

# contact

Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

## Citation



Dennis, Brian. 1975. 'Review of *Experimental Music Catalogue - 2: Hobbs/White Duo Percussion Anthology*, and *Michael Parsons: Piano Pieces*'. **Contact**, 12. pp. 38-39. ISSN 0308-5066.

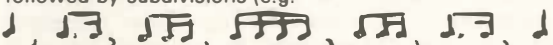
EXPERIMENTAL MUSIC CATALOGUE — 2: HOBBS/WHITE DUO  
PERCUSSION ANTHOLOGY (£1.50); MICHAEL PARSONS: PIANO  
PIECES (£1.20).

BRIAN DENNIS

Here we have a batch of systemic pieces. There are two exceptions: *Ragtime* by Michael Parsons — an occasional piece à la Joplin, but more confined harmonically: e.g. limited pitch areas, mechanistic changes of key etc. — and Christopher Hobbs' *Timpani Studies* 'ready-made' material from a timp. manual transcribed for two sets of four wood blocks.<sup>1</sup> An interesting inclusion this, not only as a continuation of Hobbs' former pre-occupation with ready-made material — as in *Remorseless Lamb* (Bach's *Sheep may safely graze* stretched, mangled and juxtaposed demonically ad lib), his *Early Tudor Ready-Made* (a grey, menacing collage for four organs), *The Muzak Lovers* (Tchaikovsky reduced to a grinding loop) and many others — but as an investigation into the audibility of systems themselves. In other words, the *Timpani Studies* do not sound ready-made, they relate only to the 'sound' of the Hobbs/White Duo. (White's *Photo-Finish Machine*, for example, uses the same combination. This latter piece, also anthologised, I discussed in my *Musical Times* article mentioned above.) The *Studies* are therefore a foil; they intrigue the ear with four-square patterns in random counterpoint while relating to (a) the audible procedures of the White piece and its kin, (b) the more complex, less audible procedures of, say, Hobbs' *A Fair Lick* and (c) the use of random

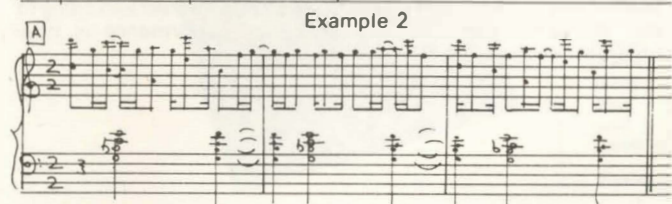
numbers in *Lincoln E. Moses Comes Down From the Mountain* (also by Hobbs).

If this exception highlights the otherwise numerical percussion on pieces in this anthology, Parsons' *Ragtime* provides an 'alternative style' to his equally repetitive (but never repeating) piano pieces. *Rhythmic Study 4* is the largest of these (lasting about 25 minutes), and is based on a single matrix (see Example 1). There are 17 lettered sections (A—Q) which alternate with 16 numbered sections: the former expand two bars at a time from 3 to 36 bars; the extra bar of Q mirrors the extra bar of numbered section 1, otherwise the numbered sections are fixed at 14 bars. The lettered sections are derived by applying a fixed rhythmic pattern to the matrix. For example, the rhythm of A (  ) sweeps the matrix three times to complete its cycle (see Example 2). The rhythmic unit of B (  ) produces five bars; another crotchet is added in C to produce seven bars and so on. By contrast, the numbered sections build-up and then break down, the matrix starting in crotchets followed by subdivisions (e.g.

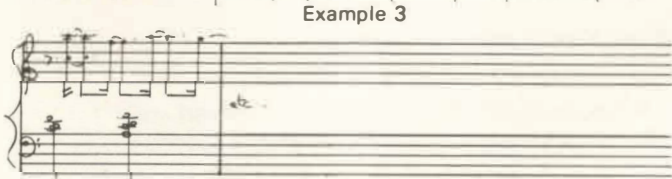
 — each value X 8). Bar 2 of Section 1 shows the beginning of the process (see Example 3). By shifting the matrix one pitch at a time, the 16 sections are formed: i.e. bar 1 of Section 2 starts on the F (see Example 4).



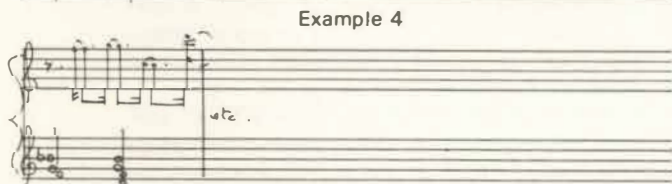
Example 1



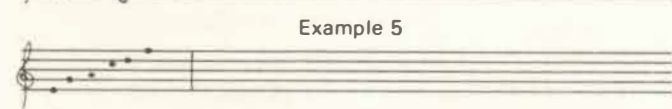
Example 2



Example 3



Example 4



Example 5


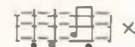

The left-hand harmonies of *Rhythmic Study 4* change inexorably with each section, a feature also of the four-part *Canon*, whose subject is confined to the 'field' shown in Example 5. Each part enters a fifth below or a fourth above and one crotchet out of phase. This progressive rhythmic variety is also a feature of the shorter *Variations*, whose minimal character reflects Parsons' long standing partnership with Howard Skempton: the essence of variation-form reduced to a skeleton. But are these pieces systemic? Hobbs' definition — 'music in which the structure and note to note procedure are dictated by a numerically expressible construct' — scarcely applies. Here is a conundrum for those academically inclined, since Parsons was the first to apply the word (derived from 'systemic art' with which he is closely associated). The parent word 'machine', first coined by John White, is still found among pieces in the *Duo Anthology* e.g. *Photo-Finish Machine*: "a process is switched-on, runs full cycle, then stops" (certain 'rogue machines' are stopped by other means, i.e. after an agreed period). White's *Newspaper Reading Machine*, *Twin Reflections Machine* and many others make no reference to numbers but 'process' is inherent and essential.

The 'rounded-process', often a distorted or inverted palindrome,

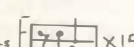


### Example 6

STEADY PACE JOURNEY CHRISTOPHER HOBBS  
(1st three modules)

Prayer 1

4-Dims  x 15  x 16  x 8 etc.

Prayer 2

4-Dims  x 15  x 9  x 14 etc.

is a feature of several of the duo pieces, White's *Yet Another Exercise*, for example. The latter operates through a series of number-against-number patterns from 1:1 through combinations of 3:4:5 back to 1:1. *Purple Passage* (White) and *Steady Pace Journey* (Hobbs) run a series of expanding modules which contract midway (see Example 6).

A second *Hobbs/White Duo Anthology* is scheduled for a later date; the residue will stay in manuscript (Hobbs' *Heavy Viking Systems*, for example, would be a volume in itself). Spawning after the break-up of the Promenade Theatre Orchestra, the prolific duo repertoire represents three years' exploration of a few non-pitched instruments and their structural potential (1971-74). Overheard at a Hobbs/White concert (a remark to a distinguished practitioner of post-Webern piano music): "this is what I regard as real modern music". Small wonder that the experience is irrepeatable. Hobbs and White have now moved backwards and forwards respectively into the 'alternative' tradition. This inexhaustible area is proving particularly fruitful at the present time.

#### NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> For interviews with these composers see Peter West and Peter Evans, 'Interview with Christopher Hobbs', *CONTACT 3* (Autumn 1971) pp. 17-23 and Keith Potter, 'Some Aspects of an Experimental Attitude: an interview with Michael Parsons', *CONTACT 8* (Summer 1974) pp. 20-25.

Music examples reproduced by kind permission of the composers.