

Traces C for Solo Flute (2006)

James Erber

My "Traces" cycle consists of three solo flute pieces, each of which lasts around 20 minutes. It begins with *Traces* (1991) and continues with *Traces B* (1996-7). The final component, and the subject of this essay, is *Traces C*, written between February and September 2006.

The cycle has its origin in a memory dating from my late teens. During a walking holiday in the Lake District, I came across what my Ordnance Survey map told me was the track of a Roman road. Clearly discernible through the grass, it ran directly across the path I was taking and disappeared into the horizon. I was moved and intrigued by the presence of what had been a major thoroughfare in this now barren and deserted landscape.¹

In the "Traces" cycle, the equivalent of the Roman road is a single continuous rhythmic arch, underlying all three pieces.² Just as the road that I saw was the result of the effects of time and nature, the arch is subjected to several layers of variative activity. It undergoes up to three levels of rhythmic modification, and is also subjected to subsidiary grids controlling further rhythmic treatment, use of various performance techniques, dynamics and other features. The overlaying of these strata creates music that, throughout the course of each piece, is clearly undergoing constant modification complex enough to defy categorisation into structural hierarchies, creating the kind of formal ambiguity notable in much of my output in the ten years prior to composing the cycle.

In *Traces*, the fragile consensus of the musical landscape is threatened, towards the end of the work, by the introduction of a new type of material, characterised by repeated notes and a use of the flute's lower register. Previously encountered material types eventually begin to reappear. The new material, however, obdurately resists being subsumed by these and, to the end, the sense of an uneasy coexistence is maintained.

Traces B begins with much the same music as that which ends *Traces*. It is a more disparate and consciously virtuoso piece than the earlier work, and it is this very richness that constantly threatens to undermine the work's cohesion. The appearance of a lengthy, bravura penultimate section (marked *maestoso* and adumbrated in the previous sections) would seem at last to provide a focal point for the piece. This certainty is deflated in the static final section, in which crescendos and diminuendos provide subtle changes within the prevailing extremely low dynamic level.

There are right from the start some clear differences between *Traces C* and its predecessors. The opening of *Traces B* seems to form a continuation of the final section

¹ *Music for 25 Solo Strings: Epitomaria-Commentaria-Glosaria* of 1981-84, is another "archaeological" piece, suggested by a visit to the Roman remains at Pompeii and Herculaneum. Much of the latter are still buried beneath the modern town of Ercolano. For an analysis and discussion of this work, see my article "Music for 25 Solo Strings" in *Contemporary Music Review*, volume 13, part 1 (1995).

² My only other extended work for solo wind instrument, *Strange Moments of Intimacy* (1999-2001) for clarinet in C, is similarly based on a grid, albeit one used in a slightly freer fashion than that in the "Traces" cycle.

of *Traces*, and it might be expected that the same would occur at the start of *Traces C*. Here, however, the only feature carried over from the end of *Traces B* is the use of descending glissandi on longer notes: it is not possible to prolong into the new piece the distant, almost valedictory music which concludes *Traces B*. This perhaps indicates how my thinking about the cycle had broadened and developed since starting work on it nearly 15 years previously. By 2006, I saw the "Traces" cycle as an attempt to reconcile the nature of memory itself, and of my memory of the road in particular, with the dynamic nature of both an actual journey down the road and the nature of the listener's experience of a musical performance. I wanted *Traces C* to be palpably the final component of the triptych, and as such it is concerned with disintegration, not just that of the road itself, but also of my memory of it, which by 2006 was nearly 40 years old.

Although the musical language of *Traces C* of necessity continues that of the two previous components of the cycle, it also reflects some of the ways in which my compositional technique has changed and developed since the mid 1990's. As far as the music's surface is concerned, some stylistic traits (such as the use of lengthy grace note groups) have been jettisoned, and a far greater emphasis placed on the flute's lower register. Since *Traces B* and *Traces* (until its final section at least) both almost exclusively occupy the flute's upper register, I decided I would redress the balance in the final work in the cycle. Thus the lower register functions in *Traces C* both as part of the large-scale pitch structure and as a means of determining the use of specific performing techniques. On a deeper level, *Traces C* is also the least narrative of the three works constituting the cycle. Right from the opening bars, with their excess of information (Example 1), its music seems to be moving towards the dissolution, which forms the end of the piece.

As with its two predecessors, the rhythmic arch underlying *Traces C* is divided into major sections, which are further subdivided as shown in Example 2, which can be referred to in order to clarify the following description. Each subsection undergoes up to three levels of variative activity (shown as F^1 , F^2 , and F^3 in Example 2), which tend to produce music of increasing rhythmic complexity. For the first time in the cycle, there are three subsections (designated "as is" in Example 2) in section 4 in which the underlying arch is stated more or less in its original form. As is the case throughout the cycle, each level of variative activity is associated with a different tempo. Thus subsections based on F^1 are associated with Tempo 1^a (eighth = 65) and 1^b (eighth = 50), on F^2 with Tempo 2 (eighth = 40) and on F^3 with Tempo 3^a (eighth = 90) and 3^b (eighth = 118). The three "as is" sections are played at Tempo 4 (eighth = 30).

Once again, further systems are then imposed on the music, firstly in the shape of up to four versions of one or more of the five different types of activity entitled "Procedures" (see Example 3). Each major section of the piece is dominated by one of the Procedures: 1 by A, 2 by B and so on. Thus in 1/i, the rhythmic arch undergoes levels 1 and 2 of Procedure A, then level 3 of Procedure B and finally level 4 of Procedure C. Example 4 shows the transformation of b.1-7 by the application of these systems.

Secondly, various performing techniques are allotted to each subsection. These range from techniques (such as trills and other ornaments) commonly found in the instrument's historic repertoire to the so-called "extended techniques" used in the music of the last 50 years or so. These techniques are applied in two Levels. Level 1 involves techniques (such as lip pizzicato, tongue ram and key percussion) only possible in the

lower part of the flute's range as well as requiring certain notes or phrases to be left "as is." Level 2, on the other hand, includes techniques possible over most of the instrument's compass, which are applied to notes or phrases according to their duration. Thus, for example, harmonics, multiphonics and alternative fingerings, either on their own or in combination with other techniques, can be applied to notes longer than a quarter note (see Example 3).

Each bar is allotted a pitch, normally given to the first note of the bar, which acts as a major pitch centre. These pitch centres form a loop, which is drawn upon to provide pitches for the remaining notes in each bar. As the rhythmic material is subjected to further modification, extra pitches, taken from one of several modified forms of the loop, are added. Example 5 shows the accretion of pitch material for b.1-7. The raw pitch material having been worked out, a pitch net determines the registral position of each major pitch as well as that of groups of subsidiary pitches. The net is largely over-ridden in section 1 by a scheme of upward transpositions, so that the opening occupies the high tessitura of most of the rest of the cycle. As the piece progresses, these upward transpositions are gradually phased out, while the appearance of more and more Level 1 (register-specific) performance techniques causes the net to be over-ridden in the opposite direction, in favour of lower pitch centres.

As with *Traces* and *Traces B*, the critical moment of *Traces C* occurs near the end. In this case, however, it is not a drawing back from the abyss of structural disintegration, but an embracing of it.³ The overload of information, which has been apparent from the opening, has constantly endangered the continuity of the musical line. Finally, in section 4, three out of seven subsections present the basic rhythmic arch, each component note decorated only by short groups of grace notes, at the slowest tempo used in the cycle. Each appearance of this new material, which poses an extreme challenge to the player's lungs, seems to offer the promise of a final point of repose. The cadential moment always proves illusory and, after a pause, a further section, of four brief, snapshot-like fragments, unexpectedly follows (Example 6). Throughout the cycle, the possibility of taking the music further has become less likely with each piece. Here, finally, there is a situation in which a continuation is inconceivable. The music has arrived at its dissolution, as must the original memory that brought the cycle into being.

³ Compare the end of my work for 11 instruments *The Death of the Kings* (2007), which features a similar formal dissolution, and the piano piece *Fluctuations* (1996-2006) in which a melody in the extreme high register fails to coalesce.

1/i

$\text{♩} = 65$

$B\sharp$

$C\sharp$

4:3

5:4

6:5

3:2

7:4

5:3

5:4

rit.

$\text{♩} = 40$

f *p* *mf* *mp*

f *p* *pp* *mf* *mp* *p* *pp*

p *f* *mp* *f* *mf* *p* *pp*

p *mp* *(ff)*

Example 1: Sect.1/i

Section	1/i	1/ii	1/iii	1/iv	2/i	2/ii	2/iii	2/iv	2/v	3/i	3/ii	3/iii
No. of bars	7	10	8	12	9	10	12	13	5	10	6	3
Tempo	1a	2	1a	3a	1a	2	3a	1b	3a	3b	3b	3b
F ¹												
F ²												
F ³												
Proce- dures (see Example 2)	A ¹	A ¹	A ¹	A ¹	B ¹	B ¹	B ¹	B ¹	B ¹	C ¹	C ¹	C ¹
	A ²	A ²	C ²	C ²		D ³		D ³		B ²		C ²
	B ³	C ³			A ³	C ³		E ³		A ³		
	C ⁴		D ⁴		A ⁴			A ⁴				
Additional performing techniques, Level 2												
q +	Alt fing.			°/Alt. fing.	°+gliss./ Alt.fing.	Mult./°	Alt. fing.	Mult./° +smorz.	Alt. fing./ Mult./°		Mult./ °	
q	Gl.	Gl.	Gl.			Artic. gl.	Artic. gl.			Gliss + flz.		
e	Tr.	Tr.			Tr.	Tr.		Tr.			Tr.	
x		Flz.	Flz.	Flz.		Flz.	Flz.	Flz.				
y	MPC	MPC							MPC			
Additional performing techniques, Level 1												
Lip pizz.												
Key perc.												
Aeol. snds.												
MPC dist.												
T. ram												
As is												

Section	4/i	4/ii	4/iii	4/iv	4/v	4/vi	4/vii	5/i	5/ii	5/iii	5/iv
No. of bars	12	5	9	10	10	9	6	3	2	4	3
Tempo	1b	2	4	2	4	2	4	3a	3a	3b	3a
F ¹			(as is)		(as is)		(as is)				
F ²											
F ³											
Proce- dures (see Example 2)	D ¹	D ¹		D ¹		D ¹		E ¹	E ¹	E ¹	E ¹
	D ⁴	A ²		A ²		D ²		E ⁴	D ²	E ²	E ²
	C ²					C ³		D ²		E ³	E ³
	A ³							D ³			
Additional performing techniques, Level 2											
q +		Echo effects						°	°	°	°
q	Gliss + flz.			Artic. gliss. + flz.							
e		Tr.		Tr.					Tr.		
x				Flz.		Flz.		Flz.	Flz.		
y		MPC		MPC		MPC			MPC	MPC	
Additional performing techniques, Level 1											
Lip pizz.											
Key perc.											
Aeol. snds.											
MPC dist.											
T. ram											
As is											

Key to abbreviations: alt. fing. = alternative fingering, (artic.) gliss = articulated glissando, tr.= trill, flz. = fluttertongue, MPC = change in mouthpiece position, mult. = multiphonic, Aeol. snds. = Aeolian sounds, T. ram = tongue ram, key perc. = key percussion, MPC dist. = mouthpiece at a distance

Example 2: Form Scheme

	A	B	C	D	E
(i)	Remove ties between bars/halve values of notes e+	Filter out all notes e+	Create cutting-off points; convert all notes to e, x or y and move to left or right of cutting-off point	Divide selected notes q + into e, x or y; every 6/7/8/9 filter out 1/2	Filter out all notes x or shorter.
(ii)	Fill selected rests (q. or longer)	Halve values of selected x or y groups	Convert selected x or y to grace notes	Convert selected e, x or y groups into grace notes, except for the final note (unless followed by a longer note)	Divide all untied notes q+
(iii)	Every 4/5/6/7 notes filter out 1	Fill in selected remaining rests (q.+); add 1/2/3 grace notes before each longer note created.	Filter out selected longer notes (q. +); divide selected remaining longer notes by 2/3/4	Convert e and x groups into y; every 4/5/6/7 notes filter out 1 and convert to grace note.	Extend all groups of notes e + as far as possible
(iv)	Every 11/12/13/14 notes turn 1/2/3/4 into grace notes		Convert longer notes (q+) into x or y; add 1/2/3/4/5 notes of same value to each group	Halve values of groups of 2 or more notes e +; add 1/2/3 notes of same value to the end of each group	Every 8/9/10/11 notes filter out 1/halve values of selected groups of 2 or more notes

Example 3: Procedures A, B, C, D and E

1/i
Rhythmic arch + 1 level of variative activity

Example 4: Rhythmic manipulations in 1/i

1/i
Major pitches

("Corrected" registral positions of Major pitches + upward transpositions)

Example 5: Accretion of pitches in 1/i

5/i
 ♩ = 90
 rit. → (♩ = 40)

167
fff *pp* *f* *ppp* *pp*

5/ii
 ♩ = 40
 accel. → ♩ = 90

170
mf *ppp* *pp* *f* *pp* *ff* *f* *mf* *pp* *ppp*

5/iii
 ♩ = 90

173
pp *fp* *mf* *fp* *pp* *ppp* *pp*

rit. → (♩ = 50) **5/iv** ♩ = 50

175
mf *pp* *mp* *f* *mf* *ppp* *pp* *ppp*

London SE25
 01/02 - 28/09/06
 Duration: c. 20' 30"

Example 6: Final section