

## **Communicating through notation: Michael Finnissy's Second String Quartet from composition to performance**

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**ABSTRACT:** This article looks behind the scenes at the notational and interpretative issues arising from the compositional and rehearsal processes embodied in the Second String Quartet by Michael Finnissy, written for the Kreutzer Quartet in 2006-07. The relationship between the individual parts and corporate whole, as represented by the score, or quasi-score, or even the absence of a score, has been of central importance in all of Finnissy's quartet music to date. Recorded evidence from the rehearsal of the piece is evaluated from both 'insider' and 'outsider' perspectives to demonstrate the extent to which players need to devise new interpretative strategies in response to the specific demands of the notation. Examination of composer-performer interactions reveals how the limits of notation can provide creative tension and imaginative interpretation that contribute to a developing contemporary performance practice.

**KEY WORDS:** String quartet, rehearsal, notation, composition, performance, communication

Michael Finnissy has been described, in relation to the works that defined him as a 'New Complexity' composer in the 1980s, as "a composer who is acutely conscious of the relationship between the psychological nature and structural function of his notation" (Redgate, 1997, p. 150). Musical notation plays competing demands for communication off against one another: structural demands do not necessarily map directly on to psychological ones, and the necessity for a certain level of precision, locally, may be in conflict with demands for the indication of large-scale relationships such as stylistic references. The present study of Finnissy's Second Quartet reveals the issues arising from the way in which the notation is used and understood, from both the composer's and performers' perspectives, and questions their expectations of the notation. Some answers are derived

from interviews with the composer from 2006 to 2008, and from discussions between the composer and the Kreutzer Quartet during a rehearsal preceding the world première in 2007.<sup>1</sup> As cellist in the Quartet, Neil Heyde conveys the ensemble's unique relationship with Finnissy over two decades while Amanda Bayley's ethnographic approach combines participant observation of one rehearsal and four performances with research involving interviews with the composer and questionnaires completed by the performers.<sup>2</sup> Technological developments in the twentieth century have made it straightforward to document composer-performer interactions, yet it is only relatively recently that such interactions have been presented within the framework of musicological research (see, for example, Clarke, Cook, Harrison, & Thomas [2005], Hayden & Windsor [2007], and Fitch & Heyde [2008]). The collaboration between the two authors reveals the benefits of combining insider and outsider perspectives: the performers' experiences of notation and interpretation express a set of preoccupations and priorities that are applied to examples Bayley selected from the audio-recorded rehearsal, discussions and performance from 2007. Evidence from lively and spontaneous conversations with the composer during rehearsal is balanced with a reflective, critical stance generated at a distance from the rehearsal process.

Finnissy's views are perhaps typical of the questioning attitude of New Complexity composers to the role of notation, reflected in an extended interview with Henrietta Brougham, Christopher Fox and Ian Pace in 1996:

Whether the notation contains any irrationals or none at all is rather secondary, even tertiary, to other concerns. Sound remains of paramount importance. Exploring the 'psychology' of notation is more revealing – how you precipitate certain kinds of response by either writing half-notes or sixty-fourth notes. How much detail? How clearly can you hear or envisage a sound? Notation is about choice and degrees of exactitude, reality-unreality. I can best illustrate this if I refer to Monet trying to paint light, which he found very difficult because light always changes and the brush can't capture it fast enough. What one ends up doing is not capturing it, but putting up with the frustration and finding other means which possibly even suggest that frustration. The notation of music is like that if you start from the premise of sound – when you impose the conventions of music on it, you're imposing a filter, which we do all the time. The filter of our understanding, or our tolerance of our prejudice or whatever happens to it. Filters upon filters upon filters. What is eventually left is *choice of what to do*, but music notation is quite limited.

... the notation is a way of enabling the performer in some way to produce an audible result (Brougham, Fox, & Pace, 1997, pp. 32-33).

The notion of 'enabling' the performer's active engagement is fundamental to Finnissy's understanding of notation. The purpose of this article is to pinpoint *how* this enabling takes place, informing ongoing debates on the meanings of markings and the distinction between prescriptive and descriptive notation discussed, for example, by Mieko Kanno (2007),

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<sup>2</sup> For further details see Bayley (2010a), Bayley and Clarke (2011), and [www.amandabayley.co.uk/evolution-and-collaboration](http://www.amandabayley.co.uk/evolution-and-collaboration)

Douglas C. Wadle (2010), and Eric Clarke and Mark Doffman (2014).

### **The role of notation**

A common practice for 'efficient' notation is reflected in the kinds of techniques customarily taught in conservatoires and universities, where young composers often work with the expectation that they are providing material for professional or quasi-professional performances in which rehearsal time will be limited. Of course, such an expectation is real, even if it is not always the case that rehearsal time is limited, but we may also assume that the kinds of clarity and simplicity (directness) that are encouraged in this 'efficient notation' also arise from an implicit understanding of notation as a 'simple' means for transmission. In the context of New Complexity it is reasonable to question whether the notation is complex because the musical material is complex, or whether it is because the *process of transmission* is being cast in a much more important role (it may of course be both). Kanno explores a range of examples to show how "prescriptive notation unlocks creativity [...] requir[ing] a special kind of active involvement with the expressive potential of the music" (2007, pp. 231, 253). Her observations are pertinent to the discussion of Finnissy's notation that follows, which takes as its starting point the Kreutzer Quartet's practice of treating it as if it were an active participant in the creative process. That is not to say that the Quartet does not acknowledge and understand that Finnissy uses notation to communicate his musical ideas to them, and to other performers who will follow, but to observe, also, that Finnissy frequently does not want to tell players what to do but to have them engage critically with the materials he has presented. In devising notation that can activate this engagement it appears that Finnissy intends it to be not only a means for transmission but also something in itself. While the performers had the opportunity to communicate directly with the composer during the process studied here, they perceived the notation as a second interlocutor.

For the Kreutzer Quartet, an *effective* notation (as opposed to a merely *efficient* one) is able to meet the demands that composers and performers make on it with richness as well as clarity. Different subsets of musicians have very different expectations of what notation should be able to tell them and very different skill sets for engaging with it, and in order to be both rich and clear a notation must be to some extent targeted at a specific audience. This does not necessarily mean that it must be created for a particular individual or group, but it does mean that a composer may have a highly developed idea of the kind of people who will need to engage with the material – and the corollary may be that in order fully to understand and appreciate a notation we need to respond to it through the eyes of the intended audience. Throughout the examples that follow, evidence of Finnissy's awareness of the kinds of interactions the players might expect to have with the notation is seen in relation to the composer's inclusion and exclusion of notational material and to the way that he has managed its clarity, and, in some cases, obstructiveness.

In certain disciplines of music where performance from memory is taken for granted (e.g. solo piano or vocal repertoire), the written text serves a predominantly 'preparatory' function.<sup>3</sup> For string quartet players, however, the notation is normally a permanently

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<sup>3</sup> One could of course cite a number of counter examples, perhaps most notably the Kolisch Quartet, who performed almost exclusively from memory, even, or especially, in music such as Berg's *Lyric Suite* and Schoenberg's quartets where the textual element seems to have an important life of its own.

present text. The early quartet repertoire was clearly designed to be ‘read’ as it was performed, often without rehearsal, and it was well into the nineteenth century before quartet scores, as opposed to parts, were published. Quartet performance today differs in two fundamental respects: the parts are no longer simply being ‘read’ because they are thoroughly known by the performers as a consequence of extended practice and rehearsal;<sup>4</sup> and it is normally taken for granted that each individual player will also study the score, which will usually be at hand in rehearsal. Much of the players’ actual contact with the notation is normally through parts, which are only ‘partial texts’; however, it is worth noting that the materials used by individual players in performance are often elaborate hybrids in which extensive additional material such as various forms of cue has been added by the player.

It was immediately clear to the Kreutzer Quartet, on receiving the parts for Finnissy’s Second Quartet, that the work plays with the expectations of players whose repertoire encompasses the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The absence of a score speaks to practices from all three centuries, and, in the context of the larger project for which the commission was completed, Lutosławski’s String Quartet of 1964, which was initially planned to be published without a score, was an obvious point of reference.<sup>5</sup> In writing for the Kreutzer Quartet, Finnissy was also working with players with whom he had already established relationships, not least through their performances of all of his previous music for quartet.<sup>6</sup>

Many of the notational strategies in the Second Quartet are developments of techniques employed in the earlier pieces: in his first quartet, *Nobody’s Jig* (1981), Finnissy provides individual parts but no score – a common, if not universal feature in his quartet music. The players begin together on a single unison, G4 (the G above middle C), but do not synchronise with each other at all thereafter for the entire 20-minute duration of the piece. The instruction at the beginning of each part reads:

Careful attention is to be given to metronomic indications, particularly in the slower sections of the work – where the indicated durations are also to be scrupulously observed. [...] The four instruments start exactly together [...] and thereafter pursue an independent course until the end of their individual part. It is not necessary for all to

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<sup>4</sup> Partly because quartet performances are not conducted, under normal circumstances, there is a necessity for extended rehearsal that would be unusual in many other contexts.

<sup>5</sup> *Quartet Choreography* DVD *Métier* (2011) MSVDX101

<sup>6</sup> Finnissy’s pieces for string quartet to date are:

*Nobody’s Jig* (1980-81)

String Quartet (1984)

*Plain Harmony I-III* (1993-95 – written for the Kreutzer Quartet)

*Sehnsucht* (1997)

*Multiple forms of constraint* (1997 – written for the Kreutzer Quartet)

*Six Sexy Minuets Three Trios* (2003)

Second String Quartet (2006-07 – written for the Kreutzer Quartet)

Third String Quartet (2009 – written for the Kreutzer Quartet)

*Civilisation* (2004, rev. 2012-13).

The pieces up to and including *Multiple forms of constraint* are recorded on: *Michael Finnissy – Music for String Quartet*, Kreutzer Quartet (*Métier* Sound and Vision: MSV CD92011, 1998). The personnel in the quartet have evolved since this recording, with Peter Sheppard Skærved (violin 1) and Neil Heyde (cello) remaining constant. The Second and Third String Quartets are recorded on: *Michael Finnissy – Second and Third String Quartets* (NMC Recordings: NMC D180, 2012).

finish together – although additional co-ordinating cues may be established at the discretion of the performers during the course of rehearsals.

Finnissy’s injunction to observe the indicated durations scrupulously (they are sometimes very long) and to attend carefully to the very varied metronomic indications applied to complex rhythmic notation is potentially in contradiction to the suggestion that players may wish to establish co-ordinating cues. Given that small variations in tempi by individual players are inevitable, and also that each player has completely different metronomic indications and materials, there is no way in which any kind of viable cueing system could be established. In any case the players would be required to ‘fail’ to meet Finnissy’s initial demands in order to make such a system work. The combination of musical notation and written instruction challenges relationships *between* the parts that are explicitly not indicated by the composer, whilst at the same time forcing players to focus with the utmost intensity on their individual material, in which the complex rhythmic notation conveys a constant flexing of the feeling of tempo. Finnissy’s note to performers places a sharp focus on the challenge of managing micro and macro levels, exhorting the players to collaborate with one another, and implicitly with him, in finding ways of achieving a ‘quasi togetherness’: a realisation must be both individually precise and corporately coherent. To perform *Nobody’s Jig* with integrity, the players must place enormous trust in one another, in Finnissy’s handling of the notation – and, crucially, in the notation itself.

### Tensions conveyed by notation

Finnissy explains, in relation to his Second Quartet, how he conveys tension through the limitations of his notation, which correspond to the “frustration” to which he referred in the 1996 interview quoted above:

It’s the tension which keeps it going and I feel I have to present that somehow in the notation in order to tell the players that that’s what I’m doing. [...] The piece is about the dilemma of [...] tonality and indeed the dilemma of confronting Haydn (interview with Bayley, 26 July 2007).

An example of the way this tension is conveyed can be seen in Example 1 from [24] showing the four individual parts.

Adagio cantabile [♩ = 42 ♩ = 84]

Adagio cantabile [♩ = 42 ♩ = 84]

Adagio cantabile [♩ = 42 ♩ = 84]

Adagio cantabile [♩ = 42 ♩ = 84]

Example 1. ©Michael Finnissy, 2007, used with permission

The first violin part has a key signature of four flats but the pitches are spelt enharmonically using sharps. When questioned about this way of notating the music, Finnissy replied:

I think it depends on what the material is doing and what I'm seeking to make it recall – if anything – from earlier moments in the piece where there might be a sharp key signature, or I would want to remind the player about that, or there's a kind of sense in which your sense of key is being denied or withheld which again sets up a peculiar kind of tension in the performance, which you wouldn't get simply from using all-purpose atonal spellings (interview with Bayley, 8 May 2008).

A key signature functions powerfully at different levels. It does not necessarily have to correspond with an actual change of key but can act, instead, as a style marker, indicating a structural boundary. As Finnissy explains:

I don't think that it's part of a mechanism to recognise key centres and be consistent with them. It has more to do with a sense of relativity because you're moving to and from locations which are more or less weak or strong according to the conventions of the key structure and that's quite helpful because it's a subsidiary form of phrasing or accentuation or dynamics, all of which I tend to be a little bit reticent about (interview with Bayley, 8 May 2008).

It is clear that Finnissy expects enharmonic spelling to be realised in the form of expressive intonation – producing deviations from equally-tempered intervals – and that this expressively deformed intonation builds a continuum between those elements of the piece that are notated with an extended pitch vocabulary (that is, with quarter-tones) and those that are normally described in the standard space of twelve notes. Heyde discussed this with Finnissy in relation to the Third String Quartet in April 2009, in which there are no notated quarter-tones but extended sections with parts notated in different keys. The Kreutzer Quartet noted that this had the effect of stretching the language beyond both key structures and a nominal twelve-tone space (rehearsal, 3 April 2009).

In response to further questions about notation that emerged during the rehearsal of the Second Quartet, Finnissy acknowledged that “there are parts of the Quartet which I have notated [to be] slightly difficult, to make them slightly odd so that you have a distance between you and the notation. It just produces a sort of awkwardness. In a way you want to hear the kind of ‘Eerrhh? why is it like that?’” (rehearsal, 4 February 2007). Such awkwardness is perhaps part of the maintenance of a real chamber music aesthetic, in which the parts must always have an individual push and pull against one another through the conversation that takes place between players – the kind of conversation that Hans Keller sees as critical to the “intrinsic quartet” (Keller, 1986, p. 3). On the one hand, Finnissy uses notation to activate the conversation, while on the other hand he provides instructions that deliberately ‘contradict’ the notation. The enharmonic notation shown in Example 1 produces quarter-tones exerting a push and pull that forces the voices to be against rather than with each other. Yet Finnissy's instruction, *Adagio cantabile*, places this conversational aspect under threat: either all the players ‘sing’ together, or one or more defaults to playing accompaniment in the background, or everyone adopts a Haydn-esque tone and the tension inherent in the musical material is thereby understated. The awkwardness of the notation is at once an incentive to stay in the moment and a means for ensuring expressive tension.

I think you can hear it [the tension] because the psychology of it [the notation] makes the performer do different things [...] There's a certain density of thought, which obviously if I'd set it up and then I'd relinquished it by making the thing easier as opposed to complex, of course I set up another tension in the performer's mind and in the audience's mind which I've then got to deal with. So there are always relative tensions. And when the music is quite sparse, as parts of the Second Quartet are, I've still got to think about maintaining a tension, otherwise the audience mentally go shopping. I don't want to lose their attention (interview with Bayley, 26 September 2008).

Limiting detail in notation can thus be beneficial because it invites more questioning and thinking than usual about the notes on the page and the means of producing them. The main focus of the rehearsal, which dominated the dialogue between the composer and performers, was indeed discussion of information surrounding what is not in the notation. The relationship between notation and sound had already been articulated by the composer in an interview prior to the rehearsal but he did not feel it necessary to share this directly with the players:

You can't have the notation without the sound. So, once you start using the notation the sound's in your head too. So the notation produces a certain kind of sound. The notation is a kind of snapshot of the moment of the sound as it occurs to you. ... [it] unlocks an awful lot of things (interview with Bayley, 4 February 2007).

One of the challenges for the players in this situation is that unless there is a description of the type of sound imagined – usually metaphorical and thus requiring a kind of translation – the engagement with sound itself comes as the consequence of the physical action required to produce it. Such metaphors emerged in rehearsal, for example in Example 2 at [3] where Heyde questioned the word 'jumpy' in the cello and viola parts: "it's quite difficult to make it feel jumpy." Finnissy's response was: "You could kind of exaggerate the spaces between the notes more. I don't expect it to be that literal so I think you can [...] play with the spacing a little bit" (rehearsal, 4 February 2007). In this case 'jumpy' doesn't explain how to play the passage but is a metaphor for how it should feel. This feeling should, however, reach beyond the player, as demonstrated by the concern Finnissy articulated above: to retain the audience's attention.

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The top staff is for Violins 1 and 2, starting with a 'cresc.' marking and a boxed '2'. It includes a 'Cue from Vln. I' and a boxed '3' with the instruction '(Senza tempo: irregular and jumpy)'. The bottom staff is for Cello and Viola, starting with 'sul tasto' and 'I', followed by 'Pizz. nat.' and 'III', then 'Arco sul tasto' and 'IV', and ending with 'III' and 'mf subito'. Both staves feature complex rhythmic patterns and dynamic markings like 'pp' and 'mp'.

Example 2. ©Michael Finnissy, 2007, used with permission

The fundamental role of the physicality of the instrument as the medium through which the

player engages with notation and its sonic outcome is central to Finnissey's notational aesthetic, as indeed it is for many other composers. The following comments refer specifically to the opening of the piece, illustrated in Example 3, and imply this physicality 'written into' the notation.

Was it a sound I was hearing? I guess it was. It was a kind of sound *action* that I was hearing which was a lot like two-part counterpoint... and I struggled a bit to find a way of transcribing it in notational form [...] Only the violins have it [...] The first violin begins the piece *with* it. And it's a kind of conceptual two-part notation. You can't actually play very literally what it is. [...] It's not the first time I've used that kind of notation. I'd actually used it in one or two other pieces<sup>7</sup> as a way of expressing [...] proportional time-space notation where the relationships, for example, between quavers and semiquavers are roughly the same but not exactly the same. In other words it's not exactly in the ratio of 1:2 but sort of around that. And yet you can also see because you have these long [... beams] that link all the quavers together. That's a kind of phrasing, shaping. So it was shaping and describing certain shapes in a particular way. [...] And it was also a way of making quite fast-moving music sound quite hectic and spontaneous [...] but describing that and getting the physicality of it in the notation. There are lots of different ways you can do it. And this way seemed [...] good for this particular piece (interview with Bayley, 4 February 2007).

Viola and 'Cello colla parte until page

Senza tempo : irregular, jumpy, accelerating to -----

1 Vln. 5 16

2 5 16

colla parte

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5:3

dimin.

6:5

6:5

dimin.

Example 3. ©Michael Finnissey, 2007, used with permission

The physicality of the visual elements of Finnissey's notation is fundamental, too, and is another source of tension. As noted above, the beaming provides an indication of

<sup>7</sup> Notably the String Quartet (1984), in which it appears in all parts.



relationships that transcend the limitations of phrasing indications. (One could suggest that Schoenberg's indications of *Haupt-* and *Neben-stimmen* similarly seek to activate an awareness of relationships without specifying too precisely *how* they should be realised.) By activating the performer's engagement at a physical level Finnissy invites a collaborative relationship between composer and performer. But this brings its own challenges and the first violinist, Peter Sheppard Skærved, stated that "it was vital to have [Finnissy's] pointers as to how physically the piece should be approached, which has enormous ramifications for the structure and impact" (questionnaire, March 2007). The knowledge that Finnissy understands the 'literal' impossibility of what he has written is vital to the players' approaches to realising the material, as it encourages them to engage with the substance of the music at a fundamental level. Notation can be used not only as an indication of a 'means' for realising a musical idea, but also as a tool for engaging with the idea itself. Sheppard Skærved's choice of fingering in the opening bars (and later in the piece) is one such example:

A lot of the first violin part works on two levels [demonstrated by playing the two different lines] and it struck me that it was interesting that, as opposed to adopting my normal process which would be to come up with a fingering pattern which unified the two of them, which effectively makes the hand in one position, I came up with the idea that actually I needed to have truth to each line [...] So all the way through, whenever [Finnissy] breaks into two irreconcilable lines, I've given each line its own integral fingering, which is not necessarily technically possible with the other line's integral fingering, to try and raise the bar a bit; not because I think [Finnissy's] notes are easy – they're far from it – but I feel that's integral to the music. It's counterpoint, which is two disparate things being put together, so it should resolve automatically (Royal Academy of Music, 23 March 2007).<sup>8</sup>

These decisions and subsequent physical actions employed by the first violinist, demonstrate a shift from an 'ergonomic' to a 'choreographic' approach to fingering that fits Eric Clarke's identification of a continuum from ergonomics to choreography, for fingering as well as for other body movements in performance: "At the ergonomic end, performers want to try to make sounds by means of movements that are fluent, easy and comfortable. Fingering patterns in instrumental performance are one area where ergonomic factors are likely to be important" (Clarke, 2005, p. 172). In contrast to this, Clarke also gives evidence "that performers deliberately employ (and enjoy) 'showy' fingerings which have what might be thought of as a choreographic component" (Clarke, 2005, p. 172). Sheppard Skærved's fingerings are not chosen specifically to be showy but, as he says, to draw attention to the counterpoint between two irreconcilable lines. He treats the notation as a choreographic instruction in order to deliver the required sound, rejecting an ergonomic fingering that provides a more comfortable and literal representation of the notes. This example is typical of the technical and expressive decisions that Finnissy requires the players to make. Rather than using notation as a straightforward means of transmission he uses it as a provocation against which musicians can test their own ideas. Thus the notation explicitly activates this decision-making process, its effectiveness being entirely dependent on the recognition of its role in the collaboration between composer and performers.

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<sup>8</sup> Public performance and presentation at the Royal Academy of Music.

### Language and communication: written versus oral

Since the comments made by Finnissy in interview were not directed towards the players, it is interesting to compare his account of the way he uses notation to achieve what he wants with the language he used to communicate his intentions directly to the players in rehearsal. Certain sorts of rehearsal language can be mooted ‘provisionally’ by the composer, or indeed by the performers, with the sense that it is merely an *attempt* to convey something rather than an idea that is thoroughly embedded in the piece or its interpretation. Although we have seen a kind of suggestive notation used in the ‘impossible’ polyphonic notation discussed above, conveying provisionality requires other means. Much of the language used by both composer and players in rehearsal draws on extended metaphors in order to avoid too literal a response, but even then there is a sense that this language can only be permitted in a rehearsal context. Written indications in parts or scores are commonly treated as instructions rather than suggestions. Brian Ferneyhough, for example, has on occasion tried to circumvent this instructionality by using complex inscriptions that challenge established practice, as in his *Time and Motion Study II* for solo cello and electronics (1973-76) which begins “Extremely nervous, but insistent”, and on page four “violent but reserved, coldly inscrutable”. Finnissy tends instead towards an economical notation. Partly, he knows that he will be able to talk to the players, at least in the first instance, but the following quotations suggest that he seems keen to avoid setting any unnecessary limits in written instructions, as they can close off potential avenues for exploration. For example, referring to the duet shown in Example 3, Finnissy asks if it can be:

sort of saltier, maybe, like, almost *sul ponticello* kind of sound? It wants to sound more as if it is actually two-part counterpoint. There should be a certain effort. But then immediately it gets into the four of you together I think it needs to really be... I was going to say frothier, but that’s not quite the word... It needs to be less about the notes. Like spiders crawling, that sort of sound. Other things happen to that material later so if the soundworld’s not quite right... (rehearsal, 4 February 2007).

In a public forum with the Kreutzer Quartet, when asked whether he would think of adding directions to the score such as ‘saltier’, ‘frothier’, ‘objective’, Finnissy said that he probably wouldn’t. Sheppard Skærved reinforced Finnissy’s reply, commenting that in his scores it is his:

economy of expression that makes them so exciting. It’s that you don’t tell us what to do but you trust that we’re going to [...] you encourage us to use our imaginations and to a degree you don’t circumscribe it. You use very traditional markings in this piece (Royal Academy of Music, 23 March 2007).

Finnissy seems to feel that adding instructions in the score would be too prescriptive: “I would acknowledge that it’s possible to produce another reading of the piece which would have more or less all the opposite things and it might still be okay” (Royal Academy of Music, 23 March 2007). Nevertheless, it should be noted that the instructions that Finnissy elects *not* to include in the score are uppermost in the performers’ minds as they play. The tension between suggestions and clarifications made in response to players’ immediate needs during rehearsal and those indicated in the notation itself, which must serve a broader purpose, is at the heart of the communicative relationship between composers and

performers.<sup>9</sup>

When questioned further on his instructions Finnissy explained that his metaphoric language is determined by the feedback he receives from players and choices of specific metaphor are coloured by the way the sound ‘works’ in rehearsal. He would not put such instructions in the parts because that would then make the player “seek a saltier sound [...] at a deeper level it has to do with the way I design the text to be readable or, alternatively, to be ambiguous as well as readable so that I’m providing actually quite a spectrum of possibilities” (interview with Bayley, 26 July 2007).

Finnissy chooses words, then, to achieve the most effective communication with the players but “using [written] words such as ‘frothy’ would change the way that you focused on the music” (Royal Academy of Music, 23 March 2007) since ‘frothy’, for him, describes the atmosphere found in Offenbach or Chabrier’s music rather than the intensity of the late Beethoven quartets. Finnissy acknowledges that if ‘frothy’ had not produced the sound he wanted he would have chosen a different word. Comments such as these demonstrate the need for developing a performance practice for contemporary music. As Finnissy explains:

What happens as a result of performances – you hope – is that a certain kind of *Aufführungspraxis* arises around pieces [...] if you put a lot of rather picturesque words in scores players then tend to dramatise them slightly differently. [...] I am very aware of over-editing because I feel I give quite a lot of information already, rhythmically [...] which occupies the player’s mind (interview with Bayley, 26 July 2007).

Although the quartet’s 18<sup>th</sup>-century context was clear to the players from the outset and Finnissy had spoken to them directly about its relationship to the quartets of Haydn, the language used in the rehearsal had a profound impact on the way these were realised expressively. Finnissy’s observation that if one word had not produced the sound he wanted he would have chosen another, is important. The players could have construed the word ‘frothy’ to mean ‘superficial’, but they didn’t; rather, they seized upon the implied oppositional aspect of Finnissy’s language (Chabrier and Offenbach vs Beethoven and Wagner; frothy vs dense/taut). Thus Finnissy drew attention to what the 18<sup>th</sup>-century context could mean in the act of performance: it suggested both *élan* and playfulness. The power of such suggestions would potentially be limiting had they been committed to paper. We might infer, indeed, that Finnissy wanted the players to avoid the kind of performance practice that seems to ignore the levity in Beethoven’s late quartets and its successors.

The economy of Finnissy’s musical notation allows him to articulate, verbally, his preferences for specific sound qualities beyond the physical actions required to produce them. For example, during the rehearsal his request for non-expressive trills to be “dry and objective”, no portamento, and minimal vibrato, in the *Adagio* section at [2] illustrated in Example 4, enabled a more specific interpretation than might otherwise have been the case.<sup>10</sup> He nevertheless welcomed the idea that without this additional information in the parts, the piece might be played differently on another occasion.

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<sup>9</sup> See also Fitch and Heyde, 2008, where this tension is discussed on pp. 91-92.

<sup>10</sup> The rehearsal process can be heard on the DVD, *Evolution and Collaboration: the composition, rehearsal and performance of Finnissy’s Second String Quartet*, Bayley and Clarke, (2011). See also [www.amandabayley.co.uk/evolution-and-collaboration](http://www.amandabayley.co.uk/evolution-and-collaboration)

Vln I

2 Adagio cantabile  
5:3<sup>b</sup>  
pp subito

Vln II

2 Adagio cantabile  
pp subito

Vla

2 (l'istesso tempo)  
pp (Vln. I & 2)

Vc

2  
pp (Vln. I & 2)

Example 4. ©Michael Finnissy, 2007, used with permission

The value of avoiding over-editing is indicated by the way both the Kreutzer Quartet and Finnissy referred to the section at [6] (illustrated in Example 5, where the four parts are shown in alignment) as a ‘minuet’ (despite the quick tempo and one-in-a-bar feeling) and the passage at [15] as a ‘trio’. If these titles had been given explicitly they would have raised a series of questions – and potential problems – that were circumvented by allowing the players to discover the qualities of these passages for themselves. The heading ‘Minuet’ at [6] might have prompted an attempt to produce minuet-like playing, whereas the possibility that players will recognise the minuet-like quality of the musical material seems fundamental to the composer’s aesthetic. In this case, the players only recognised the nature of this section after working on the ‘trio’ at [15], in which the repeat points to the dance origins of the material. (Finnissy uses repeats in only one previous piece for quartet, *Six Sexy Minuets Three Trios*, dating from 2003.)

In contrast to the meaningful coincidences of the ‘minuet’ and ‘trio’ sections, it was clear to the players that the asynchronous material that forms the majority of the piece must have at one stage been mapped out in such a way as to ensure that the individual instruments cannot pull too far apart from one another. The large-scale structural push and pull between the parts that is activated by the absence of a full score thus becomes a kind of counterpoint that might appear too tightly ‘boxed in’ if scored explicitly. As notated, this structural counterpoint becomes an important complement to the local expressive polyphony resulting from each player’s avid pursuit of his own path.

The image shows a musical score for four instruments: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The score is in 3/8 time and marked 'Allegretto' with a tempo of quarter note = 72. A vertical dashed line marks rehearsal number 6. The score includes various performance instructions such as 'G.P.', 'Pizz.', 'Arco', and dynamic markings like 'pppp' and 'niente'.

Example 5. ©Michael Finnissy, 2007, used with permission

### Issues of ensemble

Access to Finnissy’s sketches provides the opportunity to explore decision-making processes in relation to the information he eventually decided to include in the individual parts. For example, two of the seven instructions from the sketches – which he chose not to make available to the players – indicate why a full score would not have been helpful to them (references to ‘Figures’ in the original have been replaced by ‘rehearsal numbers’ for consistency with the terminology used throughout this article):

- 1: The independent parts, between rehearsal numbers [2] and [5] and after [27], allow for individual shaping and phrasing (subtle dynamic and durational distortions). It is intended

that the parts should drift slightly apart (and definitely not seem calculated or rigidly together).

7: 'Polyphony' (1<sup>st</sup> bar and from [27] in both violin parts). The rhythmic notation is 'proportional' – where a semiquaver is faster than a quaver, but not strictly in the ratio 1:2. The effect should seem irregularly spaced and unpredictable. The two-part writing is not literal, and performance of it should emphasise (not disguise) awkwardness. The tempi chosen – 'Vivace' – should not be identical. Avoid rhythmic unisons and coincidences.

Indeed, rhythmic coincidence is mostly to be avoided in the piece. The composer felt this was: "easier to achieve without a score – without making a point of it" (interview with Bayley, 8 May 2008). In this interview, which took place 15 months after the piece was rehearsed and performed, Finnissy explained his decision not to provide a full score:

There were going to be bits of the score that wouldn't be scoreable – the bits where they divide into pairs and go their own way – so there would be those lacunae in the score where there would have to be a different format. Something happens when you represent something as a score rather than as a set of parts, inferring that it's about individual polyphony, individual responsibility for carrying a line somewhere with a phrasing which is not referenced to barlines. I know at the very early stages of writing it I did toy with the idea of producing a score. And then I thought, no this is silly because only bits of it are going to be readable and if Peter or anybody wanted it at the rehearsals I could have photocopied the manuscript [...] ([it] is clear enough to see what the coincidences are, albeit that it's got scribbles all over it). And so I probably rejected the idea of giving them too much information (interview with Bayley, 8 May 2008).

When questioned subsequently about his decision not to include instructions from the sketches in the parts Finnissy admitted: "thinking about it now, actually this is probably quite a handy little foreword to have" (interview with Bayley, 8 May 2008).

With reference to the manuscript Finnissy explains why his working procedure involved sketching some of the sections in score format:

[...] because I wanted to see how the notes lined up. [...] It depends on the overall harmonic movement. And because this was a kind of neoclassical experiment *à la* Haydn [...] It seemed that the harmony moves in faster moving blocks than I was normally used to so I wasn't confident that on its own my ear would do the job (interview with Bayley, 8 May 2008).

While composing the Second Quartet Finnissy noted another feature, besides asynchronicity, that it has in common with his earlier piece *Nobody's Jig*: neither of them "really enact a process on the material: it's an anthology of bits of materials [...] the work that's done is minimal. They tend to be assemblages of things" (interview with Bayley, 10 July 2006).<sup>11</sup> After completing the Second Quartet Finnissy expanded on the way different types of material create different kinds of continuity that clearly have an impact on how the players communicate with each other in order to link the sections of the piece effectively.

[...] you can see which bits have one type of continuity and which bits are obviously the product of intercutting this material with another type, a bit like you can perceive visually the difference between a jump cut which just goes from this sequence to that sequence or a slow fade in which one image bleeds into another and they have a different

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<sup>11</sup> In the interview in May 2008 Finnissy likened his working procedures to film techniques. For further discussion of this see Bayley, 2010b, and Bayley & Clarke, 2011).

emotional and psychological effect. I've used both types here (interview with Bayley, 4 February 2007).

An example of “a slow fade in which one image bleeds into another” can be seen at [2] in Example 4, the end of the first ensemble section, marked *Vivace*, where the viola dovetails with the duet that follows between the two violins. This particular junction demonstrates the sense of fluidity that Finnissy creates in the piece. In rehearsal, the second violinist, Mihailo Trandavilofski, questioned his early arrival at [3] on both occasions, since he is instructed in his part to play “with Vln 1” at [3]. Finnissy explained that he should just wait: “at all moments where there are those pauses, you just wait serenely until you [the first violinist] get[s] there and that’s fine” (rehearsal, 4 February 2007). This particular question would have been redundant if Finnissy had retained Instruction 4 from his sketches in the parts: “The bracketed pauses [ ] represent ‘gathering moments.’”

An example of a jump-cut from one sequence to another can be seen at [6] in Example 5, the start of the minuet: at the end of the previous *Vivace* section the players meet on a General Pause. During the rehearsal the players stopped at this point and Heyde sought clarity: “We’re liable to have silence in front of the minuet aren’t we?” Finnissy replied, “It should feel ... like the kind of silence that you have between two movements” (rehearsal, 4 February 2007). Unlike the players, Finnissy was not concerned with issues of co-ordination; rather, he focused on the different sound-worlds of each section:

The sound-world is capturing where you’ve left off in the previous quartet, in the first section of the piece [the *Vivace* section from Figs 1-2], so it needs the same kind of bubbly, frothy, ‘traditional’ quartet. Then it settles into something else. But the transition should kind of pick up the mood of the previous, restoring that (rehearsal 4 February 2007).

These examples of rehearsal talk demonstrate once again the contrast between the performers’ preoccupations with ensemble and the composer’s with sound, which have to be resolved swiftly given that they typically meet only once to rehearse.

The players worked on negotiating another transition, the *senza tempo* at [18] after the trio section, shown in Example 6, before their first attempt at playing it during rehearsal with the composer:

Sheppard Skærved: When we have the *senza tempo* [...] should the tempo effectively find itself as to how we actually arrive at the pauses? [...]

Finnissy: You should have an idea of what it’s going to be before it starts.

Heyde: Individually?

Finnissy: Well, my feeling about it was that it should somehow come out of the way you were playing the chords before [...] It becomes a continuous sound [...] it should get set up by the chords in some way. [...] maybe there is a distance between the chords that you would feel is like a kind of solidified beat. It’s like a silence but in fact it sets up a pulse [...]

Sheppard Skærved: It’s going to set something but we don’t know quite what it’s going to freeze into (rehearsal, 4 February 2007).

The image displays a musical score for four instruments: Violin I (Vln I), Violin II (Vln II), Viola (Vla), and Violoncello (Vc). The score is divided into two measures, 17 and 18. Measure 17 contains rhythmic markings (2, 4, 3, 3, 2, 2) and performance instructions such as (G.P.), (Q.P.), Pizz., and Arco. Measure 18 includes dynamic markings like pp and pp subito, and the instruction 'Senza tempo'.

**Example 6.** ©Michael Finnissy, 2007, used with permission

To conclude, the efficiency of Finnissy’s notation encourages the composer and performers to focus on negotiating issues of ensemble and sound in rehearsal. The players find Finnissy’s “economy of expression”, as Sheppard Skærved calls it, helpful because it gives them licence for interpretation. As Finnissy himself points out, providing the players with “too much information” can be unhelpful; he is reluctant to be over-prescriptive, preferring to leave open possibilities for alternative interpretations. On the one hand, more verbal instructions in the score could have been useful for helping the players to coordinate their transitions between different sections. On the other hand, their inclusion might have meant the players would not have raised so many questions that elicited such useful responses from the composer. Thus a strong case can be made for composers to give as much, if not greater, consideration to the instructions they leave out of the parts (or score) as to those they include. The effectiveness of the delicate balance achieved between inclusion and exclusion is, however, reliant upon the enquiring minds of performers, who need to know what questions to ask just as composers need to know what answers to give. Since composer’s ‘answers’ have to precede performers’ ‘questions’, the exciting and creative nerve-centre of interpretation lies at the intersection between the two.

An ongoing challenge for composers is how to make notation efficient yet effective, to decide what notation should communicate and how it should be communicated. Having decided what to include within the notation, the balance shifts to one of purpose, addressing what Redgate (1997) terms the ‘psychological nature’ and ‘structural function’ of notation. In this context one of Finnissy’s comments from an interview conducted before he began writing the piece, is perhaps most relevant: “It’s kind of psychology which you’re applying to the performer to get a sound and one learns from experience what notations get certain kinds of results” (interview with Bayley, 10 July 2006). An all-important function of notation, as observed in this study, is that of trigger, activating individual decision-making processes and negotiations between players. New discoveries can then be made on each reacquaintance with the music, lending itself to a rich variety of interpretations.



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