approaches a composition with only the practicalities in mind--who will be performing the piece, on what instruments, where and for whom it will be performed, and so on. Therefore it is the structure which is laid first, allowing the music to 'write itself'--be written intuitively--over this base.

This strict organisation, which will be explained at length in the next two (analytical) chapters, seems to create a contradiction with the 'openness' of Skempton's notation; for as he has said "It's only by putting structure first that you can create something strong enough to survive".[15] However he often leaves his scores free of phrasing, metronome markings, measured notes, dynamics and so on, leading one to question whether a clear structure can be identified throughout widely varying realisations. Cardew raised similar questions in his article "Notation, Interpretation, etc..":

> ...where things are left 'free'... the composer tells the player afterwards that he played well or badly ('used' the freedom well or badly). If there exist criteria for making such a judgement, then there is no freedom. Playing a piece where the dynamics are free, it should make no difference whatever to the piece (its identity) (its value) if I play *mp* continuously.

In contradiction, within the same article Cardew also discusses the fact that however many instructions one provides in a piece of music, the player will never perform the piece <u>exactly</u> the way the composer heard (conceived of) it originally (and arguably this would be even truer of Cardew's own graphic scores). Skempton's

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[14] Michael Parsons, "The Music of Howard Skempton" <u>Contact</u> 21 (Autumn 1980) pp. 12-16
[15] Ibid., p. 14

answer to the above criticism would also begin along these lines: "'Openness' of notation allows performers to assume responsibility for those aspects of a performance which they alone can define with any precision (dynamics, etc.)"[16]. The question, therefore, is primarily one of <u>responsibility</u>; to what extent is the composer responsible to provide the performer with information, and to what extent is the performer responsible to provide their own interpretation in matters that the composer did not specify (be they exact speed or total lack of dynamics)? There is no doubt, as Skempton says, that a performer <u>can</u> define those things more accurately. So to follow this line of thought, Cardew would be wrong in saying that it should make no difference if he plays *mp* continuously--for as a performer it would be his responsibility to define such an aspect of the piece: And presumably Skempton would hope that the elements of the music itself that <u>are</u> provided (harmony, initial direction such as "gently", etc.) would guide the player to "'use' the freedom" well.

The question of the responsibility of the performer in Experimental music was one raised earlier by La Monte Young, although in his case the context was different; he felt the placing of responsibility on the player is a result of limitations, whereas Skempton's results from the freedom. However the similarity arises in the fact that with both composers the freedom is in the form of articulation. As Young states:[17]

> If we have already determined in advance the frequencies we're going to use and we allow only certain frequency combinations- certain chords which we have determined harmonious to our ears- then we find that as soon as one or two people have started playing, the choices left are greatly reduced and limited, so that each performer must be extremely responsible.

The contexts may be different, but the message from each remains similar- in order to perform these musics one has to <u>listen</u> and react to the sound-world around oneself. Therefore however free the written music, even if "frequencies" only are given (often

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[16] Howard Skempton.

in both composers' cases), the responsibility is to keep the sounds "harmonious to our ears".

This becomes principally a question of <u>musicality</u>, which is why Skempton has persistently written for Tilbury who evidently is "sympathetic" to the composer's wishes. It also involves another idea of Cardew's which is that a performer should not be attempting to fulfil the composer's supposed wishes when performing, but that he should allow himself to follow the music in the way <u>he</u> feels it leads; "He should not interpret in a particular way ... but should be engaged in the act of interpretation".[18] Hence to perform the music of Howard Skempton, in which so much is left free, one should react to the music in its particular context (time and place) rather than presuppose Experimental laws, thus being engaged in the act of interpretation, which is perhaps one stage further on from the "disinterestedness" that some (including the composer) have said one needs to perform the music.

This brings us back to the question of the structures behind the music which have such importance for Skempton: to reiterate the question, how can strict structure survive in such an open score format? Skempton feels that in the "free" scores the form <u>is</u> obvious, and that even if it may be lost in a bad (or irresponsible) performance, the importance lies in the fact that it is there: the construction behind the music. In his own words, "If the composer risks losing clarity of form, then he stands to gain clarity of intention".[19] This is in fact a definite strength behind his more recent music; in the past it has tended to be clear whether a composition is more intuitively written, or written to a system (whether structural or aleatory). But with works from the last fifteen years, a balance between the two seems to have been struck. For example in the piano piece 'Even Tenor', which uses both Chordal and

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[17] Nyman, p. 122

Melodic methods of composition, the second section's melodic semiquaver passage sounds like a series of "suspensions" with notes falling by semitone to create a feeling of constant resolution. This is shown in example 2.1.[20] And yet analysis shows that the ordering of the notes in this section uses the same number series that orders the first (Chordal) section: the effect is a very musical one but there is no doubt of the solid structure that underpins the surface.

Example 2.1

A strange standpoint is therefore created from the juxtaposition of Skempton's very practical approach to music and the (almost romantically) subjective effect it has- it is not a dense, complex, Avant-Garde music, but then neither is it a nostalgic or sentimental presentation of past ideas. As Parsons puts it, it is "rather a recreation of something long taken for granted", citing 'Waltz' again, particularly "the chromatic scale... which has none of the expressive implications of chromatism in Classical music". [21] Such an objective outlook coupled with differing use of a past language and Experimental procedures can, however, appear as a paradox.[22] Skempton nonetheless insists that "Self-expression is not the aim. One looks out and responds to an external necessity, observing and discovering possibilities in the chosen material. The aim is to fulfil a need ... The objective requirements are

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[18] Cardew, "Notation- Interpretation, etc.", pp. 27-28
[19] Howard Skempton.
[20] A full analysis of 'Even Tenor' begins Chapter 3.
[21] Parsons, "The Music of Howard Skempton", p. 14

paramount".[23] And yet the music created is highly expressive, which is perhaps why accusations of being romantic are occasionally levelled.

With these accusations, however, Skempton can probably live. One of his most recent works, a 'Rondo for Piano'--performed at the I.C.A. in 1995 for the Radio 3 broadcast "Hear and Now"--mixed exciting harmony with a deeply syncopated melody, echoing jazz and blues influences however strong the structure behind it.[24] Yet the piece does not present itself as contrived; it is, however, a leap away from the carefully controlled Chordal pieces and illustrates the wider boundaries within which Skempton now feels he can write.

Development of Musical Material.

Returning to the Chordal pieces and more generally to Skempton's output over the last twenty-five years, there are a few more descriptions frequently used with respect to his work that demand explaining here. It has been said that Skempton's music is "essentially direct", an assertion with which the composer has agreed.[25] But the observation that it is "non-discursive", with respect to Skempton's thoughts on composition, is incorrect. [26] It is fair to place that description on earlier Experimental music, in which the exploration of sounds is often more important than a methodical exploration of chosen material. But although Skempton's works are often short and may not methodically develop an idea or ideas, one should not charge his music with being non-discursive. In fact, it concentrates on the potential of material, without

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[22] The issue of whether this music is tonal or not is discussed later in this chapter.
[23] Ibid.
[24] A further description of 'Rondo for Piano' is included in Chapter 3.
[25] Peter Hill, "Riding the Thermals- Howard Skempton's Piano Music", Tempo 148 (March 1984), pp. 8-11
[26] Michael Parsons, "Howard Skempton: Chorales, Landscapes and Melodies", Contact 30 (Spring 1987), pp. 16-29; also quoted in Keith Potter, "Howard Skempton: some clues for a post-experimental 'movement'", Musical Times (March 1991), pp. 126-130

stating but all the while focusing on possibilities, and as a result opens as many (if not more?) possibilities to both performer and listener as a Beethoven developmental section. The difference--which can make it appear non-discursive--is that much, as with many aspects of Skempton's music, remains unsaid. Often the material is dealt with in its most succinct form, through means of simple statement and repeated statement, showing the sounds against each other in different lights and from different angles. From this one may conclude that the responsibility lies not with the performer but with the listener, the composer feeling his task complete when he has brought issues to the minds of his audience. Therefore an unsaid discussion can take place if the listener is sufficiently aware (whereas Beethoven would write the dialogue himself, or at least guide it)--we need not consider this "emotional cognition" but audio/intellectual play. [27]

A great influence on this effect of Skempton's music is obviously Feldman. Feldman invites the listener into his sound-world and engrosses them; because the dynamics are so low, often on the threshold of silence, and the occurrence of notes often spaced far apart, one is drawn to listen for musical clues, picking out repetitions five minutes apart as if they were a repeating refrain in a song. Fox describes this effect as "a slow, quiet, intimate sort of music that doesn't need to raise its voice to get attention".[28] It grips the mind of the listener who becomes caught up in the process of the music--and the "unsaid discussion can take place". As mentioned in the Chapter One, the two composers achieve this through both similar (quiet and occasionally repetitive music) and differing (Feldman's extreme lengths of music, Skempton's short and concise utterances) means, but both explore the potential of material with the audience without developing it in any traditional way. "The effect is

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[27] Hans Keller, as referred to by Skempton as "a richly contradictory notion".

that every sound seems freighted with meaning, poignancy and tenderness", or as Tilbury says, "the sound should have its own life".[29]

Skempton's Sound-World.

In articles written about Cardew and the composers of the Scratch Orchestra references are made to the placing of sounds in "time-space" and the effects of "spatial" music, terms which can be defined in many (and sometimes contradictory) ways. Taken literally, Cardew has referred to time-space as the form of graphic notation which best describes the timing and duration of sounds by exact spacing and lengths of notes of the page, and provides examples by Brown, Cage, Bussotti and Stockhausen.[30] Of this notation, regarding the treatment of "filling" time as if it were space, Cardew recognised that the idea is more a philosophical than a practical one- "the satisfaction lies in the fact that satisfaction is impossible".[31]

The terms of "time-space" and "spatiality" carry different meaning regarding Skempton's music, especially the Chordal type: as described above, he sets a limited amount of material by repeating and juxtaposing it, and it is the juxtaposition that creates the spatial feature. For example in a piece made out of only four chords one chord is shown in many different ways; simply repeated, placed between two contrasting chords, placed between two similar chords and so on. Skempton adds to this: "The recurrence of identical chords at different points in a piece is also a spatial feature, in that it contradicts the listener's expectation of events as an ongoing sequence".[32] In such a way the same material is given the effect of being viewed

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[28] Fox, p. 35
[29] Both quotes from Fox, the first by Fox and the second by Tilbury: each is speaking about Feldman's music but the same thoughts can be applied to Skempton's.
[30] Cardew, p. 21
[31] Ibid.
[32] Parsons, "Howard Skempton: Chorales, Landscapes and Melodies", p. 21

from many angles: this is a spatial feature not only notationally but also audibly, developed from the way the music is assembled. Again we may refer to constructivism--the assembling of an art form from an objective standpoint separate to the work itself. Parsons has described this feature as follows:

> It is ... akin to the spatial arts and especially to sculpture, where the object, while affected by variations of light, surroundings and the changing experience of the viewer, itself remains constant. It can suggest, paradoxically, an 'outside time' experience which is reflective and contemplative, but not hypnotic.

This in many ways seems to both relate to and yet contradict the Experimental tradition. While Cage searched to separate himself from the compositional process and from its performance, (and so <u>liked</u> it to be changeable by "surroundings and the changing experience of the viewer"), his later work did not employ constants; the above statement presumes something very definite, certainly not random, about the construction of the music.

Skempton's music creates not only the usual "outside time" experience (that music can be heard in many places at many different times) but also the one that Parsons refers to. Due to the "free" notation employed, each performance is not only original but can be quite different to another, affected by all parameters of performance. Hence his practical approach to composition is reflected in a practical collection of sound which can react to its context, as Parsons puts it, "the performer and listener are invited to participate in the creation of musical space".

Post-Tonality and the Twentieth-Century.

The question of tonality in Skempton's work raises issues that are not immediately pertinent to this discussion, such as 'what makes a piece <u>tonal</u>?' ('what makes it atonal?') or 'does a piece that is not diatonic have to be atonal?' The real

issue with Skempton's music, apart from the accusation of being nostalgic, is exactly where it lies between the boundaries of definite tonal and atonal music. It has already been mentioned that a sound world is created in each of the Chordal pieces by repetition and variation of positioning within the work, and in a sense this also creates a tonality of its own. At the start of a piece, for example, the ear may find chords dissonant. But after repetition and reflection a consonance of the piece's own making is developed, especially when so little material is used. The ear can soon make new sounds seem familiar, changing only by their context in the music. Such an example would be 'Three Shades for Piano' (1971). It is not purely the Chordal pieces that fall into this category, however; works that are melodic such as 'Trace for Piano- right hand' (1980) are held as one continuous development not by tonal progression but by repetition, rhythm or common shape of movement where variation is allowed. ('Trace' uses only seven bars of material in different ordering to create a twenty-one bar piece that sounds both tonal--although finding a tonal centre would create contradiction--and discursive, as if it is a continually developing line and not a repeated one). As such (and in line with Robin Holloway's thinking on postmodernism in music) one could consider this a new line of 'extended tonality', different to those followed in the second half of the nineteenth century, but without forgetting all that has been learnt since.[33]

This equivocal explanation by no means covers the majority of Skempton's music, however. There are exceptions on both "sides" which deserve a mention, pieces which one could label "tonal" or "atonal". There are pieces which are definitely tonal such as the already-mentioned 'Waltz' (1970) or 'Rondo for Piano' (1995) and others such as 'Well Well Cornelius' (1992), 'Images- song 2 for piano'

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[33] Robin Holloway, "Modernism and After in Music", The Cambridge Review, (June 1989) pp. 60-66.

(1989) or the third 'Nocturne' (1995). Another good example would be 'Second Gentle Melody' (1975) which is essentially an extended I-V7-I structure which only escapes being predictable by use of unusual inversions of chords and repeated chromatics (accidentals); the breaking of tonal 'rules'. The works which seem to defy the "tonality" labelling are dissonant ones which have a less clear structure, or large amounts of material which do not undergo repetition, such as 'Beginner' (1983), 'Colonnade' (1975) or 'Eirenicon 3' (1978), the last of which uses a highly dissonant harmonic field which in the short duration of the piece does not establish itself in a listener's mind as consonant. These matters will be discussed in Chapter Three with reference to individual pieces.

The justification of Skempton's music as either tonal or atonal again loses relevance when it perpetuates the old idea of 'Avant-Garde versus Experimental', a notion that grew out of the 1960s and is essentially wrong. In fact the movements have their similarities: both the twelve-tone system and aleatory procedures served to separate or limit the composer's role. Both systems were post-war reactions to past (musical) culture; and both acted as a new 'beginning', a different way of approaching music. Furthermore, the rift between the two movements did not actually exist anywhere except in critic's minds and with a few outspoken composers such as Babbitt and Boulez.

Stockhausen himself, part of the European Avant-Garde, employed chance procedures similar to Cage's in works such as Zyklus (1959) or Stimmung (1968). Cage studied with Schoenberg in Los Angeles, and even if he did not expand on early efforts at serialism was happy to have the music employing that language involved in his concerts. Similarly the Scratch Orchestra's 'Popular Classics' repertory included

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This article and thoughts contained therein are discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five.

works by composers of the Avant-Garde, and both Tilbury and Cardew professed to not just being interested in Experimental music but in 'new music' in general, Tilbury performing Avant-Garde works regularly in his early career. Skempton himself identifies with Webern, essentially with his use of structural clarity and precision, and has himself experimented with the twelve-tone ideas of a kind. 'Quavers' (1972) divides the twelve notes into four equal groups (chords) and then determines their sequence by chance, and 'Bagatelle' (1984) for flute is serial.[34]

However a gap remains. Although it not necessarily a rift between the Avant-Garde and the Experimental, or between complexity and simplicity, it is one touched upon earlier in this chapter: the question of musicality. In the 197 Roger Smalley described this as follows; "The great divide is not between the post-serialists and experimental musicians but between those who think _in_ music and those who think _about_ music".[35] Hence the divide is created between a set of composers (arguably in both groups) who rely solely on "pre-compositional theory" (as defined by Babbitt), caring little for the eventual sound of their music, and those who rely on intuition to complete a piece of music, however rigorous the theory behind it. While Skempton cites the influences of Cage's thoughts on music, the importance for him seems to remain essentially there; only as thoughts. One could say Cage's pieces themselves were only exercises of those thoughts. With this, Smalley would agree. In his article he goes as far as to name Cage as guilty of being in his first group:

> Babbitt and Cage are perhaps closer than either might like to think. They are united in their ability to speculate interestingly about the nature of music and in their inability to invent compelling aural images which will give substance to these speculations.[36]

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[34] More detailed analyses to be found respectively in Parsons, "The Music of Howard Skempton", p. 12 and "Howard Skempton: Chorales, Landscapes and Melodies", p. 27.
[35] Roger Smalley, "Experimental Music", _Musical Times_ 1683 (January 1975), pp. 23-26
[36] Ibid.

Skempton's Balance.

A balance of Howard Skempton's has already been referred to--his balance between a clear structure behind a piece and intuitive musicality laid over that structure, as exemplified in "Even Tenor". This, obviously, relates to the need Smalley expresses--for speculations about the nature of music to be exercised in "compelling aural images" and thus gain substance. The balance between these two needs (theoretical and musical) is the most important aspect of Skempton's aesthetic: "Composing is thinking musically. If today's music seems less intelligent than it should, the composer's job is to restore the balance".

This relates to his decreasing use of chance and affirmation of structure (and as will be seen in the next chapter, structural number systems). It also relates to his 'open' notational method and attitude towards the responsibility of the performer--a balance has to be struck between what needs to be written to communicate a musical idea and yet allow for the "liberation of the performer" as taught by Cardew[37]. This need for balance may be what Keith Potter described as "post-experimental", and certainly substantiates a move <u>from</u> Experimentalism as it stood in the 1960s (and not in the direction of the minimalists who are often bracketed as the romantics of Experimentalism). Skempton has certainly moved on from the open-ended compositions such as 'Drum No. 1' or 'May Pole for orchestra' to the careful and concise forms he uses today.

This makes Skempton a composer that seems to fit into multifarious trends as mentioned at the beginning of Chapter One, and yet he is not. The grounding is Experimental, but beside it are many other influences (the eclectic Skempton cites Webern, Bartök, Stravinsky, Gorecki, Xenakis, Arnold, Britten and Shostakovich).

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[37] Howard Skempton.

He approaches a piece of music entirely objectively, yet the result is often seen as a sensual or even romantic music: this is achieved through his dedication for the balance between the theory behind a work and a "musical" surface, something he justifies as follows: "I would say that musical thinking is intuitive but governed by intelligence". Yet the notational aspect still echoes the Experimentalist thought of "letting sounds be themselves", and one of Skempton's main objectives- especially in his Chordal pieces- seems to be the exploring of those sounds to the most minute detail. These beliefs and methods define Skempton's distinctive, although widely varying, sound, and perhaps these beliefs provide "some clues for a post-experimental 'movement'"[38].

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[38] Potter, p. 126

The power of music to inspire confidence is more than equalled by its ability to alleviate anxiety. Through music we are no longer manipulated by time ... we can stem the tide of time through the practice of repetition; or through silence, the last refuge of the fastidious.[39]

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[39] Parsons, "The Music of Howard Skempton", p. 14 (the quote is Skempton).

Chapter III

WORKS FOR PIANO

Piano music represents the largest single medium for which Skempton writes. It being one he can play this relates to his close exploration of the instrument's sound. It also reflects the instrument's popularity and widespread use, being widely available to the largest range of audience and performers alike. The fact that his <u>Collected Piano Pieces</u> have been published by Oxford University Press in 1996 rather than other works for orchestra, voice, small ensemble and so on is evidence to the fact that they are the most representative output of Skempton's career. Pieces range from the late 1960s (before Skempton commenced studies with Cardew) to today and between them exhibit all of the traits of Skempton's wider compositional method, as examined in Chapter Two. For simplicity's sake, the pieces will continue to be split into the easily identified groups of Chordal and Melodic.

It has to be mentioned here that Skempton himself uses the distinctions 'Chorales, Melodies and Landscapes' when describing his different approaches to composition or distinguishing between types of piece. These descriptions have been avoided because of the closeness between the identification of 'Chorales and Landscapes', which can become quite subjective and therefore is useless in analytical terms. However this labelling may shed a different perspective on the range of Skempton's composition and are therefore explained as such:[40]

<u>Chorales</u>: "The material almost inevitably comes in the form of chords ... without embellishment."

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[40] For a more detailed discussion of the terms between the composer and Parsons, see his article 'Howard Skempton: Chorales, Landscapes and Melodies', pp. 17-29

Landscapes: "The landscapes simply project material as sound, without momentum. Sequence is not important."

Melodies: "I think of melody as tracing a path through a landscape ... there are   fewer variables."

Hence 'Chorales' are Chordal pieces <u>with</u> some kind of harmonic direction, and 'Landscapes' are those <u>without</u> (where the exploration of sound is of uppermost importance).

The simple descriptions of Skempton's pieces as Chordal or Melodic, however, will suffice during the following analyses. It will be noted that some pieces which have a melody may still be classified as Chordal, primarily when the melody appears as an arpeggiation of structural chordal material. The prime objective is not to categorise works but to fit them to the overall picture of Skempton's aesthetic and compositional method as laid out in Chapter Two.

'Even Tenor' (1988) has already served as an example in earlier Chapters. This is because it uses both the Chordal and Melodic types of composition and is laid over a strong structure. Finding these structures behind the music can often be a lengthy and laborious undertaking. Sometimes it occurs that no structure is present. Such works are ones written entirely intuitively or by means of chance. It can also be problematic if, as in 'Even Tenor', works *sound* as if they have been written intuitively but in fact have a rigorous structure underlying them.

The method of analysis, therefore, is to number chords or melodic shapes, recurrent pitches and so on, so that patterns can be seen when a whole piece has been dissected. If, for instance, a piece has 24 chords and Skempton has ordered them very deliberately, by numbering the chords patterns can be detected most quickly (for example an obvious pattern would be 1-2-1-3-1-4-1 etc.). However sometimes the

ordering patterns or ideas are so complex or even vague that one has to decide whether either they are too well hidden (cannot be found) or that there is a possibility that the piece has been constructed intuitively or randomly. The danger of this approach is that one can dismiss a piece as having no structure when in fact it is incredibly simple and quite close to the surface. "Simple" is not a word Skempton would object to in this context, and while some of the following pieces will reveal intricate precompositional working, many will be seen to be less complicated than they appear at first. 'Even Tenor', on the other hand, has released its secrets as such:

This piece is in two sections which appear entirely unrelated.[41] The first section is a series of four chords repeated in differing order with their measure and dynamics left open (apart from the initial 'Very Slowly' and *p* markings). By numbering the chords (in the order they appear) the overall sequence is 1-1-2-3-3-4-2-2-1-4-4-1-3-2-4-3-1-3-2-4. Initially this does not seem to show a strong or obvious structuring behind the ordering, but if one takes the chords that are repeated in succession (for example, the piece begins with the first chord twice, then after the second chord the third twice) the order of 1-3-2-4 is seen. Immediately it is obvious that that pattern, 1-3-2-4, is repeated twice towards the end of the section. There are then only four chords that are not included in the above groups, and these give the sequence 2-4-1-3, which is part of the same permutation. Example 3.1 shows that all chords of the first section can be accounted for in this way.

Example 3.1
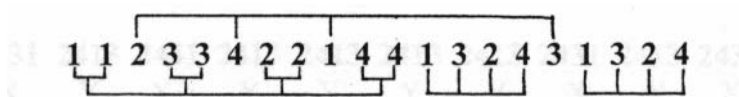
—————————————
[41] 'Even Tenor' is reproduced in full in Appendix One.

The second section is a measured semiquaver descent which relates to the other piano pieces 'Quavers III', 'Waltz' and 'The Durham Strike' (primarily the fourth section) and even the open-scored 'Recessional' in its use of chromatically falling lines. This dropping of the four voices (the semiquavers are split up into four-note arpeggiations) by semitones gives an ancient feeling to the music, one of continually resolving suspensions, but not in the traditional sense of the word. With a piece by Bach these compositional tools can be analysed in respect to their tonal function (i.e. the delaying of the completion of a chord and its importance, usually at a cadence.) but with the continuous falling of the second section of 'Even Tenor' there *is* no tonal centre. The falling itself is the section's identity, reinforced by the repetition of each arpeggiation.[42] Therefore any method behind the falling of the notes and the effect this gives is again analysed by numbering the groups of notes.

The lines are numbered 1 to 4 from the top downwards[43]. If, starting at the beginning and progressing through the section, one records the order in which the lines fall a pattern emerges. For instance, the order of the first twelve falling lines is: 243124132431. The entire section uses two number groups to order the falling of the notes, 2431 and 2413 which may be labelled X and Y. Example 3.2 shows the overall structure of the section:

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[42] As mentioned in Chapter 2, Skempton creates his own tonalities by use of repetition- the ear becomes accustomed to the language of the piece.

[43] For example in the first bar the F# is 1, the A#-2, B-3 and D# is 4.

Example 3.2

2431 2413 2431 2413 2413 2413 2413 2431 2413 2431 2413 (24)
X   Y   X   Y   Y   Y   Y   X   Y   X   Y

A   B   A

In the first line of Example 3.2 the numbers are grouped in the two repeating patterns of fours they obviously appear in, being labelled X and Y in the second line. This ordering of the falling lines is then given an overall form in the third line of the example which brackets the pattern (subsection) of X-Y-X-Y as A and Y-Y-Y as B, giving the ternary form A B A.

By this point it is obvious that the link between the two sections is not one of simple form but radically hidden beneath the surface in the ordering of the chords in the first section (they gave 1324 and 2413) and the ordering of the falling lines in the second section (2431 and 2413) These raise too many similarities (primarily the series 2413, marked 'Y' in example 3.2) to be a matter of pure coincidence[44]. So although the piece, especially the second section, sounds entirely intuitively written, there is a repeating pattern upon which the structure is built but can remain unheard.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, underlying structures (especially such mathematically concrete ones) cannot always be found. One obvious example is that of Skempton's earlier, more Experimental, piano pieces in which aleatory devices were employed. It is unsure at what point Skempton ceased to use chance procedures (if he ever has), but one can be certain about the earliest works on which Parsons has commented and others through the early 1970s which seem to carry similarities.

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[44] When the author acknowledged the presence of the controlling number sequence 2-4-1-3 to the composer, Skempton replied "your analysis of 'Even Tenor' is spot-on, but astonishing to me too because I'd lost my tracks (which is not the same as covering them)."!

The earliest aleatory pieces are 'A Humming Song' (1967), 'Snowpiece' (1968), 'September Song' (1968) and 'Piano Piece 1969' (1969). These initial four pieces are all Chordal. 'A Humming Song' is analysed in Parson's first article on Skempton's music and as he points out "Eight basic pitches [are] arranged symmetrically around the C sharp and D sharp in the central register of the piano". [45] Even at this early stage Skempton's style is clear: through thirty-two repetitions of the pitches (arranged randomly) we are drawn to observe the intricacies of the chosen sounds. Skempton also adds to the interest by adding a lower or upper auxiliary note (one octave above or below) whenever a pitch is repeated, adding variance to what could have become (according to the laws of probability) a series of exact repetitions: the chance is controlled musically to add interest. Another interesting addition is the instruction to the performer that "Black notes should be hummed as well as played", the notes concerned being the two central pitches.

It seems essentially important to Skempton from the start, then, that he gains maximum use from a limited amount of material. Example 3.3 firstly shows the six combinations in which the pitches are employed--it may be coincidence but of course six is the number of sides on a dice and so that could be the way the ordering was decided. Secondly, example 3.3 shows the pitches employed arranged vertically, the numbers by the sides being the intervals between each note, hence exhibiting the symmetry clearly. Symmetry of structure is something that Skempton continues to explore to this day. Parsons goes on to say "The method of composition gives the music a rather loose and 'timeless' quality, drawing attention to the unique sonority of

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[45] Parsons, "The Music of Howard Skempton", p. 12

each note or chord as it occurs"[46]. As early as 1967, one can conclude, Skempton was

establishing the spatial style he would make his own.

Example 3.3

Peter Hill describes this early style of Skempton's as "a 'kaleidoscopic' form"

and cites 'September Song' as an example.[47]   This piece is indeed an extreme

example of this early aleatory method, as Skempton uses only three notes over thirty

unmeasured repeats in chance order. The interest this time is not in the addition of

ideas, but in the limitation that two of the three notes cannot appear together although

they constantly appear consecutively. These two notes are G and G# over the 'pedal'

E natural creating a shifting major/minor dissonance/consonance commentary, the

elements both complementing and contradicting one another.   Skempton escapes

making these notes seem repetitive by using three distinct registers of the piano, as

seen in example 3.4, but Hill is perfectly justified in fearing "that the process of

refinement has reached a point where silence is the next step".

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[46] Ibid.

[47] Hill, p. 9

Example 3.4
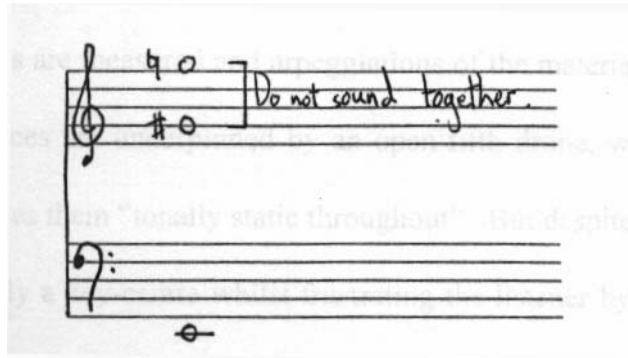
'Waltz' (1970) has also been cited as an early example of Skempton's careful balance of chance procedures and musical control, and it is a different example of the early compositional method. It is made up of four sections which are intuitively written, chance being used to determine their order throughout the piece in thirty repeats of one section or another. Here, therefore, Skempton uses chance not to decide on the ordering of the notes for the piece but simply writes a Waltz and then allows it to provide the form.

'Two Highland Dances', also written in 1970, is the first piece which appears to be entirely intuitively written. It also serves as the first clue to another device that he uses regularly to this day--playing on the idea of what is expected, what is preconceived. This is possible for Skempton because his music <u>does</u> often relate to a tonality of the past, and his rhythm is often repetitive and regular. Both of these constituents, along with an audience's expectations of any tonal piece (to have even phrase lengths, cadence at the correct points etc.) provide Skempton with a vehicle to provoke; to <u>not</u> provide the expected. For example, he may throw in uneven bars or to point towards a harmony that will not be provided.

The 'Two Highland Dances' are conceived in Chordal form once more, although not in the same way as earlier pieces such as 'A Humming Song', in that the notes are measured and arpeggiations of the material provide a melodic setting. Both Dances are underpinned by an open-fifth drone, which Parsons correctly points out makes them "tonally static throughout". But despite this stasis, Skempton manages to imply a key-centre whilst frustrating the listener by never actually providing it. The drone is on the notes G and D, and the first bar acts as a suspension to a G minor chord in bar two, but this has been contradicted in the first bar by the lack of a sharpened seventh--F natural is provided. The first of the 'Two Highland Dances' is reproduced in full in example 3.5.[48]

There is no key-signature and no clue of harmonic direction in any traditional sense, yet there are many possibilities raised by the ear: the third bar adds another fifth on C and G which reminds us of which note G is the dominant. The fourth bar then adds D and F, a truly contradictory move in that it sounds like the beginnings of a dominant chord in G, but in following the C and G of the previous bar our ears can be drawn to hearing it as a G7 chord with the third missing. At this point an audience cannot be sure which, if either, is the key-centre. The fifth bar throws in a C and E which provokes us to believe in a cadence, but the drone remains and the E moves up to the F of the first bar. This is the only change in a repetition of the opening four bars, hence moving the harmony away from C major and back towards the G minor chord.

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[48] Example 3.5 is in the author's handwriting, having been copied from the Experimental Music Catalogue, "Keyboard Anthology" (no year given, 1969-1971 presumed).

Example 3.5

The remaining half of the first dance arpeggiates a chord of D minor over the drone which by now seems neither to suggest a dominant to G major or minor, nor reinforce any idea that the drone is one long dominant pedal to C. The air thus created is melancholy and unfulfilled and yet does not seem to lose direction throughout the four repeats. The G minor chords finally dictate our conception of a tonal centre, however, because that is the chord the ear would choose to end the dance as the most favourable tonic. Skempton, of course, leaves it entirely open. The second Dance uses the same drone, except in 4/4, echoed by the same fifth in the right hand. This time there are no complicated shifts around in the harmony; our attention is retained through use of a seven-bar section split up into a four-bar and three-bar phrase (rather than the regular four-bar phrases of the first Dance) and the addition of a C natural in the second phrase. The C would normally suggest a resolution to either a G major or minor chord, but because the tempo is slow it merely adds to the stasis.

A deep analysis of the structure of the 'Highland Dances' is unnecessary as it is simple and concise. Similarly one has no reason to believe there are chance procedures or numerical sequences behind the composition, but of course these things are possible, as proved by 'Even Tenor'. When analysing Skempton's work one

constantly has to make decisions as to when a structure is plainly simple and apparent (nothing else remains hidden); when one cannot be found whether it is present or not; and when one presumes that the ordering of material is so uneven that is probably aleatory. It is only the composer himself who can know in all instances, and therefore beginning work on a piece is like opening a new puzzle (and sometimes a can of worms).

Hence a question constantly raised, when looking at the works in the years following those early pieces, is the difference between a piece controlled by intuitive selection and a piece controlled by chance. Whenever a strong structure is not apparent one has to ask 'what is controlling the piece?'. For example when looking at works such as 'Quavers II' (1974), 'Quavers III' (1975), 'Colonnade' (1975), 'Seascape' (1982) or even as recently as the Lament and Interludes from 'Images' (1989). If one numbers the chords in the order they appear in 'Seascape', as was done in the analysis of 'Even Tenor', the following order emerges: 1-2-3-4-2-4-5 (1+4) 1-3-2-4-3-2-4. Initially one looks for repeated patterns or use of symmetry; none can be determined here but the repetition of 3-2-4 at the end which may signify a deliberate closing function by Skempton. However, one must also consider that the chords, with no other patterns, may have been randomly ordered. In an attempt to find other coincidences one can number the different note-values given (this is a measured Chordal piece), calling five beat notes 1, four beat notes 2 and six beat notes 3. This gives the order 1-2-2-3-2-2-1-2-2-2-3-2-3-2, which is positive in the symmetrical opening (1-2-2-3-2-2-1) and ending (2-3-2-3-2) divided by two '2' note lengths.[49]

This is not conclusive however. One could hypothesise that Skempton has chosen the chord order by chance and the chord lengths intuitively, but also both

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[49] 'Seascape' is reproduced in full in Appendix One.

could be aleatory <u>or</u> intuitive. 'Quavers II' presents a similar problem--by numbering the chords of the right hand 1 and 2 and those of the left hand A and B the graph shown in example 3.6 is obtained. Again this shows no patterns or underlying structures and one has to presume that either chance or intuition alone were used to create it.

Example 3.6

1	2	1	2	2	1	2	1	2	1	1	2	2	2	1	1
A	A	A	B	A	B	B	A	B	B	B	A	B	A	B	A

These examples serve to exhibit the problems surrounding analysis of some of the pieces, and piano pieces are the easiest manner in which to do this. Structure is, however, evident from some of Skempton's earliest works and he has increasingly used it to form pieces, as mentioned in Chapter Two. The practicalities of the piece and its performance are known to have a great controlling effect on Skempton's approach to a work, and this is reflected in the use of both simple and highly complex structures over the past twenty years. Although not used <u>exclusively</u> today, there has been a growth of complex structures. This growth started in the late 1970s and 1980s and is exemplified in works such as 'Eirenicon 2' (1977), 'Air' (1979), 'Trace' (1980), 'Piano Piece for Trevor Clarke' (1985), the Preludes from 'Images' (1989) and 'Maestoso' (1990). 'Eirenicon 2' is analysed by means of numbering the content of the whole bars rather than chords or melodic shapes. There are two possible bars for the right and left hands, and as in the previous analysis of 'Quavers II' the right hand bars are labelled 1 and 2, the left A and B. Example 3.7 shows the results of such an analysis.

Example 3.7

1	1	1	1	2	1	2	2	2	2	1	2	1	1	1	1

A	B	A	B	B	B	B	A	B	A	A	A	A	B	A	B

The arrow shows the halfway point of the piece, around which the bars are arranged very deliberately. The right hand (top half of the grid) is arranged symmetrically around the arrow, whilst the second half of the left hand part is inverted (A becomes B and vice versa) and then also arranged symmetrically. "Air" also uses this kind of symmetry, but not in the harmonic material: if one numbers the bars as to their rhythmic content (only two differing rhythms are used) the following order is produced: 1-1-2-1-1-1-2-1-||-1-1-2-1-1-1-2-1-1. The point of symmetry is the bar after the double bar line. Alternatively one could simply view it as a repeating rhythmic pattern as the second half is a palindrome.

Perhaps the most complicated of such structures takes place in 'Prelude 6' from the collection 'Images'. Example 3.8 shows a completed analysis of the structure of the bars over the entire piece.[50]

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[50] 'Prelude 6' is reproduced in full in Appendix One.

Example 3.8 (a)

(b)

In order to analyse the piece, the differing bars were each given a letter, as seen in example 13.8 (a). Where it was believed (and this is proved in the fact that the analysis makes sense) that one bar derived from another it was given the same letter.

Skempton did a similar thing in 'Maestoso' (1990), a Chordal piece, where he uses substituting chords for those of the original to add a sense of development and to hide the structure behind the work. In that particular piece, when one has found which chords relate to which and numbered them appropriately the sequence derived is 1-2-3-4-5-4-3-2-1-2-3-4-3-2-1 etc. Essentially there are many numerical symmetries locked together by chord 1, although this does not appear obviously on the page.[51]

In "Prelude 6", once each possible bar had a letter ascribed to it (called A to E) the full piece was set in order--this is the lettered line central to example 3.8 (b)--and immediately it is clear that symmetry is the controlling factor once again. An added interest is that the occurrence of each bar is also symmetrical to itself within half of the piece in bars A and B, and is strongly suggested in bars C and D. In each half of the piece in bars A and B the number of bars between each occurrence of that particular bar is 1-2-3-4-3-2-1, the symmetry within itself. This in turn confirms that the labelling of the bars was correct. It also relates to Preludes 1, 2 and 8 which show similar compositional methods. In the first the top line uses five notes but uses them in this order: 1-2-1-1-2-3-2-1-1-2-3-4-3-2-1-1-2-3-4-5-4-3-2-1-1-2-3-4-3-2-1-1-2-3-2-1-1-2-1.[52] The middle line is doing a very similar thing while the bottom stave is reserved for occasional notes in the lower register. By labelling bars A if they are empty and B if they have a bass note one again discovers symmetry controlling their occurrence. Each of the three lines' symmetries are again interwoven.[53]

Whilst acknowledging the cleverness of such systems creating structure behind the music, it remains important to note that intuition still plays at least an equal part in the process of composition. While these structures dictate the placing of notes

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[51] The entire sequence: 1-2-3-4-5-4-3-2-1-2-3-4-3-2-1-2-3-4-5-4-3-2-1-2-3-4-3-2-1-2-3-2-1-2-3-4-3-2-1-2-3-4-5-4-3-2-1-2-1.
[52] This is also pointed out in Hill's article on Skempton's Piano Music, to which the author is indebted as it led to the further discoveries in "Prelude 6".

or bars or rhythms the harmonic material has first to be "quarried".[54]   Careful

consideration must be taken so that when the material is placed over the structure it

can retain its original musical intention. Skempton chooses clear ideas which will not

distort one another--again, we return to the <u>balance</u> of the essential elements within

his aesthetic.

Series of pieces that Skempton writes, such as "Eirenicon" 1-4 or

"Campanella" 1-4 can also provide an insight to the differing ways he can approach a

task. While it was seen earlier in this chapter that 'Eirenicon 2' uses a symmetrical

structure, 'Eirenicons' 1, 3 and 4 are a little more elusive. Although one may consider

them all Chordal pieces (the second is a syncopated arpeggiation of a chordal scheme

as seen in example 3.9) the same rigorous structure does not purvey in each. The

ordering in "Eirenicon 1" (1973) appears shown as in example 3.10; an ABCB

structure containing two repeated sections and two differing sections.   Chance

procedure could have been used.

Example 3.9

Example 3.10

1	2	3	2	4	4	3	5	3	5	2	1	4	4	3	5
/	A	A	A	B	B	A	B	A	B	A	C?	B	B	A	B

Repeated Sections:_____/   _____/

Eirenicons 3 and 4 do not even show this kind of correspondence, making one

believe them to be entirely intuitively written; as the amount of material employed is

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[53] 'Prelude 1' is reproduced in full Appendix One.

quite high, one presumes that chance was not used. Eirenicon 4 (1985) uses <u>fifteen</u> different chords which give the ordering 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10-11-12-1-2-3-4-6-2-8-9-11-7-10-12-5-1-13-14-1-2-3-15, the final B major chord being the give-away to Skempton's control behind the music. Similarly the 'Campanella' series show differing approaches, the most systematic again being in the more melodically based one, 'Campanella 3' (1982), which has the structure ABA as shown in the ordering of the bars in example 3.11. One may consider B as a 'false start', the repetition of the beginning material being used to fool the listener.[55]

Example 3.11

1-2-3-4-5-2-6-2-6	2-1-2-3-4-5-2	1-2-3-4-5-2-6-2-6
A	B	A

One would describe Skempton's progress in piano music since 1967 as more of an exploration of his self-imposed boundaries than as a single line of development, although development has certainly taken place. The importance, it seems, has not been to establish one rigorous style, sound or compositional method but to make the most of the sure-footed beginnings in the 1960s. Not to grow-up from them but simply to grow from them. Aleatory techniques may have slowly been left behind for structure and intuition, but these elements were present in the beginning as shown in both the analyses of 'A Humming Song', where intuition kept the chance in control, and 'Two Highland Dances', where the provocation of the listener by implied tonality is matched by the upsetting seven-bar section of the second Dance.

The importance of structure has remained to the forefront, but by no means rules over each and every piece, creating problems for the musicologist. In latter years very strong structures have been employed, as seen in the Preludes from

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[54] Skempton's word.

"Images", but the importance remains in keeping a <u>balance</u>, allowing intuition to find musical answers to problems of construction.

A final group of pieces which must be mentioned are those that lie in the middle ground of the structural and questionable, the strictly Chordal and Melodic, and these are the simplest (and often the most effective) pieces for which Skempton is well known. Over the years such examples have been 'One for Molly' (1972), 'Sweet Chariot' (1973), 'Tender Melody' (1974), 'Second Gentle Melody' (1975), 'Trace' (1980), 'The Durham Strike' (1985), 'Postlude' and 'Song 2' of the 'Images' collection (1989) and recently 'Rondo' and 'Three Nocturnes' of 1995.

These works explore the use of an extended tonal language, often referring to a key centre but not actually allowing one to settle, as seen in the first 'Highland Dance'. 'Second Gentle Melody', for example, is essentially an extended I-V7-I structure but only intimates the harmony and uses unusual inversions rather than root position chords. The melody often provides further pointers to the keys of Ab and Eb major, but accidentals such as B natural serve to confuse. In the final bar the resolution is left open with the root in the treble and the third in the bass, no fifth being present. The whole piece seems to remain in mid-flow, waiting to pivot in one direction or another and instead disappearing.

'The Durham Strike' and 'Rondo' are two of Skempton's longest piano pieces. 'The Durham Strike' is held together by the folk-like melody presented in the first of six sections which is repeated in the third section to a more tonally ambiguous setting and developed in the top line of the final section.[56] The intermediate sections show Skempton's variety of style with two chordal passages (the second and fifth), and one semiquaver passage that pre-empts 'Even Tenor''s second section with its

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[55] 'Campanella 3' is reproduced in full in Appendix One.

chromatically falling lines held together by the structure AAB CCB ABB CCA (where each letter represents a pattern or order for the parts to move in). 'Rondo' is jazz-like and instead of exploring an extended structure moves through a series of uplifting key changes and misplacements of the beat (there are many even four-bar phrases but they all begin on the <u>second</u> beat of the bar) or extension of phrase lengths (Skempton employs nine differing phrase lengths). The syncopated melody holds the whole piece together as if it were twelve-bar blues. Only one repetition of the initial material (up an octave) calms the listener's mind half way through the work.

In these pieces structure seems coincidental rather than controlling, as if it were the most natural way for a specific piece of music to be put together. That remains the triumph for Skempton: the pieces in which structure is present behind the intuitive material but is not noticeable unless one is looking for it--as exemplified in the opening example, 'Even Tenor'--the balance is struck again.

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[56] 'The Durham Strike' is reproduced in full in Appendix One.

Chapter IV

<u>WORKS FOR OTHER INSTRUMENTATION.</u>

In Chapter Three we saw Skempton's compositional method at work in his piano pieces. This chapter explores his work for other media and illustrates how his techniques are applied to these genres, exploring in detail at least one piece from each of the following groups: Solo, Vocal, Small Ensemble and Orchestral.

Works for Solo Instruments.

Until the 1980s, the great majority of Skempton's output was for solo piano or accordion. Parsons accounts for this as Skempton's awareness "of the risks of over-diversification, preferring, on the whole, to clarify and extend his knowledge of a limited number of media"[57]. The accordion is Skempton's other main performing instrument and so works do, unlike those for other instruments, span back regularly to the mid-1970s. Being a diatonically designed instrument many of the accordion pieces are uncomplicated in harmonic structure, but no less genuine. As was seen in the more tonal (in the traditional sense) piano pieces Skempton tends to play with the listener's expectations of an age-old system.

With the accordion pieces one feels the directness of message which Parsons describes to be especially evident, primarily because of the constraints of the instrument and language available therein. This occasionally results in a sound cliché, but with Skempton's voice clearly audible beneath it; such pieces are the French-like 'Scherzo', 'Summer Waltz' (both 1975) and 'Crane's Waltz' (1991), the traditional 'Hornpipe' (1982) and the dirge 'Cakes and Ale' (1984). Skempton's two weapons

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[57] Parsons, "Howard Skempton: Chorales, Landscapes and Melodies", p. 16.

against the stereotypical accordion work, however, are the contrasting of this traditional tonal sound (generally produced by the chordal left hand) with either syncopated rhythm and constant time changes (for example 'Twin Set' (1984)) or the addition of a dissonant or tonally ambiguous melody. The latter of these two methods is employed to great effect in 'Corsham Street' (1992) which seems to have several key centres fighting for attention and a melody which cannot decide between them, resulting in a series of drunken dissonances which never seem to resolve.

'Gentle Melody' (1974), on the other hand, outplays the predictability of using only the chords I, IV and V resulting in the feeling that it could cadence every two or three bars. It is reproduced in full in example 4.1.

Example 4.1

'One for the Road' (1976) again explores this preconception of the tonal direction in music which appears to be diatonic. The effect, in fact, is that of a Bach Chorale after too many pints of ale. The melody is generally accompanied by block chords but never actually reveals a tonal centre: the C# in the first bar confuses a direction towards G minor (given by the Bb and F#) and that is again thwarted by the clash of F

sharps and naturals between the melody and the accompaniment. To add confusion, the phrases cadence alternately on D major and G major chords, adding a G major centre, but this is contradicted by the use of a second inversion D major chord (supposed chord V) to close the piece. This is shown in example 4.2.[58] To add to the dissonance and lack of tonal direction the bar-lengths are left undesignated and in fact (when note-lengths are added together) give the pattern of 5-2-4-2, adding uneven phrase-length to the unsettling harmony and melody.

Example 4.2

Skempton's early work for solo instrument also includes 'African Melody'
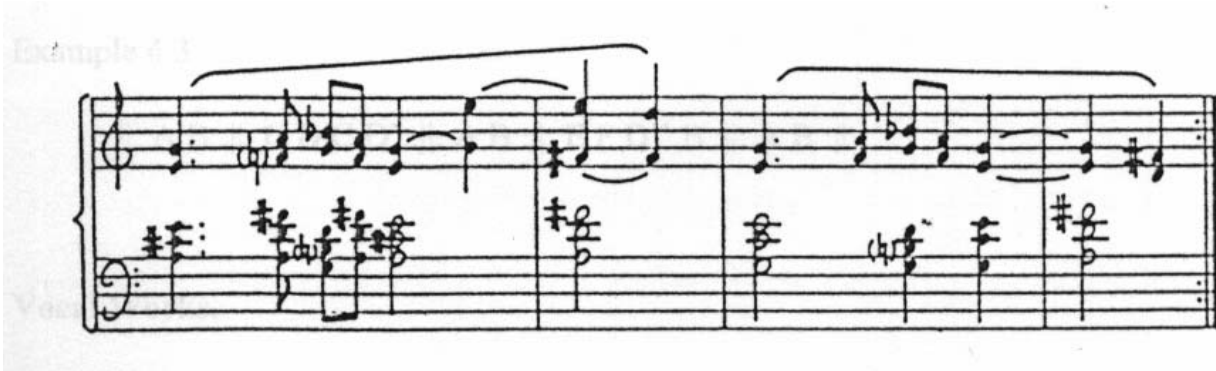
(1969) for Cello, 'Prelude for Horn' (1971) and 'Bends for Cello' (1973). These pieces explore pitches and effects (such as the glissandos in 'Bends for Cello') in Skempton's familiar unmeasured and quiet manner, presumably in chance-determined sequence as no obvious structures are present. The 'Call' (1983) for clarinet, the 'Bagatelle for Flute' (1985) and the 'Three Pieces for Oboe' (1993), on the other hand, explore melody and repeating phrase in a similar way to that seen in the melodically-based piano pieces.

In the most recent of these, 'Three Pieces for Oboe', structure seems to take second place to the importance of a constantly evolving melody which uses near-repetition (only one or two notes are changed to ensure the melody floats evenly

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[58] 'One for the Road' is reproduced in full in Appendix Two.

between phrases) to establish itself in the listener's mind. This is especially relevant in the first and third movements, the first repeating each phrase once and moving through eight developments before returning to the original phrase to close. Similarly the structure of the third movement is based around three pillars of the repeated A and B phrases, as shown in Example 4.3.[59] The phrase letters marked with an apostrophe show that they are slightly changed in repeats.

Example 4.3

||: A B :||: C D C D' :||: A B :||: E F D'' B :||: A B :||

Vocal Works.

When writing song, Skempton again employs the device of repetition to establish a tonality, but this time in a different manner. Frequently he employs a whole melody or chordal sequence, depending on which the piece is based, and repeats it for the entire song extending it only in time (duration) to fit the words that are being set (he does not change the notes or harmonic material). This creates an odd feeling; the musical content is regular and coincides with the beginning of stanzas or lines, but the settings are never regular in rhythm, and therefore the original metre of the poem is obscured by different bar lengths in each line. Neither the music nor lyrics are allowed to maintain their own rhythm. This happens to varying extents in all of Skempton's songs, but at the same time as upsetting the natural rhythms of both poem and melody the musical repetition <u>does</u> reinforce the form (structure) of the poem.

One example of this is 'The Elephant is Slow to Mate' (1989), in which the lyrics are taken from a poem by D. H. Lawrence and set for soprano and clarinet.

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[59] The third movement of 'Three Pieces for Oboe' is reproduced in full in Appendix Two.

Example 4.4 shows the basic harmonic content of the entire piece, and this is repeated six times which coincide with the six rhyming couplets of the poem. Each time, however, the rhythms are slightly altered to give the piece a constantly changing feeling and upset any natural metre. This is reflected in the differing (and without underlying order) time signatures. In Example 4.4 the square brackets show where Skempton allows the clarinet part (which begins as the lower part) to rise an octave in some repeats and the boxed notes where the soprano falls an octave in others. The only other change in the harmonic material is indicated by the arrow at the end which shows where an F# and D natural are inserted in the third repeat.

Example 4.4

The 'Song at the Year's Turning' (1980) and 'The Maldive Shark' (1990) are equally clear examples of this approach to vocal writing. 'Song at the Year's Turning' uses the same harmonic material, this time much longer than 'The Elephant is Slow to Mate', repeating three times with small changes only in word setting.[60] 'The Maldive Shark' uses much less primary material which is symmetrically arranged. The four and a half melody repeats coincide with the accompaniment but are not actually symmetrical themselves. Another type of Skempton's song which is worth a mention is the humorous. These do not exhibit startling structure but do use the same repetitive melodic style and also show a talent for witty and parodic lyric writing on behalf of the composer (Skempton also wrote the more sober lyrics to his

own two 'Tree Sequences')[61]. Examples are 'Pigs Could Fly' (1983), 'Ever Greener' (1986), 'Show me the Limelight' (1988) and 'It's Never the Time or the Place' (1988) which recall the more amusing of Skempton's Scratch compositions. The following is taken from 'Ever Greener':

> Whether Cardew or Holloway,
> Whether Machaut, new apparelled,
> Whether Barrett or Finnissy,
> Whether Judith's King Harald.
> Ever greener, Ever greener, Ever greener, My arbour.
> Ever greener, Ever greener, Ever greener, My arbour.

Works for Small Ensemble.

The small ensemble is again an area into which Skempton has branched with increasing confidence over the past fifteen years, but works do date back to the mid-1970s, namely with 'Surface Tension' and 'Surface Tension 2' (both 1975). Essentially Skempton, as will be seen in his orchestral works, does not attempt to add to the complexity of structure with the increasing number of instruments. The essential message is one of simplicity of sound. 'Surface Tension' exhibits simple structure and choice of material with chromatically falling lines in the ostinato piano part (again reminiscent of 'The Durham Strike', 'Even Tenor' or 'Recessional') and with static harmony notes provided in the flute and ´cello parts.

'Surface Tension 2' again employs a static harmonic field which uses seven notes (C, D, Eb, Ab, A natural, Bb and B natural) at differing octaves and in nine combinations. Analysis of the ordering of the notes or groups of note does not exhibit a clear structure behind them, so again one may presume that either aleatory methods or intuition alone was employed. 'Autumn Waltz' (1975) for two baritone horns and 'Lullaby' (1983) for clarinet and ´cello share the simple design of the 'Surface

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[60] 'Song at the Year's Turning' is reproduced in full in Appendix Two.

Tension' series, in these cases with repetition of a limited number of phrases. In 'Agreement' (1985) for two drums, however, the beginning of an elaborate structure within ensemble composition is evident. Four note combinations are used, as shown in example 4.5, although one could argue only three are used, because obviously A equals D twice. These combinations are used together to make thirty different rhythms and analysis shows patterns emerging in the ordering of these rhythms, although they are be no means conclusive of a single pattern underlying the work.

Example 4.5

A- ♩♩   B- ♫   C- ♪♩   D- ♩

'Broadside', for oboe, clarinet, ´cello and bass, was written for 'Ixion' in 1991 and is the perfect combination of Skempton's structured Chordal method and his simple writing for small ensemble. Eight chords, marked A to H in example 4.6 (a), are used with two additional chords (I and J) which are combinations of the main eight. Example 4.6 (b) then shows the overall ordering of these chords. Two main groups are noted; [1] is ABCDEFGHGFED and [2] is GIEDCJ, containing the combinatory chords. These two groups are either used in their entirety or fragmented (as bracketed in example 4.6 (b)). However the interest comes in the fact that the second half of [1] is the beginning of a symmetry, or retrograde of DEFGH, and that the presence of G(I)EDC in group [2] is also evidence that it is based on a retrograde of the first seven chords of the original sequence.

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[61] 'Tree Sequence', (1981 to 1982), 'Tree Sequence 2' (1983).

Example 4.6 (a)

Example 4.6 (b)

The harmonic material arranged in this way, Skempton sets it in his usual slow (although it has to be measured in an ensemble) and quiet manner (there is only the initial dynamic of *p*). Although the division of double-stopped strings in the lower register and wind instruments in the upper register suggests a marked distinction between melody and accompaniment, this is avoided by using the upper registers of the ´cello and the lower ones of the clarinet in frequent crossovers in pitch which blur the occasional dissonance of the strings even further.[62]

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[62] 'Broadside' is reproduced in full in Appendix Two.

Two other works demand a brief mention here, firstly the 'Chamber Concerto' (1995) which was commissioned for the Brighton New Music Festival in 1995. Mark Pappenheim, in his review of the concert, described it as "a delightful series of dotty dances, ending in a Lento-esque slump (Parsifal puts his feet up?)".[63] The second work is Skempton's incidental music to 'Delicate' which was commissioned by the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group in corroboration with the Motionhouse Dance Company and first performed in Coventry at the Warwick Arts Centre in 1996. Performing in some small venues, the BCMG wanted Skempton to write for two instruments, but when ´cellos were suggested it was agreed that a small amount of percussion (one tympanum and bongos) would be permitted. These confines obviously suit Skempton's preference for a composition to meet the criteria for which it is to be written, and the finalised score contained contrasting effects for the ´cellos from drones through pizzicato sections to virtuosic performance on harmonics.

The most lively and successful sections were the ostinato based ones, into which Skempton typically threw off-putting uneven bars and syncopated melodies. This was perfectly complimented by the movement of the dancers, who contrasted frequent repetition of movement and great energy with moments of stillness and grace. Skempton found the whole project a totally new experience, having been asked to change or extend whole sections of music during the prior months to make them fit with the dancing set. Similarly Motionhouse had found that they had had to adjust to a new sound and commented that it had made an enormous difference when the BCMG had commenced rehearsals (only a week earlier) and the music could have the sense of freedom that Skempton's demands. Skempton has felt, and this is

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[63] Mark Pappenheim, "Classical: Don't mention which war?", Independent (12 May 1995), p. 29

reflected in the increasing complexity of works for small ensemble, that each performance is part of a learning process.[64]

Orchestral.

Skempton did not write his first fully orchestrated work until 1980, when he completed <u>Chorales</u> in response to a commission from the Merseyside Youth Orchestra. Early experimental works for orchestra, however, existed from the Scratch Orchestra days, the most well-known being 'May Pole' (1971) (there are also 'Pole' (1970) and 'Movement for Orchestra' (1971)). In 'May Pole' material (in the form of unmeasured single or couplets of notes without dynamic) was ordered using aleatory procedures and the following instruction is given at the top of the score: "Each player chooses a single note from each chord, entering any time after the beat (20″), the later, the more softly". Pitches are chosen from a range of just over three octaves, as shown in example 4.7, lending the opportunity for limitless colours to be achieved.

Example 4.7

Parsons acknowledges that "these works have the practical virtue of being playable by any instrumental combination", which naturally echoes the manifesto of

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[64] The above 'quotes' from Skempton and members of the 'Motionhouse Dance Company' are from discussions after the first performance.

the Scratch Orchestra as seen in Chapter One.[65] However more important, the real virtue, is the sheer number of possibilities that are aroused by the simple six pitches and carefully given instructions. After a recent rehearsal at the University of Sussex a performer was observed carefully repeating the notes at the piano, trying to find out 'what made them work'. The answer, of course, is the manner in which Skempton draws the ears of listener and performer alike to the very smallest details of each sound as described in Chapter Two. Through this controlled freedom the boundaries of performance are changed, but not closed.

As mentioned, <u>Chorales</u> (1980) was Skempton's first full work for orchestra, and as Calum MacDonald points out, "with a playing time of about 12 minutes it is by Skemptonian standards a major work".[66] <u>Chorales</u> is, as both MacDonald and Parsons describe, built around three pillars which are repetitions of the main 'Chorale' (they occur at the beginning, middle and end). It is only accurate to mention, however, that the middle chorale is not an exact repetition as the last is: Skempton says that the "sixteen chords which form the main chorales existed for a long time in open-score" and the sixteen chords of which he speaks are the opening and closing chorales.[67] In fact the sixth, seventh and eighth chords are repeated within this whole giving the order 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10-11-12-6-13-7-8.   The thirteenth chord could also be considered a development of chord five (one note is chromatically changed).

This may seem a pedantic analysis, and at the least is quite useless alone, but it does serve to illustrate the difference between the outer and central main chorales. The ordering for the central chorale, therefore, is; 6-13 (5′)-7-8-9-1-2-3-4-5-6-n1-11-12-n6-n1 where chords preceded by an 'n' mean derivatives of the former chords. Obviously this structuring both preserves the original form (identity) of the chorale

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[65] Parsons, "The Music of Howard Skempton", p. 15

(with 1 to 6 in order) but is also a development or central alternative; it both repeats and develops.

In between each of these 'pillars' are three short melodic and different Chordal sections. Parsons feels reminded of Bartok and Messiaen--"in the chromatic contour and harmonisation"--of the first melodic section which comes straight after the first presentation of the main chorale.[68] Naturally the structure of the section, despite any harmonic connotation, is typically Skempton's, exhibiting the symmetry of ABABA in four-bar phrases. In each repetition the setting is increased leading to a build into a smaller chordal section for six bars which is not based on the main chorale. Another melody follows this section, again building on a repeating phrase. The second repetition occurs a false start in bar 57 and extends in falling quaver scales, the third repetition extending in chromatic triplets, these being examples of Skempton's frequent use of repetition and variation in one; upsetting the listener's expectations. There is a short silence before the central chorale.

The chorale is this time followed by a longer and slower chordal section, which, like the one at rehearsal mark C (already mentioned), does not seem to be based on the harmonic material of the main chorales. Four main chords are used in growing orchestration, and each chord starts from a bare few notes and is slowly built upon (the first two chords appear in three different developments), recalling the analyses of 'Prelude 6' and 'Maestoso' for piano. When summarised, these chords give the order 1-2-1-2 - 1-1-2-3 - 1-1-2-3 - 3-4 and grow into one final melody which repeats four times and then develops into unison strings, recurring again at bars 140 (transposed down a major sixth) and 150, 153, 156 and 159 (up a minor third) before

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[66] Calum MacDonald, 'Skempton's Chorales', Tempo 142 (September 1982), p. 41
[67] Quoted in Parsons, "Howard Skempton: Chorales, Landscapes and Melodies", p. 19
[68] Ibid., pp. 16-19

returning to the previous chordal material (using chords 1, 3 and 4) to lead into the final repeat of the main chorale.

Chorales was undoubtedly a success for Skempton, especially in the context of this first move away from his usual succinct forms. The structure of the whole piece, as Skempton himself recognises, was obviously built with this in mind; the nine short sections which are held together by the consistency of his method and harmonic language. This is reflected in the manner in which his piano pieces are often performed; "Rather than playing them as isolated single pieces, the performer may choose to perform them in linked sequences".[69] Hence Skempton overcame the problem of writing a much longer continuous work than he was used to simply by avoiding the possibility: the longer work came a decade later with Lento (1991). Chorales was performed in Liverpool and London in 1982 and gained encouraging responses, such as MacDonald's "every effect is precisely and beautifully judged... *Chorales* has been a breakthrough for Skempton: I for one await his *next* orchestral piece with great impatience".[70]

Skempton's next orchestral piece came five years later, with Chorales II (1987). However, it was not until 1991 that Skempton received a professional performance of an orchestral work, with Lento, completed a year earlier after a BBC commission. The success was enormous. In the time since Lento was first broadcast in March 1991 it has received somewhat of a cult status amongst an audience much wider and more diverse than that attracted by the 'Images' series on Channel Four two years earlier. The original recording is now published by NMC and the score by Oxford University Press. There is no requirement in this chapter for a full analysis of the work's structure and planning, as Keith Potter does this perfectly in his article,

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[69] Quoted in Parsons, "Howard Skempton: Chorales, Landscapes and Melodies", p. 19

'Howard Skempton: some clues for a post-experimental 'movement'' which was a preview to the first performance.[71]

Instead it is simply worth noting the pure simplicity of the work: Skempton feels no need to introduce systems of development, nor does he endlessly repeat the limited amount of material he uses. The opening theme is used four times, three times quietly in the strings, and once in a grand tutti at *f*. There are five other sections which all seem to relate to the opening section but actually were composed as separate chorales and then intuitively put together by the composer. The resulting effect is of a static harmony, but one that draws the listener inside it by means of diverse and careful scoring, sensitive dynamics and solid structure. This makes one feel that although the piece never actually moves from A to B that one actually travelled a long way to A, stayed there for some time, and that was enough.

Lento has continued to be performed regularly, and has continued to catch the attention of a growing audience and a complimentary media: "It shapes sound as a sculptor might carve wood, with love and respect for well-differentiated tones and colours."[72] It is this craftsmanship which has drawn the success of the work. The work may not travel anywhere but neither does it burden the listener with purpose or moral. Skempton describes this as "A certain 'floating' quality. This 'lightness'... may be due to precision: craftsmanship".[73] This quality unites Lento and 'May Pole'; even though the approach to each composition and realisation of material is entirely different, the essential aim of the composer is to draw both performers and audience alike into the unique sound-world and have them examine everything around them to

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[70] MacDonald, p41. See also J.Blezzard, "Skempton: Chorales", Musical Times v123 no 1671 (1982), p. 349.
[71] Keith Potter, "Howard Skempton: Some Clues For A Post-Experimental 'Movement'", Musical Times (March 1991) pp. 126-130
[72] Robert Maycock, "Casualties of War", Independent (4 May 1993), p. 14
[73] From Skempton's own notes: see footnote 7.

the smallest detail. In such a manner it becomes almost impossible to analyse <u>Lento</u> aurally, sections being too similar and yet not the same, time passing in repetition and development simultaneously. But this does not matter. As it did not matter *how* Skempton made the pitches "work" in 'May Pole'. All that matters is that one is drawn to listen. That is a very Experimental attitude.

Chapter V

EPILOGUE.

The Analyses over the last two chapters have in general been objective, concentrating on the development of structures behind Skempton's work and their relation to the sound-world which is uniquely his, although not without influence. Long descriptive passages have been avoided because it is hoped that any reader interested will listen to the readily available recordings (or play the recently published music) and judge the musicality here commented upon for him or herself. Any breadth of analysis and detailed description cannot equal one hearing of a piece.

The current time is a good one for Skempton. He is writing much music to commission and is being published again for the first time since a small Faber collection of his piano pieces in the 1970s. Now available from Oxford University Press are the Collected Piano Pieces, Lento, 'Lullaby' and the 'Images' collection, with further pieces expected soon. In addition to the NMC recording of 'Lento', there has been a Sony release of John Tilbury's selection of Skempton's piano pieces on a CD entitled 'Well, Well, Cornelius' earlier this year. This means the music is now accessible by a wider public, and many responses have been positive. The final question to answer, therefore, is--why? Why has it become so successful? Is this music revolutionary, something new? Is it the forefront of a postmodern movement?

It is problematic to regard Skempton as a postmodern composer with regards to much contemporary thought, although what exactly makes a postmodern composer is a question in itself. The main criteria of judging what is postmodern in Linda Hutcheon's book, "The Politics of Postmodernism", are a dedoxifying intent, paradox

and parody, none of which are present in Skempton's work.[74] The music takes itself entirely seriously (possibly with the exception of a few of the songs). However, as Hutcheon points out, there are many opinions, or constructions, of Postmodernism.[75] This is confirmed by Holloway's article, "Modernism and After in Music" which is closer to identifying a postmodernism with which one can identify Howard Skempton.[76]

Holloway's definition is nearer to a literal 'after-modernism'. To this extent, Skempton does offer an alternative present-day theory of composition to those cited in Holloway's article as the ongoing <u>modernists</u>: "Elliott Carter (aged 80), Shapey (68), Xenakis (66), Birtwisle (55), Ferneyhough (45)".[77] Skempton's music is not a reaction <u>against</u> modernism (as discussed in Chapter Two), more a re-evaluation of what is important in music. Holloway describes true postmodern music as following paths that could have been taken in history but were not; consolidating rather than innovating, making one choice where a composer made another. In this respect, Skempton is following several paths. The relation to a tonal system, but playing with our preconceptions of it, one may identify with the extension of tonality during the second half of the nineteenth century; the establishing of new tonalities through the use of repetition one may relate to the very early modernist works of Bartok and Stravinsky; one could even argue the continuation of an English line from Britten; and, of course, the Experimental line as examined in Chapter One, dating back to Satie and Cowell with Cage and Cardew as Skempton's greatest influences.

Another coincidence with Holloway's description of a postmodern composer is that Skempton is not writing 'music for theory's sake'--as Holloway describes it,

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[74] Linda Hutcheon, <u>The Politics of Postmodernism,</u> (London: Routledge, 1993)
[75] Ibid., p. 11
[76] Robin Holloway, "Modernism and After in Music", <u>The Cambridge Review,</u> (June 1989) pp. 60-66
[77] Ibid., p. 62

"Nasty modern music.... three-quarters-empty halls... confront contemporary composers"--but as has been seen with his approach to composition, considers the audience when planning a piece.[78] A path of its own making, then, is being followed. Not a path directly in history as Holloway suggests, but a path created by the drawing together of the ideas Skempton feels important, the path of balance between musicality and the need for structure. The result is a reflective music, but not necessarily an eclectic one. But this does not answer the question of <u>why</u> this music should suddenly find its niche.

The reason for Skempton's growing popularity relates with serendipity to Cage's concerns in his later years, that "the greatest crisis confronting society in the late twentieth-century was overpopulation".[79] For Cage, this was both a political and social problem, which he reacted to with the invention of 'anarchic harmony'. The relation to Skempton's music, however, is in Cage's own words: "If the masses are going to get any culture that is really useful to them, they will get it individually rather than as a group".[80] He was again talking of a contemporary need for the individual to create space, and its relation to the arts.

Feldman created space, much of it, but his (as Cage's) was an space alien to many, or at least a space which was not easily accessible. Skempton has, perhaps unintentionally, filled that gap; created pieces with much smaller forms than Feldman's, but with a freedom that fulfils the same need. Again we are reminded of Skempton's belief that music "can stem the tide of time", the ultimate aim when attempting to create the space of which Cage spoke.[81]

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[78] Ibid., p. 60 and p. 63
[79] Mark Swed, "John Cage: September 5, 1912- August 12, 1992", <u>Musical Quarterly</u> (Spring 1993) pp. 132-144 (this quote p. 140).
[80] Cage, John: <u>Conversation with Joan Retallack</u>, (Washington, D.C.: Aerial, Edge Books 1991) p. 100
[81] Skempton quoted in Parsons, "The Music of Howard Skempton", p. 14

And of Skempton's position in today's musical world? As mentioned in the introduction to Chapter One, he does not seem to fit easily into the brackets that critics place upon him, perhaps with the exception of Potter's as yet undefined "Post-experimental movement".[82] Skempton carries with him the Experimental aesthetic ("let sounds be themselves") and some of the method, and yet he appears to be creating a <u>new</u> music, which is already gathering a younger generation of followers. In these terms we may certainly consider Skempton a major clue for a post-experimental movement, defining the term as 'from' or 'after' Experimentalism: the continuation of many thoughts but the development of a new position within the musical world. Hill says, "Heaven forbid that one should burden any composer with the label 'important' over and above the pleasure his music gives", but the music itself is now gaining its own importance.[83] This is being achieved by Skempton's careful <u>balance</u>.

> I have frequently drawn strength from the Ancient Greek aesthetic once defined to me as follows: "Perfect Parts in Perfect Harmony to form Unity with Clarity".[84]

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[82] Potter, p. 126
[83] Hill, p. 11
[84] Howard Skempton.

APPENDIX ONE

SELECTED PIANO PIECES

These pieces have been removed from the online version for copyright reasons. Piano pieces can be located in the following Oxford University Press publications:

Collected Piano Pieces

Images for piano

'Even Tenor'

'Seascape'

'Prelude 6'

'Prelude 1'

'Campanella 3'

'The Durham Strike'

OTHER SELECTED WORKS.

Skempton's Improvisation Rites in "Nature Study Notes".

The following pieces have been removed from the online version for copyright

reasons. They can be located at the British Music Information Centre.

'One for the Road'

'Three Pieces for Oboe', third movement.

'Song at the Year's Turning'

'Broadside'

HOWARD SKEMPTON- IMPROVISATION RITES.

The following are excerpts from "Nature Study Notes- Improvisation Rites 1969", edited by Cornelius Cardew. A copy is held in the British Music Information Centre. Titles are given in brackets where provided in Cardew's index. All Rites without a title were simply numbered "Improvisation Rite no. 1", etc. The codes are those of the book.

HSIRNT13   When you're not playing, look for a girl in red stockings.

HSIRNT14   Before playing, do something inappropriate. Keep doing it until it seems inappropriate to start playing. Start playing.

HSIRNF28   Do something. Undo it. Do it again- but louder. Undo it again. Do it while undoing it. Undo it while doing it.

HSBR34   Six deep breaths...

HSTPR41   ("Three-part Rite") Each player divides himself into three _equal_ parts.

HSSR51   ("Swimming Rite") First of all, play as freely as possible, without regard for personal safety.

HSTROJ52   ("The Rite of Jokes") Before the improvisation, tell a few jokes to get everybody into a good humour.

HSOR53   ("Orphan Rite") ...with blindfold.

HSWR54   ("Wheel Rite") Rotate / before starting.

HSPR55   ("Puberty Rite") Drop everything. Do it gently for fear of damage.

HSSR56   ("Shaving Rite") One person starts shaving; the rest improvise loudly, getting softer as the growth is removed. When the shave is finished, dynamics are free.

HSWRS7   ("Weather Rite") Make detailed observations of weather conditions. The mood of the improvisation must contradict the evidence of the senses.

HS58   INTROIT. Procrastinate.

HSOR59   ("Opera Rite") Regard instability as a function of discontent.

HSDNT152   The drum is without form. A simple extension of the soul.

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