

## Melody in Experimental Music: An Excursion

### Annotation

This article seeks to locate and discuss – somewhat informally – occurrences of melody within experimental music (so-called). From a certain perspective, this would seem incongruous, as midcentury experimentalism (of the East Coast in particular) set itself up as revisionary, to be constructed from first-principles rather than from an appeal to established musical expectations or precedents. But nonetheless, for many composers of an experimentalist bent – here discussed are Partch, Cage, Johnston, as well as a number of other figures – the role of melody in their music has been marked. Within the contexts of experimentalism, use of melody obtains a curious mix of reference to the past and to ordinary (or not-so ordinary) life. Notably mentioned in this article are two Canadian composers, Martin Arnold and Cassandra Miller, whose unique approach to melody is striking, as well as, British composers Tim Parkinson and Laurence Crane, and Lithuanian Rytis Mažulis.

**Keywords:** melody, experimentalism, ordinariness, plainness, mnemonics.

Is there a straightforward way to deal with this thing that gets called “experimental music”? Is there really such a thing *as* experimental music? What are we actually talking about, when we talk about it? Robert Ashley once put it like this: “Composition is anything but experimental. It is the epitome of expertise. It may be aleatoric or purposefully unpredictable in its specific sounds, or purposefully exploratory of a sound, but experimental is the wrong word.”<sup>1</sup>

In a short article from 1978, Ben Johnston used capital letters to refer to the American Experimental Tradition. For Johnston, this represented something of an experimental attitude, quintessentially American – something rough-hewn, something rugged, existing on some margin. Something that afforded a different regime of subtlety than one could encounter in European tradition. However, to push it out as such – with capital letters – is deliberate artifice; if there was not a sense of artificiality to the designation at the time, then there certainly must be now.

While one might want to characterise experimentalism as being essentially linked – enjoined – to ideas of indeterminacy, for Johnston it was misleading to think of experimental music beginning with Cage. Johnston suggested that at least the tradition inasmuch as could be explicitly American – and in any case, all such traditions are invented – that the tradition should stretch from William Billings and Anthony Philip Heinrich. Indeed, it is good to remember that at the time he was writing, a considerable quarter of any such a tradition should be regarded to be taken up by Partch.

Today, the Dionysian expressiveness of Harry Partch is not usually taken to be definitive of experimental music (as Partch put it: “you never see my experiments”), inasmuch as, usually, younger composers who self-identify as experimental do not tend to cite him as an influence. But given the character and mood of later practitioners’ musical attitudes, the idea of an experimentalism that isn’t Apollonian is something to hold on to. The idea of a Partchian experimentalism – despite his loathing of Cage, and dislike of his association with the composer – nevertheless has a good deal to offer. (Think of the music of Lou Harrison, Dane Rudhyar, Peter Garland, La Monte Young, even Charlemagne Palestine, Glenn Branca.) Nevertheless, it is clear that Cage, the other half of the balance, the Apollonian, these days is the person who, even posthumously, gets to stake out the playing area.

From the beginning, one of the more notable aspects of Partch’s compositional project was its focus on melody – song, monody – beginning with the Bardic works utilising adapted viola. Throughout Partch’s career, enfolded into his pieces would be an often imaginary vernacular, of song, of dance, of wake, of ritual. A return to such materials, base in every sense, was part of his fundamental impulse to revise – or, more plainly, simply discard – all of the Western musical models inherited since the Renaissance.

Generally speaking, Partch’s revisionism was too specific to be adapted. Even for Johnston – some years Partch’s apprentice – the inclination to parrot Partch’s not inconsiderable achievements did not arise. If we take the liberal metaphor, Partch was not particularly saleable in the ‘music aesthetics ideas marketplace’. Unlike Cage, a composer wishing to follow Partch required familiarity with a recondite music theory; worse, it required understanding fractions. It required serious efforts in organology. It was borne from a person whose own habits and idiosyncrasies – and homosexuality – might inspire discomfort; it might be implied one had to sign up to these things. He didn’t give lectures in Germany. He did not give lectures anywhere.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Bob Gilmore, ‘Five Maps of the Experimental World’, *Artistic Experimentation in Music*, ed. Darla Crispin, Bob Gilmore, Leuven, 2014, p. 24.

**The Potion Scene**  
from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*

Harry Partch  
Helmholtz-Ellis notation by A.N. McIntosh, March 2010

slow, but constantly changing tempo

voice

adapted viola

[whole of accompaniment up to double stops near end to be played on the G string]

*p*

4

7

Fare - well!

God knows when we shall meet a - gain.

Example 1. Harry Partch's *The Potion Scene* from *Romeo and Juliet*, for intoning voice and adapted viola. Edited by Andrew Nathaniel McIntosh. Note the use of bare fifths – or as Partch would refer to them, 3/2 s.

Example 2. John Cage, *Cheap Imitation*, opening. Version for violin, edited in 1977

Partch's aesthetics also required such an emphasis placed on melody – song – which, in the contexts of mid-century modernism and abstraction seemed misplaced if not expressly backward. Nevertheless, I want to suggest that melody and line became of great importance to post-Cageian experimentalism too.

One might be tempted, say, to turn to Cage's early pieces, *Sonatas and Interludes*; while these are some of Cage's most well-known pieces, and no doubt have some influence, they are something of a red herring.

On the other hand, *Cheap Imitation* (1969), a piece of twenty years later, has had I believe quite a considerable effect on music of the 1970s and later. The piece arrived almost by accident. A licensing difficulty arising from the French owner of the rights, Cage was forced to construct a version of Erik Satie's *Socrate* – Merce Cunningham having already choreographed a significant portion of the work – that maintained its rhythm but dispensed with its linear specifics. The resulting piece may well be one of Cage's most personal works; it's also one of his most intuitive. Its language manages to combine the blithe, slightly spongy, semi-dissolved squareness of Satie, with Cage's own "normal but not normal" world of transformed commonplace. Where Cage's pieces of the 1950s and 1960s had sometimes felt severe, *Cheap Imitation* obtains the smile of Zen that is so present in his writings – the character of the monk who, having achieved enlightenment returns to his previous mundane routines and prosaic duties unchanged apart from floating 'the feet a little bit off the ground'. For Cage, *Cheap Imitation* solidified his spiritual connection to the smiling, edge-like, nomadic Satie, man of white foods and identikit brown suits. The figure so admired by Cocteau and his coterie, but whatever their efforts were never fully rendered scrutable.

A brief digression. What might be the essential characteristic of Cageian experimentalism? I think it can be seen as a fundamental inversion – an inversion that is crystallised in *4'33"* and is consolidated in *0'00"*. It is the effort to try to turn the composer into just another listener – or, equivalently, to make the listener into something more of a composer. More generally, Cage predominantly wanted to revise inherited models of *listening*. By reconfiguring music in this way the effort is to try to make music something that is actively brought into being *by* the listener; and that on the other hand, the composer sets out along the line of the composition *in order* to become this kind of listener. The important aspect of *0'00"* then ('In a situation provided with maximum amplification, perform a disciplined action') is not the performance *per se*, it is the *situation*. What would it mean for a situation – in other words, the world – to be maximally amplified? It is amplified because audible. It is audible because *aesthetic*. The disciplined action, in the end, exists to *fully amplify* the situation, not the other way around.

The melodic world of *Cheap Imitation* (along with Cage's other pieces from the period, such as *Apartment House 1776*, as well as much of the music of Christian Wolff) seeks to achieve this inversion through, largely, inherited musical material and its *playing*, rather than through, say, the institution of a *sound*. Melody is only really possible once music is more – or, even, less – than just "sounds". Such music does not make fetish of timbre. What it does do is create a situation where the musicians might have to come to terms with an array of material that is fundamentally incomplete, and can never be completed. Surface simplicity – even a degree of 'normalcy' – belies an underlying ineffability. Whatever is so apparently normal recedes forever from one's touch. Such music exists to create for the performers – and the listeners – a wider situation of greater amplification; amplification because understanding, but a kind of innately Socratic understanding. That the discipline, the simplicity and incompleteness of the material and its aesthetics underline our inability to fully comprehend the world. The music's incompleteness – and the responsibility this grants us – mirrors the natural incompleteness of the world. A certain Socratic understanding grants for us a modest but specific agency in the face of this incompleteness.

In the end this kind of experimental music is not primarily about overwhelming musicians and listeners with the exotic; it can often be more about giving them – granting them – a new listening to the, apparently, entirely ordinary. This is what *Cheap Imitation* does. Benjamin Piekut puts it well: "experimentalism performs not simply a return to daily life but an intensification of it – a peculiar mix of the commonplace and the singular. Experimentalism is both ordinary and extraordinary. It is the everyday world around us, as well as the possibility that this world might be otherwise."

This alighting on the melodic, in Cage's work, did something by osmosis not just to Cage's later work, but also mirrored or coalesced with similar concerns arising at the same time in other composers' work also. By "melodic", I intend to mean those things that somehow transform (mere) linearity into something closer to the "tunelike – small yet giant details such as the difference between a leading tone and a simple semitone. The melodic is what renders the linear mnemonic. And indeed, given the New York School's somewhat vaunted desires for *tabula rasa*, for sounds being themselves (whatever that might mean), for sounds being unconnected to each other but simply alongside one another, the presence of the melodic apparently would run counter both to experimentalism's spirit and practice.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> In this relation, Cage wrote: "The question of leading tones came up in the class in experimental composition that I give at the New School. I said, 'You surely aren't talking about ascending half-steps in diatonic music. Is it not true that anything leads to whatever follows?'" in *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, Hanover: Wesleyan U. Press, 1961. See *Cheap Imitation*, bb. 5–6 (Ex. 2).

The past always finds a way in for itself. Shortly after Cage's re-writing of *Socrate*, in 1971 Morton Feldman completed *Rothko Chapel*, a large, major statement composed in memory of the late Mark Rothko, to be performed in the chapel he developed in Houston with John and Dominique de Menil. The piece, which was responding to some of the darkest and most complicated paintings Rothko ever produced, makes, alongside a wordless choir and ensemble, a particular feature of a solo viola. The delicately spiralling, crystalline, internally rotating lines of the viola from our perspective seem to look forward in time to Feldman's later music. Indeed, the presence of the viola would solidify something quite personal for Feldman; concurrently he was composing *The Viola in my Life*, for that instrument and ensemble.

310  
 J = 52 exactly  
 Vibr. *pppp*  
 2/4 Fed. →  
 et sim.  
 Via.

320  
 Vibr.  
 Via. *mp* very, very simply

330  
 Vibr.  
 Via.

Example 3. Morton Feldman, *Rothko Chapel*, from b. 314

But perhaps the most personal – and inscrutable – response of Feldman's came at the end of the piece, in its now famous coda. After great panels, steles, of vocal writing, moving like flocks of stone, at the end of the piece unexpectedly arrives an almost Stravinskian ostinato on the vibraphone. (Stravinsky had died also shortly before.) Above this is heard a heptatonic, modal melody, on the viola – a melody that dwells on dominants, subdominants and tonics, on the lowered seventh, on the diatonic tetrachord. A melody dredged up apparently from Feldman's own late childhood, an early attempt at composition.<sup>3</sup> Feldman's response perhaps implies a looking 'full-circle' about death; that death brings us, whether we want to or not, to look at our memories. The mnemonic becomes the memorial. But while Rothko's transcendental universalism, his paintings that perhaps imply the grandeur – and terror – of the universe and its dwarfing of us, Feldman resolves the human figure in this scene more explicitly. For Feldman this melody seeks to gesture even more violently at the

<sup>3</sup> See Stephen Johnson, "Rothko Chapel and Rothko's Chapel", *Perspectives of New Music* Vol. 32, No. 2 (Summer, 1994), pp. 6–53. Johnson repeatedly refers to the melody as a 'Hebrew tune', though at present I'm unaware of its source as a Hebrew hymn. See also Alex Ross, "American Sublime: Morton Feldman's mysterious musical landscapes", *The New Yorker*, June 2006, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/06/19/american-sublime>

mystery of personhood. That the sheer *ordinariness* of one's personhood is the route towards its mystery, its transcendence. To respond to such metaphysical enormity, such rendering of the sublime, with a melody of such innocence, is as bold as it is unsettling, and like Cage's own piece of a few years earlier, indelibly inscrutable. It imbibes indeterminacy because indefinite. Following Rothko's paintings, as much as it is a door into the beyond Feldman's *Rothko Chapel* is a door into his entire late project – the wider still and wider expressions of the 1970s and 1980s following on, piece by piece, from this beginning essay. While not wanting to push any such interpretation too heavily, nevertheless, what would it mean for Feldman to begin this period of his later working life with a dredging up of the melodic?

untitled cello & piano tim parkinson

piano

♩ = 88-92

cello

*p* simple, carefree (legato and freely phrased)

con sord.

Example 4a/b. Tim Parkinson, *Untitled Cello and Piano*. The parts are not synchronised

This substance that is somehow melodic: are there any other composers who might be working along these lines? I want to point to a few. The first is British composer Tim Parkinson (b. 1974). Parkinson's music works from the starting point largely aligned with Christian Wolff. But there are differences – of approach and of music sense; he has a particularly acute sense of harmony, and melody too. Parkinson's aesthetic can be, often, deliberately plain. But plainness in his music points to a deeper, more inaccessible aesthetic, an aforementioned aesthetic of incompleteness. Pieces of his often involve simple juxtapositions of pages of material – pages given to musicians in no particular order, played through at the performers' pace. But one of the defining characteristics of Parkinson's music is its diversity – while material is enfolded into a single continuity, rarely if ever does any material return. Entire pages-worth of material appear and disappear as

quickly as they appeared. Where traditionally the artwork is held to be a kind of additive object – the piece is more than the sum of its parts – in Parkinson’s music, the piece can somehow be *less* than the sum of its parts. This is mysteriously *subtractive* music.

Another composer whose work I think is relevant is the Canadian Martin Arnold (b. 1959). His music is largely concerned with continuity, with wandering, meandering. In Arnold’s music, music never repeats itself, but neither does it change much. It exists as if floating around or between variously nearby loci. (Arnold, when he isn’t composing, works as a gardener.) He is not interested in dramatic or narrative disjuncture. His pieces do not have ‘sections’ *per se*; the music continues, and if it changes en route, this is just part of its continuity. Composing for him requires figuring out for how long a certain range of material should exert itself – how much space it should take up – so that if a change occurs it will not be perceived as rhetorical, but merely “just some more music”.<sup>4</sup> If there are points in his music they are rather more like way markers, mile posts. Points in a landscape that do not ‘articulate’ the landscape inasmuch as the landscape is non-articulatory, or articulates itself in its own way. His personal aesthetics were influenced by his teacher, the Czech émigré composer Rudolf Komorous, who himself had an aesthetic he called *estetiku divnosti* – aesthetics of strangeness, curiousness. *Divnosti* is also related to *divny* – which is polysemous with aspects of the divine as well as the strange.<sup>5</sup> This became transmuted via translation into English into Arnold’s ‘aesthetic of the wonderful’. For Arnold, the music is not ‘about’ wonder; it does not make wonder its topic. Rather, the music attempts to directly provoke – in a small way – these feelings; of mystery, of strangeness, of simultaneous seriousness and non-seriousness. Of incompleteness. His music is influenced by dance forms – often slowed down to an undanceable rate – and fourteenth-century polyphony. Like Partch, Arnold’s music often seems to invoke some imaginary vernacular, some kind of invented folk music.<sup>6</sup>

Example 5. Martin Arnold, *Latex* (2011) for flute and piano

<sup>4</sup> Personal communication, May 2015.

<sup>5</sup> See Martin Arnold, “Thinking the Wonderful: After Rudolf Komorous, beside the Reveries”, in *Canadian Cultural Poesis: Essays on Canadian Culture*, ed. Garry Sherbert, Annie Gérin, Sheila Petty, Waterloo: Wilfried Laurier U. Press, pp. 305–322. See also an interview with Arnold, in Paul Steenhuisen, *Sonic Mosaics: Conversations with Composers*, Edmonton: U. Alberta, 2009, p. 155.

<sup>6</sup> Hear a recording of Arnold’s *Latex* here: <https://soundcloud.com/musica-mundi-1/arnold>

One of Arnold's close associates is another Canadian composer, Cassandra Miller (b. 1975). Like Arnold, her music is largely concerned with this very distinct sense of continuity, often achieved using melodic means. Like Arnold, she is interested in a kind of refracted or bent vernacular. But unlike Arnold, her exposure to Dutch music – and her own personal sensibility – introduce a certain narrative or dramatic component to her music. This piece, *Bel Canto*, takes as its starting point the singing of Maria Callas, the material split across two ensemble groupings.<sup>7</sup> Here too, there is a peculiarly *divvy* transformation of relatively 'normal' musical things – triads, vibrato, glissando – into a musical aesthetic of deep peculiarity. Miller manages to make such things as bare scales into things, which are puzzlingly ineffable – her piano piece<sup>8</sup> *Philip the Wanderer* dwells on scales until they seem to both lose their prosaic content and gain something completely unobtainable.

Example 6a/b. Cassandra Miller, *Bel Canto* (2010).  
There are two separate semi-independent scores,  
for singer and flute/clarinet/guitar and for violin, viola and cello

<sup>7</sup> Hear recording here: <https://cassandramiller.files.wordpress.com/2010/04/bel-canto.mp3>.

<sup>8</sup> See <https://soundcloud.com/cassandra-miller-composer/philip-the-wanderer-full-piece>, the beginning of the second section, from 7:54 with its descending scales, and in particular the final section of the piece, from 14:00.

Another composer I want to mention is Rytis Mažulis (b. 1961). Like Miller, repetition is an important aspect to Mažulis' work – indeed for Mažulis it is crucial. But Mažulis' specific approach to repetitive musical structures owes less to the tape experiments of the American minimalists as much as it does to Lithuanian melodic *sutartinės*, important sources of influence not only for composers of Mažulis' generation (such as Ričardas Kabelis and Šarūnas Nakas) but also pioneers such as Bronius Kutavičius and Julius Juzeliūnas. One interesting piece of Mažulis' I wanted to highlight is a relatively early work, *The Sleep*.<sup>9</sup> This piece is quite fascinating from a melodic point of view – its concern with “dominants” and “tonics” turns its material, despite its bareness, from being (merely) linear into something more specifically melodic. The self-similarity of the line provokes the listener into hearing it in a highly mnemonic, “memorial” way; the melody is constantly “inheriting” itself through canon. And through its reference to an inherited diatonic world, not only through its emphasis on simultaneous major seconds in the voices, a common feature in *sutartinės*, but also in its modal organization, implies another litany of inheritance. Is this what melody is? A kind of “mnemonic” line? Mnemonic because sedimenting so much that is inherited (both local to the immediate musical structure, and more widely cultural)? A line “made mnemonic”? I like this piece of Mažulis because it seems to somehow encapsulate the very basics required to turn line into melody.

Example 7. Rytis Mažulis, *The Sleep* [*Miegas*] (1988), for 8 singers and 4 string instruments

Finally, another composer who concerns himself with such basics is British composer Laurence Crane. Crane's music too is interested in repeating things, and it too is concerned with a certain ‘transformation of the commonplace’. In pieces such as this one – *John White in Berlin* – tonal material is presented in such a reduced state so as to show it at its very beginnings.<sup>10</sup> Or its very endings. Tiny essays in voice-leading, in suspensions, or the (in)stability of some triad or leading tone. As Michael Pisaro points out, these aspects of Crane's music are

things that most composers of our age learned at the very beginning of our training. They have the fascination of a raw material, but we were encouraged to move along past them, not to dwell on such apparently simple objects. However when you look at them closely, under the microscopes of isolation and repetition, such things can seem to be the real miracles of music.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Hear Erik Carlson's recording of this piece here: <https://erikcarlson.bandcamp.com/track/rytis-ma-ulis-the-sleep>

<sup>10</sup> Hear this piece here, in a recent recording by Anton Lukoszevics and Apartment House: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JMhB66HRIUw>. Ex. 8 begins c. 10:50.

<sup>11</sup> From Michael Pisaro's essay on Crane, “Less than Normal”, 2014, on the record label Another Timbre's website <http://www.anothertimbre.com/laurencecrane.html>.

The image displays a musical score for Example 8, consisting of two systems of music. The first system covers measures 171 to 175, and the second system covers measures 176 to 180. The score is written for four instruments: Electric Guitar (E. Gtr.), Violin (Vc.), Percussion (Perc.), and Piano (Pno.). The time signature is 5/4. The E. Gtr. part features complex chordal textures with many accidentals. The Vc. part has a melodic line with slurs and accents. The Perc. part includes a section labeled 'MEDIUM TAM-TAM' with a wavy line indicating a specific rhythmic pattern. The Pno. part has a dense, rhythmic accompaniment with many accidentals. Pedal markings '(Ped.) →' are present at the end of both systems. A double bar line with repeat dots is located between the two systems.

Example 8. Laurence Crane, *John White in Berlin*, from b. 171

Crane can dwell on these things – small lines, triads, inversions, suspensions – because they indeed are miraculous; because they are *divny*. What is melody? Is it something that is baked into our heads, stuck there, an assortment of children’s songs, whistled tunes, idle hummings? Ordinary trappings, ordinary music; we swim around in it, with it inside us? Pisaro again: “It would not surprise me if someone hearing Crane’s music for the first time would say something like, ‘It sounds like ordinary music.’ This ordinarieness is right there on the surface. If I have learned anything from Laurence’s music it is that ‘the ordinary is not’.” Amen to that.

### Works cited

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## Melodija eksperimentinėje muzikoje: ekskursas

### Santrauka

Straipsnyje kiek laisvesniu nei mokslinio tyrimo stiliumi stengiamasi aptikti ir aptarti melodijos apraiškas vadinamojoje eksperimentinėje muzikoje. Tam tikru požiūriu melodija šioje terpėje atrodo lyg svetimkūnis, turint omenyje, kad XX a. vidurio eksperimentalizmas (ypač Amerikos rytinėje pakrantėje) kilo kaip revizionistinis judėjimas, siekęs iš naujo atrasti pirmąkartinius kūrybos principus, o ne pataikauti įsitvirtinusiems lūkesčiams ar precedentams. Nepaisant to, melodijos vaidmuo gana ryškus daugelio eksperimentinio sparno kompozitorių – Harry'o Partcho, Johno Cage'o, Beno Johnstono ir nemažo būrio kitų veikėjų – kūryboje. Eksperimentinės kūrybos kontekstuose melodijos vartojimas įgijo keistą konotacijų derinį, pasireiškiantį kaip nuorodos į praeitį ir įprastą (kartais gal ir ne visai įprastą) gyvenimą. Straipsnyje minimi du unikaliu požiūriu į melodiją pasižymintys Kanados kompozitoriai Martinas Arnoldas ir Cassandra Miller, taip pat britų kompozitoriai Timas Parkinsonas ir Laurence'as Crane'as bei lietuvis Rytis Mažulis.

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** melodija, eksperimentalizmas, įprastumas, paprastumas, mnemonika.