

Assured And Permanent Catastrophe : Notes On Composing, 2003-2012

Samuel Andreyev

I moved from Toronto to Paris in September 2003, when I was 22. I had no idea how this would play out at the time, since I had no resources, contacts, or even the most rudimentary plan, besides a desire for adventure and a sense that the contemporary music scene in Europe was more vital and exciting than what was happening at home. A friend had suggested I get in touch with Allain Gaussin and try to join his composition class at the Conservatoire de Sevrans (a suburb of Paris). However, he had unexpectedly been asked to teach at the Conservatoire de Paris (CNSMDP) for a year to replace Marco Stroppa, so I ended up studying with Franck Bedrossian, his replacement, for that first year. Franck was a recent CNSMDP graduate himself, and had striking attitudes toward contemporary music which clashed with my own.

The first composition I started after arriving in Paris was my contribution to the microgenre of solo oboe repertoire, *Locus Solus*¹. An oboist myself, I was intensely preoccupied with writing wind music at the time. The basic gestural vocabulary of this piece owed a lot to my largely failed attempts at understanding Boulez' piano sonatas, but transposed into the domain of wind music. I showed the score to Bedrossian, who felt that my instrumental writing wasn't sufficiently invested in radical playing techniques, and suggested I listen to Lachenmann and Grisey. As a piece, *Locus Solus* represents one of my earliest attempts at establishing a homogenous technique. Nevertheless, I feel it succeeds at expressing something personal, and the work is characterized by an intense, disorienting expression, propelled more by rapid intercutting than linear development (see Example 1).

5

III.

Example 1: *Locus Solus*, 3rd movement, mm. 1-10.

Wanting to go farther, I then embarked on a truly utopian project which, at the time, had little hope of seeing performance: *PHP* (2003) for heckelphone and two pianos

¹ Title after the novel of the same name by Raymond Roussel (1914).

(subsequently revised and premiered in 2011 as *PLP*, a slightly-revised rescoring for lupophone). Although I had to wait 8 years to hear a performance, this was an important piece for me, exploring spatialization, attack/ resonance figures, and large-scale formal strategies. Like *Locus Solus*, *PHP* was written with a kind of very loosely-employed dodecaphonic technique, which was obviously a highly eccentric position to take at the time, but it provided an adequate technical armature, allowing me to focus on my quest for a chromatically saturated music of considerable expressive intensity.

On a trip to London in March 2004, I saw an exhibition of paintings by Phillip Guston at the Royal Academy. This extremely impressive show inspired the title and certain formal qualities of my next piece, *Music with no Edges* (2004) for five instruments. This piece consists of four very different movements, each based on a distinct formal concept. The whole was unified, however, by my search for maximal independence of the instrumental lines, both harmonically and rhythmically, throughout the work. Transparency and flexibility became priorities. I tried to ensure that no rhythmic unisons occurred, the better to highlight the individual qualities of each line (see Example 2).

Example 2: *Music with no Edges*, 3rd movement, mm. 26-27.

Nevertheless, since arriving in France, I gradually began to familiarize myself with more recent developments in contemporary music and my instrumental writing began to evolve as a result, becoming more mutable, plastic, and focused on sonority. The genre of solo wind piece seemed an ideal vehicle for such investigations, so I then wrote *Nombres imaginaires* (2004) for flute, and *Passages* (2005) for clarinet. Both these pieces were written while a student in Allain Gaussin's class, after his return to the Conservatoire de Sevran in September 2004. Gaussin encouraged me to think more precisely about the importance of perception in my work, which forced me to look beyond my often exclusively structuralist concerns and consider the connection between the generative technique and the sounding result. My subsequent reflections on this question slowed my output somewhat, but resulted in a more acute

sensitivity to formal articulation. *Nombres imaginaires* took static harmonic fields and subjected them to prismatic timbral and figural variations, while *Passages*, composed roughly at the same time as the septet *Signaux* (2005, withdrawn), was the result of my personal investigations into ways in which musical time could be considered and notated. In particular, it alternates sections in which the meter never varies, but in which the rhythmic values—usually irrational—are constantly changing, the perception of tempo further disturbed by constant accelerandi and ritardandi (see Example 3), sections in which the meter constantly varies, but in which the beat patterns are pulsed (see Example 4).

1) Certain quarter-tones in the low register must be achieved through an embouchure change and/or through placing the tongue on the reed
 1) Certains des quarts de ton dans le registre grave ne peuvent être réalisés que par un changement d'embouchure et/ou en posant la langue sur l'anche

Example 3: *Passages*, mm. 1-4.

1) Certain quarter-tones in the low register must be achieved through an embouchure change and/or through placing the tongue on the reed
 1) Certains des quarts de ton dans le registre grave ne peuvent être réalisés que par un changement d'embouchure et/ou en posant la langue sur l'anche

Example 4: *Passages*, mm. 25-27.

In *Signaux*, which took nearly a year to write, I attempted to make an entire piece out of a single generating idea, that of a regular pulsation given by various percussion instruments triggering events in the rest of the ensemble. The title came from my productive misunderstanding of Steve McCaffery's *Signalist Poem*.² It was in this work that my lack of experience with orchestration became most apparent, resulting in the ultimate withdrawal of the piece from my catalogue. Indeed, approximately half of the pieces I wrote between 2003 and 2012 were eventually discarded. I can see no reason to publish work which falls short of my standards, regardless of how long I may spend writing a piece.

Having experienced great creative difficulties throughout the composition of *Signaux*, largely due to an overly-constricting and inflexible approach to material, I undertook the composition of *Moving* (2006), for piccolo oboe, viola, and piano. At the time I was not very concerned with issues of practicality, and had a totally utopian attitude towards the use of esoteric instruments. The dramaturgy of *Moving* was founded upon simple binary oppositions—stasis versus sudden, violent motion—but attempted to push these as far as possible, resulting in the constant threat of the work's basic precepts being violated, until all possibility of continuing is blocked. The renewed rhythmic focus of *Passages* bore its fruits here, but in different ways: for the first time, I worked with large-scale periodicities, which determine the order of events in the entire first section of the score (see Example 5). *Moving* furthermore

² McCaffery, Steve, *Seven Pages Missing Volume One: Selected Texts 1969-1999* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2000), p. 390.

pushed the intense expressivity, even violence of the works I've completed thus far to a point of no return; in subsequent works, such extremes would be the exception, the dominant expressive climate being more contemplative and spacious.

Relatively satisfied with *Moving*, which I nevertheless had to write three times before feeling I had done justice to the idea, I then composed *Stopping* (2006) for two vibraphones for a residency at Royaumont. *Stopping*, as the title indicates, is a sister-work to *Moving*, and in many ways its opposite. To the frenetic, hyper-intense trio of piccolo oboe, viola, and piano, I contrasted a pair of vibraphones, for a radically different sound. This piece, which I considered to be one of my best up until then, allowed me to subject the vibraphone to an extremely minute analysis of its technical possibilities, many of which, it seemed to me, had been overlooked. In particular, I was intrigued by the idea of using the instrument's motor—nearly always avoided in contemporary repertoire, even though this is perhaps the instrument's most characteristic feature—as an integral part of the piece. I found that by setting the motors to different speeds—or by modulating them gradually—I could compose interesting interference patterns between the two instruments. The formal side of the composition was far more spontaneously arrived at this time, the various articulation possibilities of the vibraphone serving to create large-scale contrast. At the end of the residency at Royaumont, Marc Texier offered me a commission, my first since moving to Europe: a work for solo bass oboe. It was premiered at the Archipel Festival in Geneva the following year.

It was at this point that I began studying composition at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse de Paris (CNSMDP) with Frédéric Durieux, as well as taking analysis classes with Claude Ledoux. The constant exposure to performing musicians of the highest caliber allowed me to improve my orchestrational skills rapidly, freeing me up as well to write at a faster pace, and hear each new piece performed under ideal circumstances soon after its completion. Durieux made me acutely sensitive to the importance of notation, and strengthened my harmonic thinking. But perhaps most importantly, he stressed what I might call an ethics of composition, the importance of rigorous honesty at all steps of the process.

I returned to my formal speculations in *Nets Move Slowly, Yet*³ (2006, withdrawn). This piece was the first of mine to deal directly with the question of disjunction as a compositional principle. I wanted to create a work in which various heterogeneous streams would be simultaneously operational, and moving independently of one another. These streams could be heard simultaneously, interpolated, or made to disappear altogether at times. I also was starting to get into a quasi-microscopic approach to orchestration, giving a constant, subtle motion to the music by means of minute shadings of pitch, timbre, and duration. This piece was followed by the quintet *La Pendule de Profil* (2007), in which I tried to subject the intuitively unfolding streams of *Nets Move Slowly, Yet* to a consciously-defined grammar. The initial version of the piece didn't work as I'd hoped, however: the material was too compacted and demanded a more expansive treatment. I withdrew the work after one disappointing performance.

³ Title after the poem of the same name which appeared in my book *Evidence* (Toronto: Quattro Books, 2009).

60 *sans vibrato* *pp très détimbré* *vibrato normal* *ppp*

gliss. *pp* *sul pont.* *(ord.) gett.* *mp* *pp*

Reo. *

63 *flz.* *fp* *fff* *1)* *tr* *5:3*

molto sul pont. *pression exagérée de l'archet* *fff*

p *pp* *f* *ff* *fff* *5:3* *15^{ma}*

1) Multiphonique, à choisir librement

E tempo primo ♩ = 84 *flz.* *3* *mp* *p* *mf* *pp* *tr*

ord. *6* *5* *flautando* *ppp* *3* *gett.* *tr* *pp*

E tempo primo ♩ = 84 *p* *5* *pp* *8^{va}* *5* *8^{va}* *5* *8^{va}* *Reo.* *

Example 5: *Moving*, mm. 66-70.

In March 2007, I began composing my commissioned work for the Archipel Festival. The result was *Micrographia*, which developed the repeating large-scale metric periods found in certain sections of *Nets Move Slowly, Yet*, as well as the binary-opposition principle of pieces such as *Moving*. The premiere performance was another disappointment, however, as I was dismayed to find that the fine gradations of pitch and intensity upon which the piece depends were simply not idiomatic to the bass oboe. Extremely few performances, most of them unsatisfying, in the context of assured and permanent economic catastrophe: the beginning composer's path is not always easy. Nevertheless, I had no doubts regarding the basic soundness of my choices.

A pair of instrumental compositions for ensemble, *Night Division* (2008-10) and *Stars in the Dice* (2009, withdrawn), occupied the larger part of my creative energies for the following two years. These works had two very different starting points. *Night Division* began as an attempt at fragmentation of some basic material, a constant recombination and development of a large number of autonomous figures. This relentless "division" was also to take place at the level of timbre, instrumental sonority being explored in greater depth than I had attempted up until this point. *Stars in the Dice*⁴ (withdrawn) was a radically different experience. Having grown exasperated with the at times excessive amount of pre-compositional sketching my way of working required of me, which was starting to impede rather than enable spontaneous generation of ideas, I wanted to start with no generative material at all beyond a single anacrusis-accent-decay gesture with which the piece opens; what follows is an investigation of various possible extensions of this opening. Its perceived rate of change is hence considerably slower than that of *Night Division*.

At this point, rather than continuing to begin new projects, I felt it was more important for me to rework a number of older pieces. I felt this would allow me to calibrate more precisely the direction I would be taking in future works, and also to remember which paths I had abandoned, and which techniques no longer served my purposes. To this end, I entirely rewrote *La pendule de profil*. This piece was by far the most extensively revised, entirely new sections having been added, existing ones extensively improved. As the problems of musical notation were becoming an obsession, I also re-engraved nearly all the pieces I'd composed up until *Night Division*, partly in order to fix small inconsistencies and achieve a greater simplicity of notation while remaining faithful to the text of the scores, and partly to make minor improvements to my instrumental writing, reflecting my greater experience.

By then I felt I had successfully dealt with most of my initial precepts and began to be preoccupied with other questions. For instance, I no longer believed in the necessity of each piece having central organizing features. My search for a highly integrated technique led me ultimately to feel that the sensations I was after—disjunction, multiplicity, ambiguity—could better be arrived at through other means. I wanted the material to be as simple as possible, more sharply defined, even minimal at times, the better to make its radical disfigurings, decontextualizations, and decouplings perceptually relevant. Articulation, resonance, and timbre gradually assumed defining roles in my compositional practice.

Cinq pièces (2010) was, and is, a rather eccentric item in my worklist. The music sounds linear, even repetitive, on the surface. The piece as a whole is strikingly directional, something I had rarely attempted before and have not done since. In the first piece, a descending rhythmic figure played on four cymbals is heard dozens of

⁴ Title taken from "Something Blue," a poem from *Evidence* (see footnote 3).

times in the same, unvarying succession; yet the exact number of repetitions on each cymbal varies each time, resulting in music at once predictable (in terms of the overall shape of the gesture involved) and unpredictable (in that the duration of the figures changes each time). The pieces are made up of overlapping loops of varying durations. These loops are sometimes directly evident to the listener, sometimes discernible only through analysis. The work inaugurated a new focus on issues of perception (see Example 6).

I.

samuel andreiev

quasi meccanico ♩ = 100

Flûte

4 Cymbales suspendues

Tam-tam

baguettes chinoises sur le dôme

(maillloche suspendue)

sempre *f*

sempre *l.v.*

Fl.

Cymb.

T.-L.

sur le centre

Example 6: *Cinq pièces*, first movement, mm. 1-8.

At the Darmstadt festival in Summer 2010, I met Australian saxophonist Joshua Hyde, who encouraged me to revive *Micrographia* and re-write it for tenor saxophone, which I did. The piece was so perfectly suited for saxophone that it only took a few days to make the necessary changes. Suddenly the work snapped into focus, and it went from being one of those instantly forgotten festival items, to one of my most performed pieces. I also completed both *Cinq pièces*, writing the second movement which I had had trouble with before, and *A moitié gommé* for cello.

In *A moitié gommé* (2010, withdrawn) I wanted to take what I'd learned about the possibilities of repetition in *Cinq pièces* and explore the ambiguity between new and unfamiliar material. The score consists of ten unbound, unnumbered pages which can be played in any order, as long as all are played. Each page contains the same succession of small, fragmentary figures, but presented in a different light each time. Two of the pages include only one bar, to be repeated various numbers of times. It usually takes a few minutes before the listener realizes that they are hearing the same material over and over again, and even then it is not always consciously apparent. The idea was to frustrate any sense of a linear progression in the music: everything is repeated an unpredictable number of times, broken up, continually changed. On certain levels, the piece did more or less what I wanted it to do. However, the different treatments of the basic one-page unit now seem to me to lack sufficient variety, and the piece is no longer in circulation.

The biggest piece I had attempted to write up until then was *Along Unseen Rails* (2010-11, withdrawn) for large ensemble. My initial point of departure had been to write a large number of short movements, perhaps ten or so, but have different material re-appear cyclically throughout. As it happened though, the piece ended up containing only four movements, each one more or less a world in itself: the first is a slow, inexorable canon played mostly by the strings; the second, a rapid, scherzo-like movement continually interrupted by unrelated, repetitive material. The third movement is a miniature concerto for oboe d'amore, and the last presents overlapping cycles of heterogeneous material in ever-varying configurations. The piece made a more disparate impression than I had hoped for, and I don't find it a total success. However, it signaled the end of my formal composition studies. I spent a year at IRCAM after this, a period which fostered one short piece for cello and live electronics, *Jonché de croulantes merveilles* (withdrawn), as well as a healthy skepticism of institutionalized creativity. In order to stay sane during this period, I composed *Vérifications*, a piece which signaled the beginning of my ongoing collaboration with ensemble proton bern, and allowed me to go farther than had previously been possible in my exploration of rare instruments.

Vérifications further consolidated two areas of my compositional thinking. First, it deals on a very direct level with the deriving of material from highly specific instrumental combinations, and my subjective reactions to such. It is therefore a material-imminent piece, rather than a primarily formal composition. Second, the fourth movement, although lasting little over two minutes in performance, is an elaborately-planned network of repeating patterns. A sequence of seven chords is heard over a loop of six time signatures, with one chord per bar, so that 6x7 repetitions of both cycles are necessary in order for the starting point to be reached again (see Example 7).



||: $\frac{3}{4}$ $\frac{5}{16}$ $\frac{2}{4}$ $\frac{5}{8}$ $\frac{3}{16}$ $\frac{4}{4}$:||

Example 7: *Vérifications* chord sequence and metrical cycle.

There are many other patterns involved. Mainly, though, the peculiar sound of this movement came from the constraint of having to use these seven chords with such an extremely unusual instrumentation, and attempting to make the result sound as balanced as possible while still ensuring sufficient textural variety. The fact that interesting failure is guaranteed made the enterprise that much more exciting, in my view.

Now that I have a certain degree of distance from my beginnings and from my production, a few things are clear. First, I have been intensely focused since the very beginning on what I might term a phenomenology of sound. The written score is an efficient means to an end, but no more: the existential reality of a piece, for me, lies in

the confrontation between the physical sound of the work and the person listening to it. I am less and less concerned with atemporal structural devices. My earlier scores resulted from a real struggle with the material, often necessitating years of hard, painful work. This kind of effort has become more internalized now, so that while the work still necessitates a lengthy period of reflection before getting to the stage where I can actually write the score, I currently produce very few sketches.

Second, I consider the instrument to be my primary material. Its unique characteristics, its history, and the ways in which it can be combined with others, provide an essential starting point for my reflections. For instance, *La pendule de profil* would have been a totally different piece had it been scored for bass clarinet rather than basset horn. Every piece I have written so far (apart from two short piano pieces) has a notably different instrumentation. In this way, I am able to make each project highly specific and distinct from others.

Finally, I've come to understand that human perception renders even simple objects far more complex than they might appear to be on paper. I've often joked that I have to write ten times more simply than I might be naturally inclined to do, if I want the piece to be even remotely comprehensible—but I find this is actually true. The great creative struggle for me is not generating material—that part is relatively easy—but rather identifying the most essential building blocks of a given project, the ones I could not live without, and stripping them down to their simplest, and hence most flexible form. It is only then that I can truly understand their potential, and begin to orient the expressive focus of a work in the most powerful, direct way possible.