

BONNY STREET - music for electric guitar

ALBUM NOTES 2019

Background and equipment used for the original recordings

This album is a remix of work originally created in the 1970s. Though I have taken advantage of modern technology to make my original conception clearer, the music is essentially unchanged.

I moved to London (on New Year's Eve 1971) to 5 Bonny Street, Camden Town. Music making was not easy – we lived in a one room flat with a small kitchen and bathroom – but I had guitars and some effects. Consequently, I can understand some of the problems faced by the pioneers of electronic music. Everything was reel-to-reel on - in one instance I actually used 1 ⁷/₈ ips speed because I did not have enough tape – a large expense for me then ! I created long loops, reverberations and delays by making a loop tape (about 6 feet long at times), which went through my Watkins Copicat echo unit. And I had my Sony tape recorder.

In terms of sound there was thus the warmth created by analogue equipment, and by sound-on-sound recording. The latter has been one of the biggest difficulties in realising this music now, despite all the ease and clarity offered by digital music making. This makes the parts easier to hear and enjoy- important because much of this is linear music. But I have had to work hard to recreate the warmth.

Last but not least I had a supportive and understanding wife. For that reason this album is dedicated to Frances.

Musical aims

I have subtitled this album “music for electric guitar”. This is because the phrase is intended to recall such titles as “music for harpsichord”. “music for string quartet”.

Though the pieces inevitably show influences of the various genres which had influenced me, I feel that they are not and were not intended to be “rock” “fusion” or whatever. Instead I wished to create my own vision of what can be done with an electric guitar. It was music created after I left CMU, and reflects where I would have taken the group, if I had been able to lead it.

The music also shows how one responds to necessity. I did not have a group, so I had to use the medium of recording. Also I had to create music without drums – not a choice I would normally make.

Nevertheless I was, as I have always been, centrally concerned to create music with a strong rhythmic basis. But I wished to explore other ways in which rhythm might be articulated. So at various points I created superimposed metres, irregularity, and changes of tempo.

I also wished to see what would happen if I set aside the basic forms of jazz and rock. I also had just spent some years exploring the common Western modes (Mixolydian, Dorian, Aeolian). I now wanted to take modes further, using less common modes (e.g. Lydian) as well as mixing modes. Interestingly, I chose not to follow the route offered by modal jazz, wonderful though that was. (I remember going to a class given by the great pianist Howard Riley, who asked us to prepare a modal

piece, and was very disapproving of what I produced – this sort of modal music was just not his taste).

However, people like Howard, and for me especially drummers John Stevens and Frank Perry, drew me even more towards atonal music. (I had ventured in this direction in CMU with pieces such as *Slow and Lonesome Blues* and *Ivory Coast*). I am still strongly drawn in this direction, though I have never been able to embrace the “avantgarde” idioms as my only language. To me it offers a powerful range of sound to the musical palette.

Some of the pieces are “pure music” in the way in which instrumental classical music or jazz are. But again I found myself moving away from the Establishment disdain of the period for music which was programmatic, or created landscapes. Again this is a trait which has endured in my work.

The pieces

Solstices

The Solstice pair of pieces were written as a celebration of my coming to know my wife. The Summer Solstice was around the time when we met and also her birthday. We were married on the day of the Winter Solstice.

Summer Solstice

This is one of various pieces in which I took the 3-3-2 pattern of beats, and used it as the rhythmic basis of the piece. Another line which I followed was to have two themes, an idea taken from classical procedures. The solos are also more structured, seeking to develop the themes in a way similar to that which is found in classical music. The drums look back to jazz, but also there is a “pagan” section, which developed out of folk drumming.

Winter solstice

The mood is quieter, but grows steadily in intensity. As the piece moves on, the tension is enhanced by a riff figure, probably most reflective of certain types of studio music. Again the guitar improvisation is strongly shaped, increasingly articulating fragments of what is discovered only at the end of the piece to be the theme.

Three pieces for James Gordon

After the break-up of CMU (or at least the original line-up), my friend James Gordon set off on a voyage of self-discovery which he describes semi-autobiographically in his books (see www.shantiluyah.co.uk). One day while he was there, I received a letter, postmarked Katmandu, which told us that, whatever his spiritual state, he had certainly found a wife. Weddings have always created a great sense of joy in me, and have often inspired music. So it was on this occasion.

A Letter from Katmandu

The title is self-explanatory. Again there are two themes, but on this occasion they interweave polyphonically, reflecting the fact that the couple have found each other. Another aspect of the

musical exploration I was doing at that time is that the basic beat is not a four but a three beat metre, over which at time there is a strong sense of six.

Calcutta Wedding

In this piece I looked back even further than the fifties jazz through which I had come to music. Instead I looked back to the swing music, which was to be heard in our house during my childhood. The swinging rhythm expresses the light-heartedness and joy of the occasion, and again two themes interweave. We also hear wedding bells in the distance, but they have a strangely Indian tinge...

For a Child

By that time I was a father, and so was aware that children are for most people what truly seals the marriage covenant and takes it into another dimension. So here I was looking to James' future. I have since found that Sylvia Plath's poem *Morning Song* catches something of the deep inner stillness (with just a hint of tears) which I wanted to convey.

This is a piece which can only be classified as "music for electric guitar" since it fits no genre. There is a steady rhythm, but it is lightly articulated. The interest lies in the evocative sounds which the instrument can make.

Soundscapes

Two riff pieces

These were two ideas in which I explored setting riffs against each other. I feel that each piece embodies a mood, but I have never been able to pinpoint what – suggestions welcomed !

Heading North

This has a steady insistence and a sense of space. When I was creating these pieces, I was pressing at all the boundaries which I had happily accepted for many years. In this case I wanted to defeat normal expectations. So the phrases interact with the beat in a non-rock way and hence the listener's feeling is of suddenly stumbling or being left in the air.

Heading South

This explores resonance and dissonance. The reverberation shows a 50s pop influence, and is so marked that for me it becomes menacing. Like various of my pieces, it puts earlier pop through a distorting mirror, probably reflecting my own responses the first time round.

Canon

There is an open and optimistic mood to this piece but again I haven't thought of a title to express it, so it keeps its original working title, which indicates its form. The polyphonic music of the Renaissance and Baroque periods has long interested me and, while studying Music, I found it a great challenge to create polyphonic pieces which also had character and life in the jazz idiom which was then my language.

A canon has a melody against which are placed copies of various types (known as “imitations”) following at given intervals of time as the melody unfolds. Most people are familiar with one type – the round (e.g. *Frere Jacques*, *Row Row Row Your Boat*).

I wished to use this technique with modern materials, notably a folk-like melody, and a drum line which is there, not for timekeeping, but to add the tension which the addition of drums typically generates.

Bells

In my mid-teens I went on a school trip to see the châteaux of the Loire Valley. It was my first visit to France. One of my most striking memories was going to Rouen Cathedral, and going up the tower. This was during the Easter holidays and it was very strange to a boy brought up on atheism (at home) and very sober Anglicanism (at school) to enter a Catholic cathedral shrouded in deepest black for Passiontide. Then, while we were up the bell tower, the bells began to clang – which was even more staggering to someone whose only experience was the bells of St Mary’s, Nottingham, as we approached in procession on Founder’s Day. Those were lighter and of course more distant. This piece attempts to catch something of the resonance and impressiveness of the French sound, with a strong hint of the darkness which the old clergy must have wished to invoke, especially as Easter approached.

Technically, I again sought to explore and push boundaries, in this case of rhythm. So in this case I wanted to catch the fact that there is a rhythm in the ringing of bells, which at times, thought human error, lurches before coming into line again.

Peace

The name says it all. Thus was originally the second part of another attempt at creating a three section work, analogous to the Classical three movement structure. The other two sections are to be found on the album *Black Dog Blues* () where details can be found in the Notes.

When I came to re-edit and remix these tracks it became clear that they should be presented in different contexts, as *Peace* is very different in techniques and approach from the other two compositions.

The River

I have always been attracted by rivers, perhaps not surprising, as their fascinating mixture of the slow silent power of the natural, and the beliefs associated with them over many centuries have been a frequent topics for writers such as Edmund Spenser and T S Eliot.

I therefore tried to evoke several moods of two rivers well known to me – the Thames, and Oxford’s Cherwell.

Technically, riffs and repetition are again the fundamental building blocks. I wished to explore the range of impacts this can create. At the time – even now in some cases – riffs are seen by the unsympathetic as a crude technique, only useful for creative physical excitement, and showing a lack of musical imagination. Supply your own version of my response to such comments!

Source

The piece begins with the lightness of mood, and at times sense of mystery you find at the very beginnings of a river. The piece soon broadens out, as does the Thames – it always surprises me that it happens so quickly.

I have always been very aware of and responsive to open, pastoral music. But in the latter rhythm often fades into the background, to allow a sense of open, unfettered, peaceful space. Yet my starting point was music founded upon a strong rhythmic base. My solution was to pick up on riffs and repetition, which mirror the steady onward push of the current.

Waterway

This is the Thames as it moves towards and through London – rowers, leisure boats, barges, and also the memories of pictures of earlier times with ferrymen and royal barges.

The sense of a strong onward tidally based rolling, so typical of the Thames, is created by the use of a 3-3-3 metre as the basis.

Pool

My river is an imaginary place, but this pool arises from a memory of the Cherwell, with trees shading the punters on a warm summer day.

In this piece I use slow but repetitive patterns to create the sense of calm and rest – it is cyclic music, rather than music pushing forward.

I also use reverberation techniques to create an atmosphere which in real life is never so resonant, but which I hope creates a sense of internal space.

Torrent

This is the other side of the river, fortunately only seen on the Thames rarely. Really this comes from memories of the Derwent in Derbyshire, or of rivers in Scotland.

Here another power of the use of riffs is seen – a sense of growing intensity and forcefulness. I also use the options for distortion presented at that time. In particular there is the use of fuzz-type effects.

It is possible to argue that these are simplistic or crude and lack the range of possibilities which more modern distortion technology has offered. I would not wish for a moment to question the existence and value of these. An important part of my own musical education came from a friend of one of my students, who had a passion for collection distortion pedals – as I remember he had about forty!

By demonstrating some of these in an enthusiastic manner, he opened my ears, and destroyed one of my prejudices.

But I find that in those earliest ventures into electronic possibilities, and indeed other developments after about 1955, another aspect of emotional expression was connected. I find that there is a lack

of a certain type of emotional impact, which allows me to express an intensity which is nevertheless rather remote and cold.

I took the music in a further direction. If you think that the instruments are not playing in the same key, you are correct! To add to the tension, I decided to make the music polytonal, that is, each part is in a different key - a technique used by Bartok and Stravinsky.

In this recreation I have added a further dimension which arises from more recent interests – I use actual sounds of rushing water as part of the texture.

Dark Futures

These three pieces express different aspects of a theme which has increasingly interested me, of a world which increasingly turning itself into a dystopia.

But as often happens in arts, the message is not clear and focussed as it is in writing such as *1984* or *The Handmaid's Tale*. There are several coexistent ways of understanding the work. Getting older, one increasingly becomes aware of the effects of old age and the approach of death – which I find are mostly dark, rather than optimistic.

The Tempest

These themes were written for a play by Bill Martin in which extracts from the Shakespeare play were featured. I always wished to develop them further. In part I did so in *Caliban Calypso* (available as a free download at <http://www.elmvillagearts.co.uk/words-and-music-scripts.php>).

In this realisation the mood can be summed up in Shakespeare's own words: *Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises, / Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not. / Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments / Will hum about mine ears, and sometime voices... and All torment, trouble, wonder and amazement / Inhabits here: some heavenly power guide us / Out of this fearful country!*

Whereas the main purpose of the album was to explore and develop the resources (rhythms and scales) then found in rock music, in this piece I set myself the task of working in a way closer to that of the classical composer, in which emotional expression, rather than tightly repeated rhythm is the basis. There is in fact a repeating background chord riff, but the lead guitars move very freely against it. I also wished to see what could be done using only electric guitar textures, rather than orthodox instruments.

The piece is also another example of using a development technique, in which the main musical argument consists of the guitar working from and towards the main themes.

But listen also for the rumble of thunder and rising winds.

Los Alamos 1944

Los Alamos in New Mexico was the site of the laboratories where the first atomic bomb was created. The site was set up in 1943 and the first explosion was in July 1945. In 1944 there was therefore intense but secret effort at Los Alamos, while in the outer world young Americans were drafted into the armed forces and sent either to the Far East or Europe. Being young, they made the most of

opportunities to enjoy themselves, and especially in jitterbugging to the sound of the Swing big bands. As a child I was made aware of the latter, through my father's interest in the music; but it was only later that we all became aware of the nightmare of nuclear weapons

In this piece I wanted to create a sense of the contrast between the joy of youth energised by the riffing of Swing music (which is lightly parodied here – the local big band is not very good, but everyone is having a great time). But meanwhile the dancers are unaware of the impending destruction and chaos which was secretly being set irreversibly into motion.

To create the latter, the piece was one of my first explorations of more modern, atonal and dissonant textures.

In the swing sections I again explore the options for placing elements where they do not normally or should not go in this idiom. This creates a mixture of light humour and unease.

Two hours before the end of the world

This piece was originally called *Avantgarde Passaglia*, for want of a better title, and reflected my desire to blend two musical interests.

The passacaglia was a series of variations over a bass ostinato – one of the most famous examples is the Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor, BWV 582, for organ by Johann Sebastian Bach. The polyphonic music of the Renaissance and Baroque periods has long interested me as have repeated basses – for instance in boogie woogie and as rock bass riffs. But in earlier music the lines are imitative (follow each other and are very similar in contour. In this case the lines constantly vary quite substantially the same basic motifs.

At the same time I wanted to fuse the sense of freedom, intensity and dissolution I found in free jazz and various areas of rock.

In 2009 Moira Jarvis painted *Early Spring*. Despite the title, I felt that the painting had a brooding and disturbing quality. I decided to write some music expressing this, and also to begin an ongoing project called *Sound Paintings*, featured on my website (<http://www.elmvillagearts.co.uk/sound-paintings.php>), in which viewing a picture and hearing music were combined.

I then realised that the mood – beauty combined with and threatened by a menacing contrasting theme - was very much the character of *Avantgarde Passaglia*. In particular, two guitars, using a call and response technique, present a varying theme. Working against them, another pair of guitars (one using delay, the other distortion) present much more dissonant ideas. The “counterthemes” are not so much complementary as antagonistic.

For years the only version of the piece was on a 1 ^{7/8} ips (yes, Dictaphone speed !) tape, so this opportunity to realise the idea properly was a particularly great pleasure.

I do not consider myself to be a poet, but occasionally find myself to write something. On one such occasion I wrote a piece called *Two hours before the end of the world*. At a certain point, as I grew increasingly interested in creating forms of words and music, I realised that this music and the poem could be matched up. The result can be heard at <https://wordsandmusic.bandcamp.com/album/the-myth-of-arcadia>