

## **The start of performance**

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### **Abstract**

This paper presents a view of the first meetings between the oboe virtuoso Christopher Redgate and the composers Dorothy Ker and Fabrice Fitch. The paper details some aspects of these meetings to highlight the processes (practical and philosophical) that are at play in the earliest stages of collaboration. Arguing for a closer attention to the 'everyday' aspects of composers and performers working together, the paper explores some of the ways in which Redgate pulls apart his experience of performing to develop new technique and to opening up new possibilities for future composition.

Key words: Collaboration, innovation, improvisation, Redgate, oboe.

### **The start of performance<sup>1</sup>**

This paper presents a view of first meetings between the oboe virtuoso Christopher Redgate and two composers with whom he is collaborating, to reveal some of the ways in which the artists come together and some aspects of the philosophy of innovation. My concern is for the day to day practices of a performer and composers as they go about creating new music. The insights that follow are drawn from observations made over the past eighteen months, during which time I have had access to Redgate's meetings. What this paper describes is work in progress, in the sense that none of the compositions have been completed. Indeed, these are compositions in a nascent state, since the meetings that I shall address are 'first meetings' between composer and performer. The quotation marks are important, since they highlight the instability

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<sup>1</sup> With many thanks to Christopher Redgate, Fabrice Fitch and Dorothy Ker.

of the term: in one case Redgate and the composer worked together before, and the music that resulted from that work has been performed. In such an instance the instability comes from the rapid change in oboe technique that has characterized Redgate's whole career, and which is shifting especially quickly at the moment, with Redgate in the middle of a three year AHRC-funded Creative Fellowship.

Now is a period of intense change, where Redgate is exploring the instrument's capabilities in immense detail. He is, for example, describing the effect of all the oboe's fingering combinations (some 77 000 possibilities) in a new database, and undertaking analyses of every known multiphonic (756 at last count) (Redgate and Archbold 2011<sup>2</sup>) He is working with Howarth of London to develop new keywork. With Redgate pulling apart so many aspects of what the oboe can do, composers have been enlisted in this process, to write music that is at the cutting edge, putting together new ideas that make use of the oboe's emerging capabilities.

Whilst it is commonly accepted that performers and composers are people on the move, changing in response to the work that they undertake, less frequently addressed are the ways in which performer and composer take part in a programme of innovation, and rarely explained publically is this process as it takes place. As such, this is not a paper of means to ends, or ends at all, since neither Redgate nor the composers, (nor, especially, the musicologist!) know what the ends will be. It is, rather, a paper concerned with some of the processes that emerge in the earliest stages of planning and contemplating new music, and of the shifts that take place within a meeting: of the first hour or two of a performer and a composer coming together, each questioning, responding, accepting and challenging existing practice, and posing new (or reposing old) thoughts and directions for musical works. Rather than pursuing an archaeological approach, as I have undertaken elsewhere through the analysis of significant works in Redgate's repertory (Hooper, forthcoming), this paper is focused on the details of a very brief period of time.

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<sup>2</sup> For ore information, see <<http://www.21stcenturyoboe.com/Multiphonics.php>>

This stage of collaboration is infrequently addressed in the scholarly literature, and when it is, it is being often characterised by metaphors such as 'stepping off into the dark', allied to plastic, 'in-between' practices that result in co-authored materials (Watts, 2011).<sup>3</sup> This notion is unhelpful for the discussion of first meetings between Redgate and composers. Throughout my observations of his early meetings he has ceased to be anything other than jovial, and his relish at the prospect of rising to new difficulties and achieving unknown challenges is consistently foregrounded. My paper, responding to the collaborations as I have observed them, reasserts the value of the separation between composer and performer as productive. This is not a paper of grand philosophical aspiration, but part of a project to present the data of collaboration less fettered by narratives that require 'ends' to explain 'means'.

Over the past year Redgate has met with many composers, including students (in particular, those at the Royal Academy of Music) and those with whom he has ongoing relationships (such as Paul Archbold). I have observed several of these meetings, of which I shall focus primarily on Dorothy Ker and Fabrice Fitch. These composers both brought material to their initial meeting with Redgate. In the case of Fitch, this material was a pitch matrix, and in the case of Ker it was a poetic idea. Both meetings were directed by these materials: although the meetings were wide ranging, they were very different from the meetings to which no material had been brought, which suggests that both Redgate and the composers were directed by the materials at hand. Redgate's approach reveals much of the 'inner-workings' of sonic possibilities, which emerge as he explores and explains oboe technique.

### **Dorothy Ker**

During most of Redgate's meetings most of the time is spent with Redgate playing as much as he can and composers asking questions. His enthusiasm comes through very clearly, and that is one of the factors that shapes his collaboration. His meeting with Ker is one of the more open that I have observed, with Ker and Redgate responding to each other in an improvisatory

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<sup>3</sup> See also Watts 2010.

manner, directed by an initial idea from Ker and a series of demonstrations by Redgate. The following paragraphs describe the opening moments from their first meeting.

To begin, Ker gives a poetic idea: a 'porous column of air' and asks 'what is the minimum amount of energy required to get the oboe going?' (Redgate and Ker 2010, 8'16") In response Redgate demonstrates sounds that respond to Ker's poetic. (These sounds are different to those used in other meetings with different composers.) The way in which he chooses his sounds follow tangents from the initial poetic, and he is surprisingly systematic in the way that he demonstrates potential possibilities. Redgate approaches the 'column of air' from the perspective of 'the pre-reed [possibilities] – the air column, just blowing down the instrument,' (8'18") (which Ker had prefigured in some remarks about differences between oboe and clarinet).

He begins with his oboe, demonstrating inhalation and exhalation, then inhalation and exhalation modified by keywork. (He notes that a microphone will enhance this, which goes to Ker's question, about the minimum amount of energy to make the oboe sound.) Redgate then demonstrates the same sounds on the cor anglais, before combining these sounds with 'diaphragm accents' and then tonguing (single, double, triple, flutter). He returns to the oboe to demonstrate the equivalent possibilities. He then explains the difference between different types of flutter on both instruments. The 'next stage' includes tongue rams at varying dynamics. He then picks up a musette to demonstrate tongue rams – still with no reed – saying 'I've never tried them on this, actually'. With musette in hand, Redgate briefly improvises to combine all the sounds that have been separated through the demonstrations on the other instruments.

Alongside these demonstrations he explains the mechanics of the tongue and diaphragm, as well as how he is producing the sounds: this gives a sense of the boundaries of each technique, where one becomes another and when the sounds cease to be audible – again directly relevant to Ker's initial question about the 'minimum energy required'. Clearly enjoying himself, Redgate then demonstrated how these ideas might be combined, such as flutter tongue into a tongue-ram-with-maximum-diaphragm-support.

His willingness to go beyond those sounds and methods derived from past practice is driven by a desire towards explication: for each sound he gives a sense of how it is produced, the acoustics of the instrument and its place in the instruments' repertoire. He uses each of these approaches to prompt new thoughts and to push his ideas in new directions. They also bring his capabilities into contact with possible manifestations of the poetic idea. The poetic idea is used to push his capabilities into new areas, revealing a sense of the possibility – the ease and the difficulty – of different sounds.

Each sound that he demonstrates reveals related, similar or analogical sounds that then need to be accounted for. The differences that emerge when an idea is transferred from one instrument to another help to explain how each sound works, as well as prompting new sounds, which in turn require further explanation. What is remarkable is how close these differences are to Ker's poetic. For example, still without the reed, he demonstrates the above ideas on the cor anglais with its crook in place. Focusing on the cor anglais's crook suggests possibilities beyond the top of the oboe, and, therefore, inside the player's body. He subsequently reaches for the oboe, and extends its column of air by adding 'vocal noises'. Redgate describes this as 'taking it one stage further'. Analogous sounds are then demonstrated on the cor anglais without its crook. The mouth/instrument interface has been implicitly at play since he began working without the reed (the device that typically converts air into vibration). Now explicitly important, he demonstrates *a la tromba* playing (complete with overtones), which does away with the reed as a source of vibration. Indicating to Ker that he had 'never tried it before', Redgate combines *a la tromba* playing with singing, bringing the two columns of air (in the oboe, in the body) together.<sup>4</sup>

Each of the ideas that Redgate offers is also pulled apart, with constituent elements combined – through improvisation – in new ways to build up an account of how sounds work as independent elements and as assemblages. Redgate's enthusiasm keeps each idea as open as possible to new uses, fulfilling his role as the performer and providing materials for Ker to use. In

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<sup>4</sup> Although my description concentrates on the part of the meeting where Redgate played without a reed, most of the meeting was concerned with techniques that use the reed.

reconfiguring possible ideas for sound production he confirms his experience as an oboist and his understanding of technique. His wealth of experience is indicated lucidly through the breadth of the ideas, and he explains these with reference to existing works and existing ways of playing. This questions that instrument's defining features (how significant is its designation as a 'double reed' instrument if he has not used the reed yet?) as it reinforces the oboe's unique capabilities. The same play of questioning and reinforcing is applicable to Redgate himself, whose knowledge of the instrument's history is a match for his willingness to exceed past practice. It also describes the central thrust of this period of (formal) innovation, which is to develop a new instrument that is 'still an oboe' rather than inventing an entirely new instrument. (Redgate and Hayden 2010, 45'21")

In a sense this play of experience and technique defines the potential difficulties that Ker may at some stage ask of him, by making apparent the thresholds of his experience. In the same sense, Redgate is keen for Ker to cross apparent thresholds and to extend his experience, which is necessary for his technique to develop. The two artists come together very much in a open, responsive meeting, and both Redgate and Ker confirm their separation as performer and composer. Redgate's demonstrations and explanations build an expectation of the 'music to come'. The particular sonic ideas demonstrated and explained are chosen according to speculation, from the performer's perspective, in response to the composer; Redgate combines each element arbitrarily (in short improvisatory demonstrations), to assist Ker's task as a composer: her 'purposeful putting together' will provide new narratives for use in future technical exploration.

### **Fabrice Fitch**

The meeting between Redgate and Fabrice Fitch followed a different path. Redgate's meeting with Ker was filled by tangents leading from, and to, a poetic idea, with the differences that inevitably result from the analogies that this approach implies setting out possibilities. With Fitch, Redgate's sonic-techniques are deployed in a more restricted manner, to develop ways of realizing a compositional-technical idea.

The idea that Fitch first presented to Redgate is this:

I was thinking of a piece where actually you would have very rapid notes, as though most of them would seem to misfire. And then every now and then you would get notes that properly work (Redgate and Fitch 2009, 38').

Fitch had brought a pitch matrix, from which 'properly' sounding sequences could be determined by numerical schemes. Given that the most difficult music in Redgate's repertoire often occupies a territory in which 'misfiring' is typical, Fitch's idea is directed to finding a way in which this characteristic might be harnessed for musical ends:

how does that [misfiring] work in terms of suggesting fingerings that are either very close to given notes, so that the note learning, the 'where you put your fingers learning', isn't completely having to be reinvented for each pitch, but which allows for, in some way, the note to be 'spoilt'? (39'30").

Over the following fifty minutes, Redgate and Fitch go back and forth in exploring ways to achieve the given goal.

Redgate suggests two different approaches to the problem. The first uses a procedure in Finnissy's *Runnin' Wild* (1978), where double tonguing and fingering are pushed, independently, as fast as they can go. Redgate explains that the speed of articulation as written by Finnissy suggests an 'observable tempo,'(41'16") and that although he practices the piece as written, he then speeds up the fingers beyond what the tongue can do. In explaining this, Redgate says that 'Michael [Finnissy] says, "oh wonderful" because it's deconstructive.' (41'30") The connection between fingers and tongue, by which pulse is enacted, is deconstructed by the separation and reconfiguration of pulse's constituent elements, which is a process (indeed, a philosophy) that characterizes how Redgate works more generally. Although Fitch makes it apparent that this solution is not matched closely enough to his idea, nevertheless Redgate addresses the problem that Fitch posed by recalling one of the compositions that mobilized the problem in the first place. In other words, he couches the discussion in terms of 'repertoire' to provide an account of the problem from the perspective of oboe technique.

Redgate's second approach is to use a 'finger filter', where the C key is lifted or the (E key half-holed) to stop the sound. This filter is a clear on/off switch, which

Redgate complements with a 'less predictable' filter where a high fingering is combined with a 'low embouchure', and he cites Aaron Cassidy as a composer who uses this decoupling.

A very brief excursion through some of the reed-less ideas that Redgate explored with Ker takes place, before quickly returning to the reed, Fitch moving back to the central problem: The question is: [... what are] the best techniques for going quickly between a state of 'lack of clarity' and clarity? (49'06")

Redgate offers greater possibilities for achieving Fitch's goal, and one senses that the process is at least as important as achieving the ends that the Fitch initially proposed. Some time later, after Redgate demonstrated yet more possibilities, Fitch spoke more explicitly about what he requires as a composer. This begins a process of whittling down possibilities, categorizing (if loosely) techniques to find points of fit between the compositional priorities of the piece (even at its most golem-like and formless) and Redgate's abilities. The process is a rapprochement of ideas (and a differentiation of past-practices of a composer and a performer) – at least as much as it is about finding sonic possibilities – and so involves a significant degree of to-ing and fro-ing of variously connected elements: 'misunderstandings' (positive or otherwise, it is too soon to tell) of 'the problem' at hand are due to the different fields in which the two are operating. Neither party is particularly quick to resolve any differences that have arisen during the meeting, since these differences are so crucial.

Redgate's work-in-progress provides an ideal opportunity to explore the process of collaboration aside from the desire to find in 'completed compositions' those aspects that can be traced to initial meetings. The technique that Redgate displays when he explains the sounds he produces highlights his past experience, drawing particularly on the works that have been written for him. It also reveals the contingencies of different ideas, as they are pulled apart and recombined in response to ideas presented by Ker and Fitch, which in turn opens up possibilities for future composition. Redgate consistently provides accounts for what he suggests, with the act of accounting itself resulting in innovative ideas, such as when an analogous path is pursued on a different instrument, or for different ends; meetings with both Ker and Fitch

contained such moments. Redgate's desire for a more consistent and rigorous understanding of oboe technique (which is a major strand of his fellowship) requires new compositions that provide new experiences to enable new accounts of oboe practice.

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## Author's biography

Michael Hooper is a research fellow at the Royal Academy of Music, investigating collaborations involving Christopher Redgate. Hooper's first degrees were in performance at the University of Sydney. His PhD on the music of David Lumsdaine is from The University of York; his book on Lumsdaine's music will be published by Ashgate in 2011.