

World Swing – form and content

My relation to world music

I have always been interested in a wide range of music, and in particular world music, and in particular the music of Brazil, Northern Indian Classical Music and the traditional drumming of West Africa. And as my first involvement with music was bebop jazz, I had always been excited by what jazz people call “swing”. *World Swing* was in the first instance a project in which I have attempted to find links between these elements.

I realise that the terms “swing” and “authentic” can generate intensely felt discussions, but it is not my intention to get into such debates. Similarly, my account below is stated in European terms, as this is my most typical way of making musical arguments. But the creators of the world musics on which I have drawn typically expressed their concepts of techniques and effects in very different ways and typically see their art in terms greatly removed from my conception here.

So I need to make it very clear that *World Swing* is not an attempt to create a jazz swing piece or authentic examples of world music, though the artists in these areas have given me both deep pleasure and inspiration over decades. In fact, the piece is, among other things, meant as a tribute these artists.

The basic approach of the work

Over the years my music has evolved and changed very greatly from those first bebop-inspired days. So my concern now is to create pieces which draw on all the resources which electronic music and dance music have given me compositionally, especially in the last 15 years or so.

World Swing is an idea which I had many years ago, and though never so far brought to fruition, it has had a series of changed conceptions. Increasingly this has meant an ever-greater role for me as composer. But what has remained constant is that it is built around and in relation to a live jazz drummer.

The chance to make this a reality arrived when Les Shaw and I renewed contact after many years. We were close friends in our teens and we got involved with music at the same time. We played together in various groups. But at the end of our teens our ways had diverged: I went to university but Les went on to become a professional drummer, which he had to give up as a full-time career because of very demanding family commitments. But he continued (and continues, in his eighties) to play in the Nottingham area. He was a major force in creating, promoting and performing with the Nottingham Jazz Orchestra. And in the 1960s and 70s he was involved with soul and jazz rock notably with Robert Hirst and the Big Taste. This experience was very valuable in the creation of the current piece.

Les’s playing always very much appealed to me. So when we renewed our acquaintance, I realised he might be the jazz drummer around whom the work focused. He was interested. The sort of collaboration that would have been ideal was not possible because of personal commitments and some 90 miles of distance between us. Technology helped to some extent but the interactive approach which I would have liked was not an option. This was a pity because I was certain that his insights would add much to the project.

Nevertheless, we got some good recordings, not least because of the skill of recording engineer Alan Hames. And Les did contribute significantly (for instance the hand drumming in the Indian section, which I should never have thought of). I would like to mention that later Alan made very valuable suggestions about the cover art.

Form and structure of the work

In form it is what literary people would call *picaresque*. This is defined by the Cambridge dictionary as *relating to a type of story in which the main character travels from place to place and has*

a series of adventures (= exciting experiences) “. In *World Swing* Les Shaw, a jazz drummer, is the “main character” and he is found in a series of contexts, which are episodes rather than a continuous development. But there are rhythmic links of which the listener will probably pick up some on the first hearing.

This reflected what became the central concept of *World Swing*. I decided that I was not trying to make pastiches or to try to use the actual techniques of a music. I was rather offering an imaginative trip through space and time, so that what happens in the music being visited is more suggested. It is a more impressionistic vision, rather as a painter might not take a naturalistic approach to a subject but instead shows us the impact of what is seen. (This approach is illustrated visually in the cover illustration, which is a work by Jenny Lowe inspired by the Australian outback)

So I invite you to go on this aural journey and to let your imagination respond. Though it may seem rather unusual or strange, according to taste, you will hopefully have gained a set of insights into the relationship between swinging jazz and various world musics.

Technical foundation

My technical starting point was that all the types of music I have used draw, at least at times, on a rhythmic basis which is grouped in threes. However, the accentuation, groupings and rhythms are far from the three of the waltz or the six of march or a jig. Jazz “swing” can also be imagined as having three notes to a beat substructure. In addition, “swing” in something like the jazz sense can be found, for instance, at least some Brazilian samba music, and some aspects of rock (the more funky area). Traditional West African music (the original source of all North American and Latin American black music cultures) is very frequently in a triple meter. Though, as I understand it, this metre is less used in Indian Classical music, it definitely appears at times, and to my ear at least, can generate an exciting effect which is very similar.

Structure

The work starts with a Header whose basic rhythm was inspired by Tony Williams, drummer for Miles Davis (Tony Williams *Freedom Jazz Dance* on album *Mile Smiles*)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yJ11cArknek>

I became aware of it when I was working with Roger Odell in CMU. I always found it an exciting rhythm and it came back to me as a very useful linking pattern which would drive the music forward. It also sets up the fact that this is a rhythmic piece - so if the listener does not find themselves inclined to nod their head or tap their foot, then I have failed.

This leads into the section which sets the tone and structure of the work, even though the work is complex, he leads into what in classical music would be the exposition. This is a jazz solo (but keeping time rather than free). This illustrated for me the important differences between the way we had to work, with Les improvising to a brief, and electronic composition in which all elements have to be shaped to make a coherent whole. Thus this solo, like all the Les contributions, are the sounds which he actually played, but it is not the entire original recording. In fact, Les played such a good solo in his recording that I had to do a lot of thinking before deciding what to include. Though the original solo would undoubtedly get favourable and attentive listening from a jazz listener, the audience which I would wish to reach would not normally be so committed to jazz, and the solo would be too long. However, I think that the original solo is so good that I have released it separately in the *World Swing* package at Elm Village Arts
(<http://www.elmvillagearts.co.uk/>)

Another bridge passage leads into the Rock episode. Here I have tried to contrast the more heavy eight in a bar rock feel to the more swinging, funky jazz rock approach which Les puts into his part.

This section is followed by another bridge, which hints at the Latin section into which it leads. Originally this started by following the most commonly known samba rhythm. But Les varied the ride rhythm

constantly and I realized that I wanted to create the spirit of the original pattern, rather than something more literal.

Next follows another Latin episode. But here I wanted to create an impression of the sort of music, which is closer to African approaches, and is still very much alive in Brazil. Afro Brazilian musicians create music for mass participation, often with triple patterns. Here I decided that my original plan only to use percussion should be amended, because I wished to create rhythmic crowd noises, to give some sense of the excitement in these events.

Another version of the original bridge passage follows, and here I decided to break an original decision, which was not to use any sort of melodic or harmonic element. I decided very short bursts of a chord could set off and make more impactful the purely percussive passages. In this case I included a drone, which leads naturally to the Indian section.

I started with tabla using *tal dadra* – a six beat pattern. Here again, rather than try to create within the tradition – it takes years to do so effectively - I again went for an impression of Indian music, not only on tabla, but on other drums, notably the *pakhawaj*. In the West we are used to the beauty of the table, but there are many other drums used in Indian folk and popular cultures.

This leads on, again with a bridge, from an initial buildup of African traditional drumming musicians into three sections based mostly on the traditional West African drum patterns *Atsimevu* and *Agbekor*. In all these, of course, Les makes a contribution.

The African section transitions again through the bridge into an episode inspired by Dance music. This is again fragmented, almost the manner of Expressionist painters, so that though there is a continuous beat, the focus is on sounds which are found in this sort of music.

This episode leads by a final bridge into the Finale, which sandwiches the header figure with a jazz drum solo.

Central to the whole work is Les Shaw's playing. He contributes to all the episodes, but in various ways. I wanted him to use the talents and draw on the wide musical taste, which I knew he had. But though there is plenty of swing, with ride cymbal and snare and kick drum punctuations, he also solos on snare drum and toms. Normally he uses sticks, but in the Indian episode he was inspired to use his hands on the snare drum with the snares off.