

## FOLKLORE IN THE MUSIC OF MICHAEL FINNISSY

English composer Michael Finnissy's (1946-) fascination with folk music stems from his early childhood years. This was due in part his acquaintance with Hungarian and Polish friends who were frequent visitors to his family home. In one particular occasion, he was asked to transcribe records of folk music for a ballet teacher from Yugoslavia, and ever since then, he has been significantly affected by the exotic nature of the music he heard.<sup>1</sup>

A close examination of folkloric elements in Finnissy's music reveals the sheer diversity of influences that encompass many different cultures. In the mid-1970s, he was particularly interested in Japanese art and literature. *Tsuru-Kame* (1971-73), a prominent work for the stage, dates from this period. This piece is of key importance as it is the first one to implement a special Finnissy trait: the implementation of imitative counterpoint within narrow tessituras, while maintaining a static approach to harmony. *Duru-duru* (1981) for mezzo soprano and three instruments marks the entry of Arabic influences into his music. Much like in *Tsure-Kame*, *Duru-duru* makes use of quasi-melodic cells that echo one another in narrow registers; in this case, through constantly recurring melodic fragments that comprise three close notes, sung by the voice and imitated by the flute. In *Duru-duru*, Finnissy creates heterophonic gestures in the piano and percussion parts that are in counterpoint with other voices, imitating the harsh antiphon of this type of music. With *Terekkeme* (1981) for solo piano, Finnissy's interests shifted to the music of the Azerbaijani peoples. In this piece, the texture is once again dominated by

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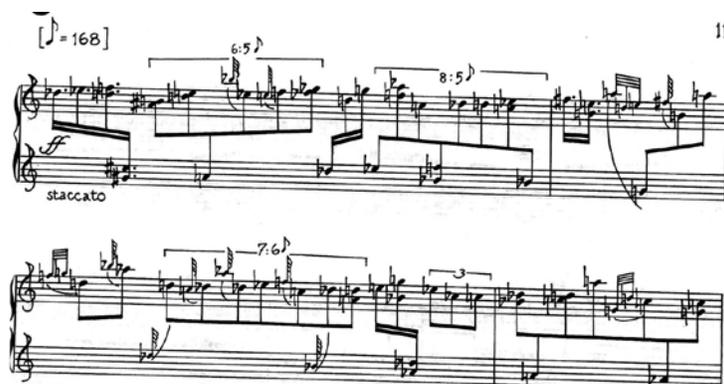
<sup>1</sup> Henrietta Brougham et al., *Uncommon ground: The music of Michael Finnissy*, (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1997), 99.

fragments of single melodic lines confined within narrow intervals. Throughout the piece, Finnissy alternates these single lines with doublings of them at different intervals.



Ex. 1. Finnissy, *Collected Shorter Piano Pieces, no. 5: Terekkeme*, mm. 7

Much like in the earlier pieces, we encounter the sovereignty of repetition and static harmony. The extensive usage of ornamentation found here remained of great interest to the composer, and it is manifested as *piobaireachd* (a type of Scottish bagpipe ornamentation that was to become a favorite of Finnissy's) in *Reels*, a group of six pieces for solo piano.<sup>2</sup> *Folklore* (1993-94), a four-part masterpiece for solo piano, incorporates folk-derived elements of many different cultures and is the culmination of Finnissy's imperturbable appetite for folk music. This piece will be the main reference point to my following arguments.



Ex. 2. Finnissy, *Reels No: 5*, mm. 1

<sup>2</sup> Ian Pace, "The panorama of Michael Finnissy (II)," *Tempo*, 57, no. 201 (Jul. 1997), 7-9.

A detailed listing of folk materials that constitute *Folklore* is of no use here, as Ian Pace has done such an undertaking in his authoritative text.<sup>3</sup> To summarize, the first section of *Folklore* is mainly based on a variety of Scandinavian-fiddle tunes (as compiled by L.M Lindeman in his *Aeldre og Nyere Norske Fjeldmelodier*) and Edvard Grieg's folk-arrangements in his *Slätter Op. 72*.<sup>4</sup> The second section draws from various Rumanian folk songs, extracted from an anthology named 'Cintecul de Leagăn'. Also present in this section are various manipulations of the *piobaireachd*; each long monodic passage takes its attributes from *Haen* (a type of *piobaireachd* figuration) and its derivations: *Hinbare*, *Hodrodin* and *Hintodre*.<sup>5</sup> The third section of *Folklore* incorporates folk material from France and Serbia, and finally, Far Eastern sources dominate the last section. Respective sections also have their corresponding dedicatees; however, their significance will be assessed later.<sup>6</sup>



Ex. 3. Second section of *Folklore*, mm. 15

<sup>3</sup> Henrietta Brougham et al., *Uncommon ground: The Music of Michael Finnissy*, (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1997), 112-131.

<sup>4</sup> *Idib.*, 113.

<sup>5</sup> *Idib.*, 117.

<sup>6</sup> *Idib.*, 122

*Piobaireachd* exercises (Scottish traditional bagpiping)

The image shows a single staff of music in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The staff is divided into four measures, each representing a different piobaireachd exercise. The first measure is labeled '(a)' and contains a single note with a grace note. The second measure is labeled '(b)' and contains a single note with a grace note. The third measure contains a single note with a grace note. The fourth measure contains a single note with a grace note. Below the staff, the names of the exercises are listed: \* Haen (Dithis - single), Hinbare (Leumlath movement), Hodrodin (exercise on the Urlar), and Hintodre (on Crunluath Fosgailte).

\* Haen                      Hinbare                      Hodrodin                      Hintodre  
(Dithis - single)      (Leumlath movement)      (exercise on the Urlar)      (on Crunluath Fosgailte)

Ex. 4. The types of piobaireachd

All of the factors mentioned above (e.g. melodic lines that encompass narrow tessituras, imitative counterpoint, ornamentations, repetitions and static harmonies) confirm the extensive research undertaken by the composer in order to achieve a high level of authenticity in the handling of folk-derived materials. However, Finnissy's approach to rhythm contributes the most to this phenomenon. Finnissy is known to be closely associated with 'The New Complexity' movement. Composers of this particular school have pushed the level of rhythmic complexity to a much higher level than ever encountered before. Their pieces often impose extreme demands upon performers who are audacious enough to take up the challenge of performing them. Composers like Brian Ferneyhough and Richard Barrett have made extensive use of nested tuplets (ratios within ratios) in their rhythmic configurations. Finnissy's music rarely features this aspect, instead, he prefers consecutive tuplets encompassing different time values that proceed through independent lines.<sup>7</sup> The cadenza section of *Piano Concerto No: 4* is a five-part canon that employs this rhythmic procedure. The resultant density in sound is described by Brian Ferneyhough as a 'meta-piano'.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Graziel Bortz, *Rhythm in the Music of Brian Ferneyhough, Michael Finnissy, and Arthur Kampela: A Guide for Performers* (D.M.A. Diss., The City University of New York, 2004), 4.

<sup>8</sup> Henrietta Brougham et al., *Uncommon ground: The music of Michael Finnissy*, (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1997), 73.



time) in order to illustrate that each new span of time serves to create discrepancies in the meter, thus creating subtle gestures that evoke improvised folk music.

Freely wavering tempo [♩ = approx. 138 ]

pp

espressivo, lamentoso

7:6

8ed.  
\*Hinbare'

Ex. 6a. Finnissy, *Folklore*, 2nd section, opening bars

In the opening bars of the second section of *Folklore*, the composer has provided the metronome marking of an eighth note, which approximately equals 138 clicks per minute. Therefore, it is not overly challenging to calculate the distance in seconds between the first three notes. We first need to find out the number of seconds elapsed within the time of one eighth note; if there happens to be 138 eighth notes within the elapsing of a minute, then the time required for one eighth note to be played is  $60/138 = x/1$ ,  $x \approx 0.43$  seconds. The next distance is also simple to calculate, since it merely involves a sixteenth note which goes by twice as fast as the preceding one, in  $0.43/2 \approx 0.22$  seconds. The next set of distances are a little more challenging to calculate, because we have seven sixteenth notes (grouped irregularly) being played within the time span of six sixteenth notes. In order to accurately calculate the distances between each adjacent note in this beat, we need to find out the new metronome marking for the smallest subdivision of notes that are embedded within the tuplet. The metronome marking of the regular sixteenth note is  $138 \times 2 = 276$  clicks per minute. Therefore,  $276/6 = 46$  clicks per minute establishes the metronome marking of a dotted quarter note, which encompasses the time-span of the entire tuplet. We are now at liberty to fit any number of notes in this new portal of time. Finnissy chooses seven, therefore the metronome marking of the smallest subdivision

(sixteenth note) within the tuplet is  $46 \times 7 = 322$  clicks per minute, and so the distance in seconds between the next two notes is  $60/322 = x/1$ ,  $x \approx 0.19$  seconds. The quarter note inside the tuplet must go by four times as slowly as the note before, in  $0.19 \times 4 = 0.76$  seconds. Then, we have 0.19 seconds twice in a row for the next two notes. By now, we have managed to fully cover the tuplet and can now work within the realm of regular eighth notes once again. The half note that follows needs  $0.43 \times 4 \approx 1.74$  seconds to be fully realized. Finally, the distance between last two sixteenth notes is simply  $0.43/2 \approx 0.22$  seconds. Thus, when these distances between adjacent notes are ordered consecutively, we have:



Fig. 1. Distance between notes (Ex. 6a.)

0.43"	0.22"	0.19"	0.76"	0.19"	0.19"	1.74"	0.22"
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Fig. 2. Table of distances (Ex. 6a.)

Each new note, by existing within an irregular time frame, serves to establish an unpredictable attack point. Example 6b. uses consecutive ratios that further enhance the unpredictability of attack points.



Ex. 6b. Finnissy, *Folklore*, p.31, 2nd system of the published score.

We are once again given the metronome marking that an eighth note equals 138 clicks per minute. And we can deduce once more that distances in seconds between adjacent notes outside of a tuplet are easily calculated (Nevertheless, their role in making the attack points irregular is ensured, because of the constant alternation of notes outside of tuplets with notes that inside them). The metronome marking of a sixteenth note, as seen from the previous example is 0.22 seconds. Therefore a dotted eighth note must go by three times as slowly. Thus, our first distance is  $0.22 \times 3 = 0.66$  seconds. The next distance is 0.43 seconds, since it simply constitutes an eighth note. The third distance is a little trickier to calculate; not only do we encounter a tuplet, but a regular sixteenth note that overflows into the tuplet as well. First of all, we must calculate, as we did in the previous example, the metronome marking of the entire tuplet. In order to do so, we find the metronome marking of a single regular sixteenth note, which turns out to be  $138 \times 2 = 276$  clicks per minute. Therefore, the metronome marking of the entire tuplet, which constitutes a dotted eighth note, is 92 clicks per minute. When we multiply this by five, we obtain the metronome marking of a sixteenth note (smallest subdivision) within this tuplet, which turns out to be  $92 \times 5 = 460$  clicks per minute. Therefore, it takes  $60/460 = x/1$ ,  $x \approx 0.13$  seconds for a sixteenth note inside the tuplet to go by. However, the value of the first of these sixteenth notes within the tuplet is added to the value of a regular sixteenth note, since the two are tied. Therefore, we have  $0.13 + 0.22 = 0.35$  seconds and then five 0.13 seconds in a row. This brief regularity in meter is swiftly disrupted by a quarter note (outside of the tuplet) that follows, whose value simply constitutes  $0.43 \times 2 = 0.86$  seconds. Next, we encounter a tuplet again, whose time span this time is determined by the regular flow of eighth notes, instead of sixteenth notes. Five eighth notes tied together constitute  $138/5 \approx 28$  clicks per minute. When this value is multiplied by six, we obtain the metronome marking of a single eighth note (smallest

subdivision) within the tuplet, and that value turns out to be 168 clicks per minute. This value in turn yields  $60/168 = x/1$ ,  $x \approx 0.36$  seconds as the time span of an eighth note within the tuplet. Therefore, we can now easily go about calculating the distances in seconds between each irregular grouping of eighth notes. The next distance is therefore  $0.36 \times 3 = 1.08$  seconds, and the one that follows is simply  $0.36 \times 2 = 0.72$  seconds. Finally, it takes  $0.36/2 = 0.18$  seconds to reach to the final note inside the tuplet.

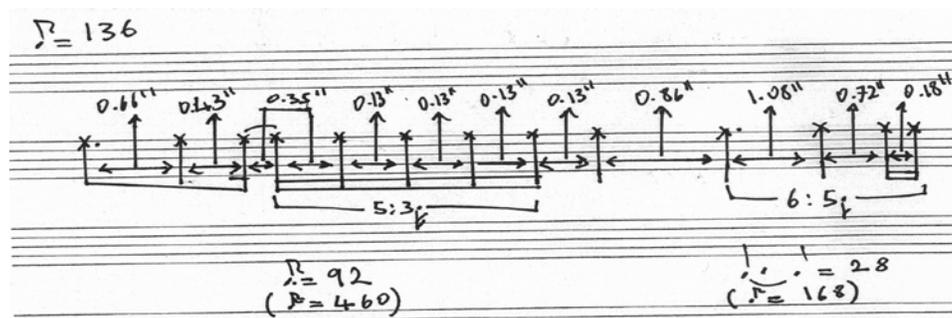


Fig. 3. Distance between notes (Ex. 6b.)

0.66"	0.43"	0.35"	0.13"	0.13"	0.13"	0.13"	0.86"	1.08"	0.72"	0.18"
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Fig. 4. Table of distances (Ex. 6b.)

This procedure imitates unmetred folk music quite effectively; taking into account the convention that in many indigenous cultures, improvisational aspects of folk music is almost always passed from one generation to the next by means of oral tradition, free of notation and precisely regulated timing. By capturing this indispensable element of improvised folk music, Michael Finnissy has perhaps achieved a level of authenticity not yet seen before by any previous composer.

With all of the above mentioned taken into account, Finnissy's rendering of folk elements in his *Folklore* is not without certain shortcomings. One can immediately notice the absence of microtonal intervals which are essential ingredients of folk music of a wide range of cultures (e.g. Rumanian, Serbian, Turkish, Asian...etc.) *Folklore* is exclusively written for the piano, a medium as far removed as possible from the sound world of authentic instruments. The ritualistic and visionary aspects of folk music is also absent from Finnissy's piece.<sup>9</sup> Often times, folk music is performed alongside a myriad of social occasions and celebrations, such as: *Halay* and *Yalli*, which are popular dance rituals practiced in Kurdish cultures; *Naga uta* which is a Japanese long song that accompanies the *kabuki* theater; not to mention the *Uzundara* of the Azerbaijani peoples, which is a dance designated exclusively for women.<sup>10</sup> One cannot help but wonder, taken into account Finnissy's meticulous way of handling other aspects of folk-derived material (e.g. piobaireachd, random grace notes, free rhythms...etc.), why the composer was so keen on eschewing theatrical elements in his *Folklore*.

Finnissy's implementation of folk music does not merely serve to provide his listeners with a catalog of a random 'cocktail' of folk tunes, however authentic. Rather, his intention is to create a realistic 'image' of it, an image, upon being carefully observed, will result in the exposure of a moving personal statement.<sup>11</sup> Curiously enough, a major portion of *Folklore* employs a monodic style of writing, so unconventional for the piano, an instrument whose paradigmatic stature in the realization of high art music (which is mostly polyphonic and counterpoint-oriented) cannot be disputed. Yet Finnissy turns it into a medium in which folk

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<sup>9</sup> Maarten Beirens, "Archeology of the Self: Michael Finnissy's 'Folklore'," *Tempo*, 57, no.223 (January 2003), 49.

<sup>10</sup> Ian Pace, "The Panaroma of Michael Finnissy (II)," *Tempo*, 57, no 201 (July 1997), 10.

<sup>11</sup> Maarten Beirens, "Archeology of the Self: Michael Finnissy's 'Folklore'," *Tempo* 57, no. 223 (January 2003), 50.

music, the music of the ‘lower’ class people, is allowed to thrive. It is undeniable that Finnissy’s training and background are rooted in Western tradition, with all its references to high art, yet, in *Folklore*, there prevails an aura of contempt for it. By utilizing the piano in such a way that creates a sharp contrast with the ‘bourgeois’, it seems almost like the composer exposes his reluctance to be a part of the Western modern culture.

Finnissy’s music often revolves around a dichotomy between two contradictory entities that work towards yielding the very idea of an outsider living, like a prisoner, in a non-idealized society. Sometimes this notion is undertaken by creating oppositions in register; the continual employment of narrow registers creates tension and energy often resulting in violent outbursts that break free the restrictions, with many lines being channeled into wide angular contours.<sup>12</sup> In his *String Quartet* (1984), we encounter constricted melodic lines in quarter tones with the mere capacity of encompassing an interval of a minor third; when instruments overcome this restriction, the sharp contrast created is ever more shocking.<sup>13</sup> *English Country Tunes* (1977), is a contest between disproportionate forces, the stronger one eventually establishing itself in the foreground; we often encounter tranquil passages that feature monodic cells, immediately accessible to the listener, and frenzied gestures that pose threats to the very existence of them.<sup>14</sup> In the beginning of the third movement, *I’ll give my love a garland*, an attempt to construct a melodic contour out of simple structures becomes undermined by an ever growing level of activity. An increase in stability is confronted with quiet buzzings and distant wailings. Their menace is truly felt when they eventually grow into crazed outbursts, invading the whole

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<sup>12</sup> Ian Pace, “The Panaroma of Michael Finnissy (I),” *Tempo*, no. 196 (April 1996), 25.

<sup>13</sup> Henrietta Brougham et al., *Uncommon ground: The Music of Michael Finnissy*, (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1997), 166.

<sup>14</sup> Henrietta Brougham et al., *Uncommon ground: The Music of Michael Finnissy*, (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1997), 65-71.

registral spectrum of the keyboard. By the time the penultimate movement, *My Bonny Boy* begins, we finally hear a genuine melodic line, diatonic in its entirety. It proceeds in a fatigued manner, in absolute subordination to the forcefulness that is soon to come back. The end result, ‘with the exception of one or two fleeting references to modally-flavored melismatic writing, the ductus of the language employed could hardly be more at odds with the sort of expectations which on the face of it, the title may be presumed to favor.’<sup>15</sup>

Ex. 7a. Finnissy, *English Country Tunes*, 3rd movement, p.23

<sup>15</sup> Brian Ferneyhough, *Brian Ferneyhough: Collected Writings*, ed. James Boros and Richard Toop (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1995), 194.

Ex. 7c. Finnissy, *English Country Tunes*, 3rd movement, mm. 1-5

Ex. 7b. Finnissy, *English Country Tunes*, 7th movement, mm. 1

In fact, this very idea of de-centralization of the main line plays an important role in the narrative of *Folklore*. Timidly progressing monodic melodies, confined within small registral spaces, are often alternated with loud gestures that push the limits of polyphonic complexity and registral spectrum. These newly introduced virtuoso elements gradually accumulate more and more energy and suddenly begin to draw antagonistic parallels to the main melodies. Eventually,

their sheer power becomes too overwhelming for the ‘folklore’ to endure, as it is in no time engulfed and destroyed completely. The resultant polarization between two entities, one being a weakly defended sanctuary, the other invasive, villain-esque and extremely dynamic, could perhaps be the representation of Finnissy’s own undervalued stature as an artist in England (outsider vs. society). The composer’s preface to the published score of his *Folklore* sheds more light onto this matter:

*Folklore*. England: insular and conservative, institutionalized, de-spiritualized, tawdry and corrupt. Transforming ‘angry young men’ into embittered, cynical ‘couch-potatoes’. Rendering artists impotent through mockery and stereotyping (what is there to be afraid of?). Politics: Capitalism. A *free* country in which censorship is universally fire. Hypocrisy. Bigotry. The cheap laugh. Cardew, Orton, Jarman. ‘Deep (Tippett) River’. Heads fall and are swept under the carpet. Nothing behind the eyes. Imperialism is served.

*Folklore*. Travel broadens the mind. (Food broadens the stomach). White men belittle Aboriginals (A member of the music-faculty at Melbourne Uni. asked me why I was interested in ‘primitive trash’. Do I declare an interest in ‘symbols of oppression’?) Power. The Archeology of Knowledge. Levi Strauss, Foucault. Diversity-or the world-culture (e.g. modernism)? *Folklore*. Untidy-insufficiently selective. Art/editing/Experience (skill, in itself, potentially obscures icon/essence). A simulacrum. Evocation becomes Provocation.<sup>16</sup>

The first section of *Folklore* has two dedicatees: Edvard Grieg (1843-1907) and the contemporary English composer Kaikhosru Sorajbi (1892-1988). Both references underpin the notion of the outsider. The latter’s radical visions about music were underestimated in his own lifetime. Consequently, he was unable to exert much influence on modern music. This is partly because of the secluded life style that he was so fond of. Grieg on the other hand, despite enjoying considerable fame in his lifetime, is not regarded today as a major (innovative) composer. Finnissy feels a deep level of connection to Grieg on another level; both were fond of

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Finnissy, “Note” preface to the score of *Folklore* (Oxford University Press, 1996), 3.

combining their own musical languages with a variety of folk tunes. Another Englishman, Michael Tippett (1905-1998), for whom the second section of *Folklore* is dedicated to, was noted for his contributions to contemporary music in England. He encountered no marginalization as a composer. However, he did stand apart as a homosexual, at least socially speaking.<sup>17</sup> Tippett is referenced in the second section of *Folklore* with quotations from his *Deep River*, one of the spirituals that he used in his oratorio, *A Child of our Time*. The significance of *Deep River* as a recurring entity can in no way be undermined, as it brings forth one of the most nauseating examples of human oppression in the history of mankind: slavery. It is with all consideration no coincidence that *Deep River* is also the tune that ends the entire *Folklore*, a statement that reaffirms Finnissy's outrage towards the ongoing hypocrisy in his home country and elsewhere in the Western ('civilized') world.

It is important to note that the evocation of folk music in *Folklore* is given a realistic edge, to the best of the composer's abilities. As I have demonstrated, Finnissy's extensive research into folk music surfaces immediately. Nevertheless, Finnissy has been, is now and will always be a Westerner himself, and so his rendition of folk music can only manifest itself as an interpretation of it: 'he remains, above all, keenly aware that such creative affiliations cannot, nowadays, be authentically reflected in terms of a naively literal adaptation of the manner and

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<sup>17</sup> Maarten Beirens, "Archeology of the Self: Michael Finnissy's 'Folklore'," *Tempo* 57, no. 223 (January 2003), 51.

substance of received tradition.<sup>18</sup> Therefore shortcomings that arise are inevitable and actually have an enhancing role in conveying a personal message. Finnissy, by discovering a sincere interpretation of folklore, reflects his yearning to emphasize with oppressed peoples, establishing a dialog with them, and momentarily dwelling in their world, devoid of treachery, bigotry and hypocrisy.

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<sup>18</sup> Brian Ferneyhough, *Brian Ferneyhough: Collected Writings*, ed. James Boros and Richard Toop (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1995), 195.

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