

## Michael Nyman

### [ pass out handout ]

- Many of you probably have heard or are familiar with Nyman's music, perhaps even without realizing it, since Nyman has composed many soundtracks and music used in film and television; probably the most famous example is the 1993 film *The Piano*, although we're not going to discuss that work since it is a bit overplayed. Let me just first say that Nyman considers himself a "post-minimalist" composer (as you can see at the bottom of the handout), so let's prime our musical ears for these post-minimalist traits.
- the reason I got interested in Nyman was through a soundtrack to an earlier film, *The Draughtman's Contract*, directed by Peter Greenaway. Nyman has worked on a lot of Greenaway films over the years, although their relationship kind of dissolved around 1991.
- Anyway, I heard the piece "Chasing sheep is best left to shepards" on WNYC a couple years ago and really took a liking to it. So before we talk about Nyman, his music, his biography, etc., I thought we could listen to this piece first to get some sort of musical compass and context in which to orient this talk. There is no score for this work in the library, but I will do a quick rough transcription of the harmonies on the board as it is being played.

### [ play track 1: "chasing sheep is best left to shepards" ]

- The harmonic progression in this piece supposedly derives from a piece by Purcell. I can't say exactly which piece, but I think we can all agree the progression sounds like it could be from the Baroque era. What I find interesting about the progression is the way the listener kind of gets lost within it. Nyman's instrumentation in this piece is pretty static, and basically only changes when the harmonic progression loops back again. Because of the static instrumentation, and because of the uneven yet long length (it's 15 bars) and the repetition of certain chords, it's hard to tell where one is, I think. The 4-3 suspension is a point where you can get oriented, but in the middle, it's tricky. The chord substitutions and the little repeat he writes in makes it even harder. So while there is a sense of forward motion, there's also a minimalist sense of stasis.
- So having listened to this first piece, let's talk about some biographical and stylistic details. My little chart on page 1 is not exhaustive, but I think it hits some highlights. If you combine that with the list of selected works on pages 3-5, I think his career comes into better perspective. By the way, the asterixes on the works list are there to indicate more well-known pieces, although on some level, that's an arbitrary and subjective distinction. Just to finish explaining the handout, page 6 shows the bulk of the works for which Sibley has both scores and recordings.
- So turning back to page 1 on the handout, I just want to draw your attention to years 1964-67 when Nyman studied with Thurston Dart. Nyman wears both a composer's hat as well as a musicologist's hat, and one of his main interests in musicology is the Baroque era, as you can also see from Nyman's editions of some works by Purcell and Handel. This Baroque influence comes through in many of his pieces, both in direct ways and in perhaps just a general sensibility.

- As a musicologist and composer, Nyman also wears two stylistic hats. You'll notice that in 1974 he published a book on experimental music, so he has a foot both in the past and the present. This experimental influence in the style of Cage is pretty easily seen in Nyman's early work. Let's take a look at another soundtrack Nyman wrote for an earlier Greenaway film, *I-100*. Originally, Nyman wanted to chop up Strauss's *Blue Danube Waltz* like Rzewski, but that became another piece. The top of page 2 on the handout gives the list of the works we'll try to hit in the talk. There are also some stylistic characteristics at the bottom of the page which you can browse. We'll be teasing out those stylistic characteristics through the pieces, and you should be able to notice most of them yourself.

- So before I play *I-100*, let me just explain its construction. I don't have a score for this piece either, but it's pretty easy to understand and Nyman is very good about giving fairly detailed explanations of his pieces in the liner notes of the CD booklets or scores of his works. Anyway, it's a piece built on indeterminacy (reminiscent of Cage). It's written for 4-6 pianos, each of which plays the same harmonic progression. Each pianist plays the next chord in the progression only when he or she feels as if the chord that he or she just played has completely decayed. So the end result is 4-6 piano players working through the same chord progression at different rates. It's a simple progression, just descending fifths (another Baroque influence). The progression cycles down, and as you get further into the piece, the sustain and thus duration of the chords gets longer and longer. As well, the piano players are further off from one another.

**[ play track 3: *I-100* ] [ pass out scores to String Quartet #1 ]**

- As you can see in the works list, Nyman likes to give pretty creative titles to many of his pieces. The string quartets are an exception though, and I'd like to take a look at String Quartet #1 now. With this string quartet, we can see further evidence of Nyman appropriating the music of other composers to inform the structure of his work.

- I'd like you to just see how the opening of the First String Quartet maps exactly to bar 8 of John Bull's *Walsingham* variations. You may notice the edition of these variations that Sibley owns was edited by Nyman's teacher, Thurston Dart. I have written in circled letter names in the scores so that you can see which bars map to which. Notice how Nyman is taking slices of the Bull piece and abutting them together in a sort of collage. Notice also how Nyman, at least at first, is taking slices from similar parts of the Bull piece. Since Bull's piece is a set of variations, Nyman is extracting all those final cadence measures in A major to create a static sense of A major. One of the interesting features of these variations by Bull, though, is how the variations end in A major and then start back in A minor, and Nyman starts to eventually extract measures from both the beginning and ends of the Bull phrases to heighten this weird effect.

- Notice also how the tempo keeps changing every two bars. The subdivisions in the Violin 2 part are also changing. What is happening here is that the notes played by the Violin 2 are kept at a constant rate while the notes around the Violin 2 are changing. For example in the 60 at the beginning, the 32nd notes have the same duration in time as the 16th notes in the tempo of 120, which are the same as the sixteenth note sextuplets under 80 and the quintuplets under 96. Let's take a listen to how this plays out.

**[ play track 6: SQ #1 ]**

- You'll notice later (at rehearsal letter B) that the texture changes. Here, Nyman appropriates a snippet from Schoenberg's second string quartet as a way to build a string of harmonies. Compare the the Schoenberg handout with the Nyman quartet and it's pretty easy to see how the cello part in Nyman takes up the cello part of the Schoenberg. Nyman talks about how he was slightly apprehensive about writing a String Quartet, but that taking parts from the Bull piece, which was written about 150 years before String Quartet writing really got started and taking a part from the Schoenberg piece which uses a Soprano voice and kind of goes beyond the confines of the title was his solution. I'm not going to play the Schoenberg influenced snippets, but I think you get the idea.

- I would, though, like to play one more selection from this Quartet. Flip to rehearsal mark G. I really like this part, especially once the figuration kicks in about half way through. There's a sense of "rock and roll" in this part with the way the melody is accented and the way the open fifths get chunked out by the cell and viola. Notice also how this part derives from variation six of the Bull piece.

**[ play track 8: SQ #1 ]**

- You can see more Schoenberg influenced parts later, but I'd like to move on.

**[ pass out *Man Who Mistook His Wife For A Hat* scores ]**

- There is a quote on page 1 about how Nyman prefers to write opera, so let's talk about one of his most famous operas called *The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*. Let me just give a little background on the opera so that the excerpts make sense. It's an opera based on a true story. The main character, Dr. P, is suffering from the early stages of alzheimer's. His doctor is named Dr. S. So to keep it straight, remember that Dr. P is the patient. Mrs. P is Dr. P's wife, of course. Anyway, one of the symptoms of Dr. P's alzheimer's is what is called "visual agnosia," which is means that Dr. P's brain is unable to make sense of normal visual stimuli. He mistakes is wife for a hat, for example, and mistakes his foot for his shoe. In "Paintings" we see how Dr. P's artistic style has changed from representational to more abstract.

- Dr. P., despite his early alzheimer's is able to play music extremely well, and the Schumann song "Ich Grolle Nicht" from *Dichterliebe* is included in the opera. After Dr. P plays the piano and sings the song, Nyman writes the "Solids" piece. This piece deconstructs the Schumann song, acting as a metaphor I guess to the breakdown of the Dr. P's mind. I have marked up the score of "Solids" with some brackets and Xs and Ys that correlate to the Schumann score I gave you. I did a loose marking up, so don't be too critical with my labels; they certainly could be revised to be more accurate. Anyway, again, notice how Nyman has appropriated music from another composer and rearranged it to create his own post-minimal structure. Sorry I only have a vocal score. Sibley supposedly has the full orchestration somewhere, but it's not on the shelves where it should be. At this point in the opera, Dr. P. is doing some visual recognition tests and playing some games for Dr. S to observe.

**[ play track 10: "Solids" from *Man Who Mistook His Wife* ]**

- Other movements in the opera also have various influences from songs by Schumann, but we won't look at any more of those. Most of the pieces and songs in the opera, in a typical Nyman fashion, are formed as a sort of continuing variation. I have included "Traffic" and "Paintings" and marked up a few harmonic motives that recur throughout these movements. Notice the <C, Db, F> progression and the others (consult notes). Nyman does cadence in parts, though, going away from variation form. Also notice the really straight-forward left-hand piano chords in "Paintings." Nyman is not afraid to just move root-position chords around; it's kind of one of his hallmarks even. But let's listen to a little bit of "Traffic" which near the opening of the opera.

[ play track 11: "Traffic" from *Man Who Mistook His Wife* ]

- It shouldn't be surprising that in addition to operas, Nyman has a variety of vocal pieces.

[ pass out "Corono" from *Six Celan Songs* ]

- This is song from a setting by Nyman of some texts by Paul Celan, a Jewish and Romanian poet of the post-WWII era. I have done a rough translation of the German text, although it really doesn't do the poem justice. The structure of Nyman's song is here again derived from an older work. Compare the "Corono" with the Chopin Mazurak I have included and you can see how Nyman has again deconstructed the harmonies. Notice also how the electric bass in Nyman's setting, just like in "Traffic" creates these second inversion chords that in Nyman's world seem like stable sonorities. Let's have a listen.

[ play track 13: "Corona" from *Six Celan Songs* ] [ pass out *String Quartet #4* ]

- Finally, I would like to compare and contrast some later String Quartet writing to Nyman's first String Quartet. You've got Nyman's last String Quartet (#4) from 1995, written a decade after his first. We have encompassed almost two decades of his output now. I won't say much about these pieces. They are based on an earlier work of Nyman's called *Yamamoto Perpetuo*, which was written for solo violin. Basically Nyman orchestrated that piece and turned it into a string quartet. As far as I know, the structure is not derived from the work of another composer. You'll notice a strong sense of modality as well as kind of harmonic stasis, which are minimalist hallmarks, of course. I have marked up the score a little, trying to reconcile the piece a bit with traditional harmonic labels, but I'm sure you'll notice other interesting features. I think there is more freedom in his composition in this later piece; he's less tied to an interesting structural idea and lets the music write itself.

[ play tracks 15 & 17 from *String Quartet #4* ]

- So, in conclusion, I just want to draw your attention to some key stylistic features. The "parody" technique was common in the Baroque age, where composers recycled and reworked their own and other composers' pieces. As well, the continuous variation (chaconne) was a popular form in the Baroque era. But with Nyman, we see him merging this interest of his with his experimental side, slicing and dicing, repeating and reshaping. We might call Nyman, the musicologist and composer, the Baroque scholar and experimental post-minimalist: "The Man Who During His Life wore Many Hats."