

As part of my research into the relationships between composed and improvised music, I used Barry Guy's *The Blue Shroud* as one of my two case studies (the other was Nick Roth's *Flocking III*). *The Blue Shroud* was inspired by the Picasso painting *Guernica* depicting the bombing in 1937 by Italian and German forces of the Basque town of Guernica. The first deliberate bombing of a civilian population.

In many parts of *The Blue Shroud*, Guy employs techniques he calls the 'sieve' and 'backgrounds'. The 'sieve' is a method of filtering the music of one group (or section) within the Band through another in a way that carries some of the musical DNA into the new section. The 'backgrounds', performed by those not playing in one of the three 'sieve' groups, provide a kind of sonic backdrop to the filtering, transforming 'sieve' music. The Blue Shroud Band was formed especially to perform *The Blue Shroud* and is composed of fourteen musicians from ten European countries. *The Blue Shroud* was premiered at the 14<sup>th</sup> Krakow Autumn Jazz festival in 2014. This interview was conducted on 18<sup>th</sup> November 2020.

**Viktória Šinkorová:** How did this idea of the 'sieve' technique appear as a central element of your composing in *The Blue Shroud*?

**Barry Guy:** I suppose the 'sieve' was for me just a meme, a way of looking at the picture of *Guernica*. It emerged as an idea when I looked at the left-hand side of the painting where you have the bull, the mother and child, and the warrior, all of which are stacked up on top of each other, and this arrangement of distinct visual protagonists though stacked closely suggested to me a certain type of activity, and ways in which I could split the [Blue Shroud] band up into three groups to mix their sounds in creative ways.

The idea was to create a method whereby music by one group within the band could filter through into another group; that was the general idea. In my drafts to the score, I made architectural realizations of these sonic layers that relate to the picture's protagonists. So, I have colours here: green for the bull, blue for the mother and child, red for the warrior, and yellow for the bird, etc. So these translated into the score as individual groups with specific sound qualities that would filtrate through each other like a sieve. It's a little like the floors of a building. Through these doors there are little staircases, which link one section to another—this is the sieve idea. You're coming from one music entity and leaving behind the residue of ideas, which will be picked up by the next group on the next floor, and so on. There's this rather three-dimensional looking building, which I extrapolated from the left-hand side of the [*Guernica*] painting. This is all about memes. This idea of a sieve is just like a meme to get the brain working in a certain way. I wanted always something to be passed onto another grouping. We can pick up that material from before but then mould it to our own needs—it's our moment to invent whatever we want to within what our instrumental group offers.

**VŠ:** This architectural analogy is very interesting; and I know you once were an architect. Could you elaborate on this?

**BG:** If you walk through a building, you go through one room to another, and you sometimes get an atrium or you get a staircase or you get a big room or you get a small room. The idea is that, with your eyes open, you're always aware of the change of density of light, the change of atmosphere, according to whatever the room you're in is offering. So, what I'm trying to do with this whole section using the 'sieve' technique is to keep on taking the listeners through different rooms. This is my architectural analogy. If you leave the door open, another light can get through. If you leave the window open, something else will happen. I think the idea is to keep the tension in the music so that it's active. It's a story from

where you enter into the building until you leave it, you've actively made some kind of journey through and you're taking the atmosphere of each room with you. And yes, architecture was one of my favourite subjects. I enjoy so much enjoy living in spaces or moving through spaces. This is why so much of this composition initially comes from drawings; I spent a lot of time doing this. The drawings are *aides-mémoire*; just to say that I want this really dense here, I want this light there, I want this filtering, etc. So, yes, the architectural analogy is quite important for me.

**VŠ:** I'd like to ask you a practical question relating to some instructions in the score of *The Blue Shroud*. You have 'free improv open' and then there's 'improv fast time'. What's the difference between these two?

**BG:** Well, for 'improv fast time' I wanted something fast moving; the interaction is a maximum interchange between the members of a given group. This will result in music that is propelled forward with everybody [in the group] really being part of the same mindset. 'free improv open' is where we take material and sort of break it open. It is open in a sense that collectively we can take the initial drive from the previous section and then break it all up. We can even carry on with the same idea if we wish. It can be fast but it can also be very slow if we want, depending on the coincidences of the playing, the type of articulations that we immediately pick up from with the 'sieve'. It's always different; and that's the thing. It's an open space; it doesn't have the direction of 'improv fast time'. Most of the time it is quite fast, but it is a type of space. And it's really up to the individual groups to find their own identity in a very short time.

**VŠ:** You mention the groups. The score indicates the 'sieves', as we have been discussing. But there are also the 'backgrounds' in the score played by those not in a given 'sieve' group. These 'backgrounds' seem to act as sonic backdrops to much of the 'sieve' activity. I'm curious about how all these elements are conducted. Do you conduct them in a way that you decide, 'that's enough', or are these 'sieve' changes just happening?

**BG:** No. I'm conducting it. I'm the composer of the piece. I have certain ideas about how long these sections should be, so rather than let each section find its own length, I listen to what the group is doing, and, of course, anticipating who's coming next, what has been played, who were involved, etc., and try to get each section to be logical; even if the material changes quite drastically. For me, this is the interesting moment—the change of material. For me, there's a natural time for each of these sections but these changes are also predicated on how many 'sieve' changes have taken place and on the 'backgrounds'. I use the 'backgrounds' to either influence the particular music that's happening at the time, or just use them as a kind of punctuation to that music. I try to be sensitive to the improvisations and I place 'backgrounds' that I consider will be complimentary; or, I could say, 'I'm going to throw this in here, what are you going to do with this?' It's like throwing new material into the mix and seeing what comes out in the end.

**VŠ:** I'd like to ask you a more general question, as it's a particular focus of my own research. What is the connection between improvised and pre-composed music?

**BG:** From my point of view, composing is a singular activity. So is also improvising. It's all about making decisions either in real time or in slow time. I'm an amazingly slow composer. I can sit at a drawing board, and at the end of the day I'll probably get about five seconds of music down. All of these slow compositional decisions have to be made immediately in the context of free improvisation and working with other people. So, you've got the same brain power working but in two different time dimensions. I enjoy the solitude of looking at the

piece of manuscript (as probably you do) while working out your compositional gambits and procedures. I like that kind of investigation because you're getting deep into the implications of your notation of density of pitches, etc., but also the implications of how people work together. That's one of these things that is very important to me: to have real the images of the players in front of me. This has been a feature of my composing life. I've always written for people that I know; I've hardly ever written a kind of speculative piece, hoping for the best. There were a few pieces early on but for most of them these days I have the image of the players; I have the sounds of the players in my head. And that goes with me on my journey through the piece. But the same brain can still function in a speeded [improvised] version where certain decisions concerning pitches and densities have to be made on the spot, or almost before. That's the thing with Evan Parker when we play together. We get so fast we would often say, 'who did what, when? Was this sort of pre-happening before you even played it?' Certain things that happen in improvisation almost sound as if they had been pre-planned. There's this thing that the body is doing. It's the receiver; it's receiving vibrations and the implications of vibrations from another player. It's very strong indeed. And these vibrations have direction, they have shape, they imply something. There are a lot of different parameters that are coming to play when you're working in a free improv context. In the end, what I am interested in with the players that I work with is actually to create as a composer certain colours that feature their particular qualities. That is why I enjoy written composition as well as playing free improv. It's the same brain but it's a different methodology.

**VŠ:** Well you have brought both of these methodologies together brilliantly in *The Blue Shroud*. How is this balance achieved, though? I'm thinking of the opening trumpet solo...how is that managed by you?

**BG:** When I'm building up a piece as a composer, I'm looking for ways to generate musical activity that actually not only frees the individual musician to react in a certain way, but I'm also trying to find a structure that is satisfying as a piece of music. As I mentioned previously, quite early on in the composition of *The Blue Shroud*, I made these sketches, really dense diagrams about activity, about space, about complexity [in the painting *Guernica*], and that was going hand in hand with the players I had in mind. So, with the part that you mention, the trumpet solo, what I wanted to do was to take the trumpet from almost nothing, to start from absolutely nowhere to the point where we finally get the whole band coming in. I say in the score, 'solo, active, virtuosic, variable dynamics but mostly high'. That's a first instruction. What happens after that is that we start at that particular point but then the next time we do it the trumpet player makes certain decisions about how he wants to negotiate the first two minutes. What is the direction? Where are we going to get with this? And he knows the whole band is going to come in. He knows that he has a type of trajectory, which is going to take the listener to the point where there's a release. For me it's important that the player understands why we're doing something.

**VŠ:** Another central element of *The Blue Shroud* is the use of Baroque music, specifically two pieces by H.I.F. Biber and the *Agnus Dei* by Bach. It all seems to work somehow...

**BG:** Yes, I wanted these three Baroque moments. In a sense, that entered into the frame of the piece because Maya [Homburger] and I play a lot of Baroque music together. It seemed to me that at certain points of *The Blue Shroud* I had to direct the music towards these [Baroque] moments of introspection, which change the focus completely. What was important for these sections was to modify the music in order to take us to these points. There's always this journey from one section to another, but the music has to modify to take

us in a natural journey, So, when the first Biber arrives, it's absolutely the right moment for it, because we've been preparing for it.

**VŠ:** And the move towards the arrival of the Bach is extraordinary...

**BG:** Yes, the biggest problem for me was the *Agnus Dei* at the end. There had to be a kind of bridge to get us there. I had to make a decision about what to do because before the Bach arrives the music is pretty wild. My decision was to break up that music, and so we have a series of silences that get longer and longer. So the listener is transported from this heavy music to the desolation of the silences. For me, this was 'the moment', the defining moment of the looking into yourself, but to get the listener there I had to start preparing spaces where listening and thinking are already being subtly changed for that moment. To get to another place, we're changing the expectations of the listener, the consciousness of the listener.