

STARS BLINDLY RUN

First...

I suspect that most listeners will not want to hear this album twice

because

it is not easy listening.

Ideally...the listener would hear it as a continuous event

but

that is a lot to ask, so it is divided into separate items.

But you *should* see the album as a journey, of which the nature is explained below.

Tracks 1, 3, 4, 6 and 7 are a group of related pieces called *Canons Dance*. This is a play on words. Partly it is meant to evoke a set of corpulent clergymen letting their hair down – at least metaphorically. [A canon is a Christian priest with special duties in a cathedral].

However, the title really refers to the musical techniques which are used.

“Dance “will be familiar, at least to younger listeners, as the name for a network of forms which share the characteristics of being usually electronically created, having a very solid beat (often “four to the floor”) and being played loud. So if you can, turn up the volume. Despite any intellectual content, this album is meant first to get to the listener by a direct physical impact.

My basic starting point has always been that it has a sound rhythmic base which appears to us in the most fundamental way. So my starting point in the *Canons Dance* pieces was to take a characteristic pattern of a genre and to build on that foundation. These are indicated in the relevant part of the notes. But it should be noted that the aim is definitely not to create within that genre, only to take its basic rhythm as a starting point. This approach has an honourable ancestry, as the classical composers routinely took dance forms as their starting point – among the noted examples are the use of the sarabande and minuet. The results were not meant to be a contribution to an evening of dancing. For further detail see Appendix 2.

The word “canon” has various meanings. But in this case, it refers to a musical technique which was much used in the Medieval and Renaissance periods, but has been a device used by composers right up to the present day. For further explanation of canon and contrapuntal techniques see Appendix 1

A *canon* is a contrapuntal musical form. It has at times been a very complex and intellectual form – perhaps the most extreme of which is the *crab canon*. The latter, sometimes referred to as *canon cancrizans*, has two musical lines that are complementary and reversed. In this respect it is similar to a palindrome, which a word or words which read the same, both forwards and backwards. (e.g. the old story of what Adam first said when he met Eve: “Madam I’m Adam”). The situation may be made even more complex: for example in his work *The Musical Offering* J S Bach included a canon

("Quaerendo invenietis") in which the line which works backwards is also inverted, i.e. the notes go down where the first line goes up, and so on.

I originally intended to work with strict forms, as I believe that Dance music's use of short, impactful, memorable themes or motifs is very suited to this.

However, whether I was wrong, or just not insightful enough (I tend to believe the latter) I found that a greater flexibility was needed. So the music (and words) are often imitative, but not always with the strictness found in some Classical forms.

The title of the album is taken from the pivotal piece of the collection, which is described below. At this point it is sufficient to say that it is a concise way of summarising the aim of the album, which is to convey a certain, admittedly bleak, view of the universe.

Track 1: Canons Dance Hip Hop

The journey starts in a relatively light conventional mood, with a swingy rhythm and memorable riffs. The interest lies in variations of rhythm, which are much more frequent than in Dance music, variations of timbres, and a range of contrapuntal treatments of the riffs. Though the latter can be analysed intellectually, their first effect, like combined big band riffs, is intended to be emotional. I am therefore giving no indication of the techniques – it is better that the listener should become aware of their presence over time.

Gradually the piece becomes darker, as the use of noise increases. At the end these noises are recognised as street noises, which lead to the second piece.

Track 2: Labyrinth

I had the original idea for this many years ago. It was to be an event (or perhaps in modern terms an installation) for a church in Cambridge. The visitor would come in from the noise of the street, and would follow a journey around the building, through a route lined with screens and with music at each stage, which changed, finally reaching the centre, where there would be silence, before the visitor followed a route retracing the stages back to everyday noise.

The project never happened, but recently I realised that modern media make such a journey possible mentally and with greater control of the details of the experience. This is also clearly an analogy (or perhaps a reality) of an internal journey from noise and chaos to total calm and silence and then back to normal life. I am grateful to Susanne Griffin Drake for suggesting the title to reflect this process.

Interestingly, I recently came across a description of experience, which is in some respects similar, in *La Sirena*, a short story by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, author of *The Leopard*. In this the hero imagines meeting and having a relationship with a Siren. She invites him to join her under the sea, and she describes the stages of moving ever deeper under the sea. "She told me about her existence under the sea, the bearded Tritons, the blue green caves, but she told me that even these were transitory and illusory appearances and that the truth was much deeper down, in the blind mute place of unformed waters, without a gleam of light, without a whisper"

Labyrinth begins with a collage of urban noises, to which are then added machine rhythms. Next comes a Dance drum pattern on a synthesised instrument. The chaos starts to recede, when bells are heard at a distance. The listener enters a new space, and the bells become steadily quieter and more distorted. The sounds of small bells and cymbals are heard and the mood becomes steadily calmer. There are moments of beauty. Finally there is silence.

The listener should not be tempted to change track or switch off at this point, but should relax into this moment until bells and cymbals return quietly, and the journey back begins. Note that the first sounds are very quiet and may not even be audible if your playback is at a very low volume. Finally traffic noises are heard and grow in intensity until the listener is returned to the chaotic din of the outside world.

Track 3 Canons Dance Trance.

The next section is based on the Trance technique of a four to the floor kick drum to which is contrasted a bass line on the offbeat quavers (eighths). But whereas an important element of Trance is the use of anthemic lines, in this piece the lines are angular and dissonant. And the other sounds are driven especially by a sound like a hard pushed car. The contrapuntal approach can even be found in these sounds, though once again the emotional effect is paramount. The aim is a growing intensity toward the next section, which will be the high point of the Canon Dance pieces.

Track 4 Canons Dance Drum and Bass

The sense of the piece is a personality at breaking point or in the grips of terrifying or diabolic forces. Dissonance, disturbing sounds, and the constant assault on the basic beat by rhythmic fragments all lead to a great sense of unease. The beat is on the boundary of a phenomenon which grabs our innermost senses and one which is disturbingly mechanical.

The effect is obtained partly by using techniques which are definitely not found in the genre. One is that the phrases are irregular in length, rather than fitting the clear pattern of multiples of two bars which is a part of Dance music (however would people dance to the music otherwise?). Phrases may start in unexpected places – thus when the drums enter, one realises that the bass is not starting on beat 1 of the bar – the effect is jolting and disturbing.

Another technique is the use of a twelve tone series created by Webern (for *Three Songs*, Opus 23, 1934). This dictates the order of notes in the bass line, again giving tension, and a sense of an oppressive, mechanical dimension. Further information about this can be found in Appendix 2.

Track 5 Stars Blindly Run

In 1849 Alfred Tennyson completed *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, a poem written over sixteen years in response to the sudden death in Vienna in 1833 of his close friend Arthur Hallam.

In Memoriam is written in four-line stanzas, made up of iambic tetrameters rhyming ABBA. These in turn are grouped into 133 cantos, dealing with a wide range of reflections.

The poem is long and on the whole depressing, but had interested me for many years, since I had to study it for A Level. At the time it had particular relevance as I was returning to study after a bout of TB.

Tennyson was the son of a Lincolnshire clergyman. The death of Hallam was a severe test to his faith, and the original title of the poem was 'The Way of the Soul'. Finally, Tennyson found an essentially Christian accommodation to his grief. However, to reach this point he had to face issues such as the cruelty of nature, mortality and the claims of materialist science.

It is my belief that had he not been able to do this, the work could easily have been self-indulgent and second-rate. But he faces these matters without evasion.

In doing so, he produced what is arguably the finest poetry in the work, and often the most well-known (for example the passage about "nature, red in tooth and claw").

It occurred to me that, ironically, Tennyson, the Christian, had produced one of the finest literary evocations of my own, atheist position. I have never been religious, and am sceptical of or reject many of its claims. I see the Universe in materialist terms, full of randomness, and certainly not arranged to reflect human wishes and aspirations.

I therefore took relevant extracts as my starting point. It is important that religious people or lovers of Tennyson should understand that I am not trying to give a balanced and accurate interpretation of *In Memoriam* as Tennyson saw it, but am instead taking extracts to create what is an evocation in sound of an atheist view.

As I worked on the album it became clear that this piece was the focal point. The preceding pieces create views into the experience of the individual in everyday reality. This is a more philosophical and general statement about these experiences.

The extracts used are given in Appendix 3.

Technically I draw on electronic and dance inspirations, but above all on Paul Lansky's approach in his *Six Fantasies on a Poem by Thomas Campion*. In that work he recorded an actor, Hannah MacKay, reading the poem. He then used electronic resources to give a staggeringly imaginative range of sounds, all derived from that reading.

In particular, I was struck by the insight that speech uses vowels, which are voiced sounds. This means that they have pitches. The speech can be drawn out into a song, the movement of which is led by the speaker's unconscious use of rises and falls in the voice.

In fact Frances, the reader, did also record sung versions of a theme I had created for *Ring Out Wild Bells*, which I again treated electronically to produce a range of sung passages.

However, I wished also to continue the canon theme of the album. Thus sounds and at times the words are also used imitatively. In addition I created a fugue, parts of which can be heard at various points. An explanation of fugue is given below.

The extracts don't follow the order in which they appear in the poem. I feel that I can live with that, since we know that the text we have does not follow the historical order of composition – Tennyson reordered them to create the sequence of the stages of grief he wished us to experience.

Track 6 Canons Dance a Breakdown

Properly speaking, a breakdown in dance music may take several forms - for more detail see the notes below. Here, as throughout the album, the concept is taken as a starting point. The piece takes us from the reflection of *Stars Blindly Run* into ambiguous territory. Our canons are deeply confused and move rapidly between various elements which echo the music heard so far. Storms, explosions, organ music, dance rhythm, even the Webern series all make brief appearances. Contrasting and irregular rhythms generate a sense of tension and unease. Yet there are hints of something more optimistic and beautiful. For further detail see Appendix 5

Track 7 Canons Dance Trance – again

This piece is the nearest to something which would be acceptable to fans of the genre. There is a somewhat anthemic line to end. But unlike authentic recordings it uses a contrapuntal approach in which contrasting lines are set against each other, with hints of imitation

Nevertheless, after what has gone before the listener may well be surprised, as the piece is light in mood and dancey. For me, it illustrates the point very well, that artists at work don't ultimately rely on planning and mechanical procedures – insights and inspirations come unbidden and from where we know not where. In this case it was during a swim at the Oasis Pool in Camden. The feel and basic idea came, and it was possible to create the draft very quickly.

I'm not sure why it works. One possibility is that the ambiguity of the previous piece is then resolved into optimism. My other thought is that the idea comes from the ending of tragedies in Shakespeare's time with a jig. This piece is then a relief after the intensity of all that has gone before, and the relief is expressed through the most fundamental of musical activities – the dance.

APPENDIX 1: A NOTE ON RHYTHM AND COUNTERPOINT

Canon is a form of *counterpoint*, that is, the use of musical lines ('voices') which have distinct rhythms which interact. These may be deployed in *imitation*, which is the repetition of a line or phrase shortly after its appearance in a different line. We are all familiar with *rounds* such as *Frere Jacques*; the round is a compositional form which uses imitation. In such cases the repetition is exact, but in contrapuntal music more generally this need not be so. The imitation needs only to be clearly related to and to copy the original line in important respects. The interval of time between the first phrase and its imitation is not fixed and depends on the aims of the composer.

In this type of music various other techniques are often used, such as *sequence* (the repetition of ideas at another pitch), *augmentation* (all the notes of the phrase are lengthened, e.g. doubled in length), *diminution* (all the notes of the phrase are shortened, e.g. halved in length) and *stretto* (the ideas follow each other at a very short interval of time).

It should be noted that the above description involves only two lines, for the purpose of explanation; in fact there may be any number of phrases, though typically there are between two and five.

A **fugue** is a contrapuntal form. It is built on a *subject* (a short theme) that is introduced at the beginning. *Imitation* is used to introduce the theme in all the voices. A contrasting theme (the countersubject) is usually added. This part of the piece is called the *exposition*. The theme is then given a development, before the original ideas return.

The most famous fugue composer was Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750).

APPENDIX 2: RHYTHM

It is worth clarifying some other rhythmic ideas at this point, because the term “contrapuntal” has often been applied to musics deriving from the African American tradition. Though parallel can be drawn between the two traditions, counterpoint is a feature of the “classical” area, and involves the features described, as is *syncopation* (the disturbance of the normal rhythmic pattern).

“Modern” styles, by contrast, use such “disturbances” as a continuous and ongoing feature of their rhythmic structure, and are therefore better described as cross rhythms, reflecting patterns which can be seen as the movement in and out of different metres.

Typically the music has two or three *contrasting* rhythms, which could be called *counter rhythms*.

Also, a very widely used feature is *call and response* in which a first phrase is answered by a contrasting phrase.

APPENDIX 3: USE OF WEBERN’S SERIES

In Twelve Tone music, the composer typically starts by arranging the twelve notes of the chromatic scale into an order known as a series. The Original (O) form is then inverted (I), written backwards (as in a palindrome) (R form) and this is then also inverted (RI form). These four options are the starting materials for the composition.

Here is the Webern series, and the riffs which were created out of it:

Webern Opus 23 Series

Original Row

Original Row

8

13 Inversion

Inversion

Inversion

19

25 Retrograde

Retrograde

31 Retrograde inversion

40

APPENDIX 4: TENNYSON EXTRACTS

*I past beside the reverend walls
Of which of old I wore the gown;
And heard once more in college fanes
The storm their high-built organs make,
And caught once more the distant shout,
The measured pulse of racing oars
The same grey flats again, and felt
The same, but not the same; (LXXXVII)*

*To-night the winds begin to rise
And roar from yonder dropping day:
The last red leaf is whirl'd away,
The rooks are blown about the skies ;(XV)*

*A rainy cloud possess'd the earth,
And sadly fell our Christmas-eve.
At our old pastimes in the hall
We gambol'd making vain pretence
Of gladness, with an awful sense
Of one mute Shadow watching all.
But let no footstep beat the floor,
Nor bowl of wassail mantel warm;
For who would keep an ancient form
Thro' which the spirit breathes no more? (CV)*

*We paused: the winds were in the beech:
We heard them sweep the winter land;
And in a circle hand-in-hand
Sat silent, looking each at each. (XXX)*

*Our father's dust is left alone
And silent under other snows:
There in due time the woodbine blows,
The violet comes, but we are gone.*

*Old Yew, which graspest at the stones
That name the under-lying dead,
Thy fibres net the dreamless head,
Thy roots are wrapt about the bones. (II)*

*The wish, that of the living whole
No life may fail beyond the grave,
Derives it not from what we have
The likest God within the soul ?*

*Are God and Nature then at strife,
That Nature lends such evil dreams,
So careful of the type she seems,
So careless of the single life ;(LV)*

*So careful of the type"? but no.
From scarped cliff and quarried stone
She cries, "A thousand types are gone:
I care for nothing, all shall go. (LVI)*

*"The stars," "blindly run;
A web is wov'n across the sky;
From out waste places comes a cry,
And murmurs from the dying sun: (III)
"Thou makest thine appeal to me:
I bring to life, I bring to death:
The spirit does but mean the breath:
I know no more." (LVI)*

*They say
The solid earth whereon we tread
In tracts of fluent heat began,
And grew to seeming-random forms,
The seeming prey of cyclic storms,
Till at last arose the man; (CXVIII)*

*Man, her last work, who seem'd so fair,
Such splendid purpose in his eyes,
Who roll'd the psalm to wintry skies,
Who built him fanes of fruitless prayer,*

*Who trusted God was love indeed
And love Creation's final law –
Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw
With ravine, shriek'd against his creed –*

*O life as futile, then, as frail !
What hope of answer, or redress ?
Behind the veil, behind the veil. (LVI)*

*Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky
The flying cloud, the frosty light:
The year is dying in the night;
Ring out, wild bells, and let him die. (CVI)*

*Dig down upon the northern shore,
O sweet new-year delaying long;
What stays thee from the clouded noons,
Thy sweetness from its proper place?
Can trouble live with April days,
Or sadness in the summer moons*

*Bring orchis, bring the foxglove spire,
The little speedwell's darling blue,
Deep tulips dash'd with fiery dew,
Laburnums, dropping-wells of fire. (LXXXIII)*

far away
The noise of life begins again,
And chastly thro' the drizzling rain
On the bald street breaks the blank day:" (VI)

APPENDIX 5: BREAKDOWNS, DROPS AND WHATEVER

Those who know the music well and are passionate about it can argue at length about the meaning of the terms *breakdown* and *drop*. It is suggested that the original breakdown was invented by Tom Moulton in the Disco genre, when to separate and yet link two sections he included a section only containing a drum rhythm. In many Dance tracks, the breakdown has most of the pitched instruments taken out, and also the percussion, and noise and other sounds are added.

But there is a general principle, first observed in the "breaks" of traditional jazz, which is as follows. The piece is built over a strong rhythm, but at a certain point many of the elements are taken away. The artistic skill consists in removing many of the elements of the music, thus creating a strong contrast, whilst not entirely losing momentum.

At the end of this interlude the music comes back with renewed impact over a strong rhythm. This is often called a "drop" - the composer drops back into the basic rhythm. (Again specialists will argue about what exactly is needed in a drop).

Above all the breakdown is a point of comparative relaxation and freedom.