

# **STUART GREENBAUM: *From the Beginning***

A written analysis of the 2<sup>nd</sup> movement by the composer

## **BACKGROUND**

*From the Beginning* was commissioned by the Royal Melbourne Philharmonic to be performed in 2003 to commemorate their 150<sup>th</sup> year. The text draws on the history of the RMP which was “founded in 1853 by a group of colonial leaders and music lovers who wished to bring musical culture of a high standard to the early Colony of Victoria”. Melbourne poet, Ross Baglin, has interpreted this early activity in terms of occupying “with mass and voice, the void land where the railway ends...” - a form of cultivation; not only of the soil, but also of our hearts and minds through communal singing. This picture forms the arch-like expanse of the first movement.

The second movement takes an aerial snapshot of the contemporary city - a fusion of established buildings and imposing recent architecture set by the city's river. Within this geographical context, threads exist between generations of 'voices' maintaining a tradition of choral singing. What began as a form of coping with 'exile' has slowly become a cultural celebration of what is now 'home' for people of many different origins.

The piece is dedicated to the RMP: to its conductor, its singers, musicians and supporters. In particular, thanks are due to Andrew Wailes, David Cramond, Rodney Wetherell, Clemens Pratt, Peter Bandy, Val Rielly and Rodney Reynolds for carrying through a commissioning idea that started four years before the work's ultimate premiere.

## **VOCAL AND ORCHESTRAL FORCES**

The Royal Melbourne Philharmonic Choir numbers around 120 voices. The piece was conceived in SATB division with the knowledge that the female voices were the largest in number. Writing for a large choir requires a particular approach. Certain effects can be much more powerful (especially tutti) though more care needed to be given to text setting. The first movement gradually constructs a polyphonic texture, but the second movement (discussed in this article) is focussed more on call-and-answer opposites – often between the male and female voices, working toward specific tutti passages for all.

The score was written initially in short score and then orchestrated for a medium-sized double wind orchestra. Since the premiere would be given in Melbourne Town Hall, the organ was happily included in the original list. A contra bassoon became available during the rehearsal process and the harp part was substituted with piano for the premiere. Essentially, the work benefitted from feedback from the conductor, Andrew Wailes, and rehearsals with the singers and musicians.

**THE TEXT** (second movement only)

Arctic Rialto, hologram  
 Of the west, industrial sun,  
 Stands pharos-like above the dock  
 Where tankers wink, and cabled streets  
 Laid out like circuits pulse with cars.  
 The river, bronze and immemorial  
 Is all that's built to last, the rest  
 Is making vocable the mute  
 And ominous tomorrow. It flows  
 From ferny hill to coastal foam  
 Where Asia and Mediterranean  
 Fuse, and an architect's glass  
 Soars over Victorian stone,  
 Da Capo, exile ; fine, home.

Blown glass are those voices,  
 Splintered and starred,  
 Thread optics where the images pass  
 To a centre that's nowhere but now,  
 The song of a city they began  
 To sing in its only dome ; what's owed  
 To the singer is never paid.  
 Da Capo , exile ; fine, home.

**Ross Baglin**

**SETTING OF THE TEXT**

The poet's layout of the second movement already has some repeat built into the end. "What's owed to the singer is never paid" reprises the opening of the first section and "Da Capo, Fine; Exile, home" reprises the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> section. Putting that aside the poet's own internal repeats, however, the second movement comprises 124 words and the musical setting of that text (including repeats) adds up to 194 words. This is a 64% expansion of the written text. As a general rule the longer the text, the less room for repetition. If the text is extremely short (like a setting of the Agnus Dei) or a single line of poetic philosophy, the proportional extent of repetition might be much higher.

Text repeats in this movement fall into different categories. The first category is a simple line repeat. In this case, there are a few of them, such as "what's owed to the singer" (bar 132):

**example No.1**

The musical score for 'example No.1' is set in 12/8 time. It features four vocal parts: Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B). The lyrics are 'what's owed To the sing - er'. The Soprano and Alto parts begin with the lyrics in the first measure. The Tenor and Bass parts enter in the second measure, with the Tenor part starting on a lower note and the Bass part on an even lower note. The phrase 'sing - er' is spread across the final two measures of the system, with each voice part having its own line of notes.

This is sung by the female voices and then echoed by overlapping male voices. Later, at the climax at letter L, however, the line repeat on "Da Capo, exile" is sung by all voices (SATB) and then sung again by all voices:

**example No.2**

S *f*  
 Da Ca - po, ex - ile; Da Ca - po, ex - ile;  
 A *f*  
 Da Ca - po, ex - ile; Da Ca - po, ex - ile;  
 T *f*  
 Da Ca - po, ex - ile; Da Ca - po, ex - ile;  
 B *f*  
 Da Ca - po, ex - ile; Da Ca - po, ex - ile;

In this case, the text repeat is less of an echo and more of an insistent repeat designed to sustain the arrival point of a critical, central idea.

The second category is the repeat of a text fragment which is then interpolated between other lines in a way that alters the flow of the text. The words “Arctic Rialto” are used extensively in this fashion. This interpolation can be clearly seen from letter B as follows:

**example No.3**

*Arctic Rialto*  
 Where tankers wink,  
*Arctic Rialto*  
 and cabled streets Laid out like circuits pulse with cars.  
*Arctic Rialto*  
 Stands pharos-like above the dock

The purpose of this is not to distort the meaning of the text but to highlight special facets of it. The text is describing the contemporary city of Melbourne, seen from above as an aerial shot. So the idea of of ‘Arctic Rialto’ captures a number of important images. The twin Rialto towers are the tallest skyscrapers in Melbourne (how many feet / metres?) and the depiction of them as ‘arctic’ refers partly to the similarity of their reflective, blue-mirrored glass surface to the monumental height and surface of an arctic ice shelf. It perhaps also refers to Melbourne as the southern-most major city on the Australian continent, and therefore by defenition, the closest of them to Antarctica.

In any event, the words ‘Arctic Rialto’ have a monumental feel and a particular rhythmic scan (short-short-short-long-long) which is interpolated mantra-like throughout the first five lines of text. It’s rhythmic formation is intially 3 crotchets followed by two, longer dotted crotchets:

**example No.4**

S *f*

Arc - tic Ri - al - to,

The three crotchets are a virtual triplet which (in compound metre) might also be spelled in the following ways:

**example No.5**

OR

In this particular context, however, the 3 crotchets are perhaps simplest for the choir to read. This motive is then expanded rhythmically at bar 25:

**example No.6**

T *mf*

Arc - tic Ri - al - to,

In terms of quaver beats, its first appearance (refer back to ex. No.4) might be expressed as 2-2-2-3-3. The expansion immediately above, however, might be expressed as 3-3-3-5-7. Note that the last number in both sequences is only virtual due to the sustain of the final note. The entire movement is built around this motive which will be discussed in further detail later in the article.

The third category or text repetition regards significant re-ordering of the text. For instance, at letter C, the 'sung' logic of the text follows as such:

**example No.7**

Where cabled streets  
 Arctic Rialto  
 Laid out like circuits  
 hologram Of the west, industrial sun  
 Pulse with cars  
 Above the dock

This is not a total deconstruction of the text beyond its original meaning but it does bend the images somewhat. The first five lines have already been present more or less as they appear in the text and so the reordered musical repetition creates new facets or even added friction between modules that make up the larger image. This is not necessarily a distortion of the text but more an interpretive colouration of the images.

On an even finer level of text repetition we can find a fourth category – that of syllabic distortion or exaggeration. There are a number of these as follows:

**example No.8**

cars-zzz	sun-nnn	fff-fine	hill-lll
fuse-zzz	foam-mmm	sss-soars	exile-lll
now-www	home-mmm	sss-splintered	immemorial-lll

These can be further divided into hum tones (mmm, nnn), buzz tones (zzz), white noise with no pitch content (sss, fff) and others such as 'lll' and 'www'. In most cases, it is easy to try singing these on a single note and observing the different lip tongue and jaw movements that are required to produce them. Hum tones are purest as 'mmm' because the mouth is fully closed, whereas 'nnn' has the mouth open and the tongue touching the upper palate. Where the exaggerated consonant has no exact pitch (such as 'fff' and 'sss') the noteheads are triangular (filled or unfilled) as such:

**example No.9**



The use of these exaggerated consonants is twofold. In some instances it actually aids text recognition and in others it simply adds colour to the overall timbral impression. When words are sung, they are often hard to discern and, depending on the context, sometimes indecipherable. Depending on the intentions of the composer, this is not necessarily a problem, though in the case of *From the Beginning*, I was certainly conscious of trying to convey the text to an audience without need to look at the printed text. In reality, viewing the text beforehand, during or after the performance can be useful, though this is not always in the composer's control and even if the text is distributed or even projected, some audience members may choose to close their eyes and just listen.

In any event, the exaggeration of consonants does not have to be an overt special effect. Sometimes the heightened pronunciation results simply in better reception of the words. In the case of a word like 'immemorial', the extended focus on the 'lll' can stop it from sounding like 'immemoria'. In other cases, such as 'fine' the preceding 'fff' is more of a colouristic device. It does not greatly hinder or help text recognition, but it can add colour to the meaning and interpretation of the words.

Additionally, consonants tend to create 'hard' starts and ends to words and phrases. The extension of their length (often marked with dotted arrow lines) can also help to soften or blur their entry and exit. In this way they can, for certain purposes, create a more fluid dissolve into or out of the overall texture (as is natural with vowels sounds). These exaggerated consonants therefore are often accompanied by hairpin crescendos and decrescendos. In all cases, exaggerated consonants should preferably have a seamless connection to the words they are attached to.

## MOTIVIC STRUCTURE

The main motive first appears in the flutes and oboes (and which permeates the majority of the second movement) is taken from the lengthened 'Arctic Rialto' motive (refer back to example no.6). It is conjunct and accompanied by a lower line in rhythmic unison but moving in contrary motion:

### example No.10



The outer pitches revealed here do not yet contain a 3<sup>rd</sup>, and the 7<sup>th</sup> ('F') is flattened, alluding to a mixolydian pitch set. This is confirmed by the addition of a B natural in the middle of the final chord. This pattern of slight ambiguity followed by full voicing appears throughout. The piece has very strong pitch centres and long pedal tones and might best be described as modal in construction. Tonic-dominant bass motion is certainly exploited structurally, though the general lack of a raised 7<sup>th</sup> indicates that the function is not purely tonal.

After the first 3-bar phrase, a second, consequent phrase answers:

### example No.11



It shares exactly the same rhythm as the first phrase, though this time the motion between the outer parts is a mixture of oblique and contrary motion. It also ends on a triad, this time including F#, which has an ionian modal flavour in contrast to the first which is mixolydian.

The third phrase is a repeat of the first except that it is shortened to 2 bars:



**HARMONIC CONTENT AND STRUCTURE**

The following table presents the structure of the piece in terms of modes and pedal points, relative to the order and number of bars involved:

**example No.14**

<b>letter</b>	<b>bar numbers</b>	<b>bars (length)</b>	<b>mode</b>	<b>pedal</b>
	1-10	10	G mix. / ion.	<b>tonic</b>
	11-12	2	G aeolian	vi – V (3 beat – 5 beats)
A	13-20	8	G mix. / ion.	<b>tonic</b>
	21-22	2	G aeolian	vi – V
B	23-32	10	G mix. / ion.	<b>tonic</b>
	33-34	2	G aeolian	vi – V
C	35-42	8	C mix. / ion.	<b>tonic</b>
	43-44	2	C aeolian	vi – V
	45-46	2	G major (no 7 <sup>th</sup> )	<b>tonic</b>
D	47-54	8	A mix. / ion.	<b>tonic</b>
	55-56	2	A aeolianvi – V	
	57-58	2	A (no 3 <sup>rd</sup> , 7 <sup>th</sup> )	<b>tonic</b>
E	59-64	6	C ionian	<b>subdominant</b>
	65-68	4	“	ii
	69-72	4	“	<b>subdominant</b>
	73-74	2	“	<b>dominant</b>
F	75-78	4	A aeolian <b>tonic</b>	
	79	1	C ionian	subdominant
	80	1	“	tonic
	81-82	2	G aeolian	vi – V
G	83-90	8	G mix. / ion.	<b>tonic</b>
	91-92	2	G aeolian	vi – V
H	93-94	2	“	iii – ii
	95-98	4	G dorian	vi (half diminished)
	99-101	3	G aeolian	vi
I	102-103	2	G (no 3 <sup>rd</sup> , 7 <sup>th</sup> )	tonic
	104-111	8	G mix. / ion.	tonic
	112-113	2	G aeolian	vi – V
J	114-117	4	G mix. / ion.	tonic
	118-121	4	“	vi
	122-123	2	“	<b>dominant</b>
	124-125	2	G aeolian	vi – V
K	126-127	2	G mix. / ion.	ii
	128-129	2	“	bvii
	130	1	“	biii (Bb and B nat mixture)
	131	1	“	ii
	132-133	2	“	IV
	134-135	2	“	V – iii
	135-137	2	G aeolian	vi
L	138-147	10	G ionian	<b>dominant</b>
	148-150	3	G aeolian	<b>dominant</b>
M	151	1	“	iii
	152	1	“	ii
	153	1	G dorian	vi (half diminished)
	154	1	G aeolian	vi - iv
	155	1	G (no 3 <sup>rd</sup> , 7 <sup>th</sup> )	vii-IV-V
	156	1	G ionian	<b>tonic</b>

Charting the harmonic areas and pedal points of the second movement is informative, though has to be interpreted carefully. The modes often switch between mixolydian, ionian, aeolian and dorian quite deceptively and sometimes even within the space of a bar. It is possible, however, to make a few general observations which illuminate aspects of the harmonic structure.



The movement is 156 bars in length and all in 12/8. With the exception of the final 'slowing down' over the last 7 bars, the tempo is for the most part even and therefore it is possible to gauge the proportional duration of certain features with relative accuracy.

The piece starts and ends in G, albeit with an ambiguous 7<sup>th</sup>, which varies the modal flavour. There is considerable use of dominant-tonic resolutions, though these are initially quite perfunctory. It is not until halfway through (bars 73-74) that two whole bars of dominant pedal can be found, and this moves to an interrupted cadence in any event. The dominant takes up almost 20% of the total duration. The most significant of this is the climax at letter L, where there are 10 consecutive bars of dominant harmony. Again, though this has a strong leaning towards a tonic resolution, this does not immediately appear, the harmony progressing through a cycle of 3rds and 'false' resolutions before finally arriving at a stable tonic centre.

Tonic pedals take up almost 50% of the movement, but this figure is deceptive because most of that is modally ambiguous and therefore not a 'resting' centre. The majority of this 50% occurs in the first half of the piece. This dissolves into a middle section (from letter E – 'The river') which features subdominant pedals. Most noticeably, tonic pedals are absent from bar 118 through to the final bar (156). This absence, coupled with the heightened dominant tension at the climax (letter L) makes the final delayed arrival of the tonic particularly pungent and therefore 'functional' as a genuine arrival.

### RHYTHMIC AMBIGUITY

The entire second movement is cast in compound time (12/8) and this lends itself to rhythmic ambiguity, principally through regrouping of quavers to create hemiola relationships. The opening strings and vibraphone immediately highlight this possibility:

#### example No.15



The tenutos indicate emphasis in dotted crotchet groupings (with the time signature), but the actual oscillation highlights a crotchet grouping that might be more akin to a 6/4 or 3/4 grouping. The presence of 'virtual' triplets has been noted earlier and in addition to this, duplets can be found (for instance, leading into letter B) which create a further implication:

**example No.16**

Arc - tic Ri - al - to, Stands pha - ros - like a - bove the dock

These presence of these duplets is influenced by the natural speech rhythms of the text, though they also help to imply another layer of rhythmic subdivision and this is exploited further in the middle section ('The river') to conjure a sense of 'flow'.

Coupled with these various rhythmic superimpositions is the general presence of a 'backbeat' or an emphasis on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> beats of the 12/8 bar. This is woven through much of the texture and at times is quite overt, like in the timpani at letter C:

**example No.17**

*p*

This backbeat creates propulsion through syncopation. At letter E, this drive is geared down to a half-time feel so that the backbeat is only on beat 3:

**example No.18**

This augmentation could in theory be doubled again to only appear on the 1<sup>st</sup> beat of every second bar and still function as a backbeat. This means that in a 4-beat bar (such as 4/4 or 12/8) backbeats can potentially land on any of the 4 beats (not just 2 and 4) depending on the gearing of the augmentation.

In conjunction with the use of virtual triplets and tied quavers, this backbeat creates a 'swing' feel without the singers and instrumentalists having to actually 'swing' the quavers. The swing is built into the metrical structure.

## **PERFORMANCE + RESPONSE**

The work was premeired on August 16<sup>th</sup>, 2003 in Melbourne Town Hall as part of the RMP's Grand Sesquicentenary Concert. The audience was estimated at around 1,300 and the program included exerpts from great works such as Handel's *Messiah* and Mendelssohn's *Elijah* which have marked the choir's history. The evening was compered by Terry Lane and included a narrated history of the choir's 150 years.

"A world premiere concluded the advertised program; *From The Beginning* by local composer Stuart Greenbaum, written especially for the occasion. Greenbaum's two-movement cantata takes as its text a poem by Melbourne-born but London-based poet Ross Baglin, and presents two contrasting views of Melbourne. Through a series of choral passages that gradually build and then disperse, the RMP's place in the development of the city is told. The music is understated, but evocative, employing some interesting effects with tuned percussion and string harmonics. Greenbaum's music buzzes with an unrelenting energy and generates an instant appeal. Featuring heavily syncopated rhythms and heroic choral melodies, the work is elegant in its structure and colourfully orchestrated. The vociferous reaction of the audience to the piece must have been of great satisfaction to the composer who was present in the audience."

**Christopher Dee, *Independent Arts Review*, September 2003**

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