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## BLOG

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**Steve Kilpatrick**

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01/09/16

### What is it that appeals to you about writing for quarter-tone alto flute, guitar and live electronics?

I've written a few pieces for flute exploiting alternate fingerings to produce microtones and multiphonics, so the opportunity to compose for a flautist who specialises in microtonal music was tremendously exciting.

I saw composing for the guitar as quite a challenge because, counter-intuitively, I suppose, the guitar is my main instrument. The guitar is such a pattern-based instrument that it is tempting to let your fingers do the composing, rather than your head. I got round this problem by composing the piece in Visby on the island of Gottland away from all my guitars. All I had in my room was a beaten up Spanish guitar that was unplayable, but which I just used very occasionally to check the part I was writing was physically possible.

As with the guitar, I saw the inclusion of live electronics as a real challenge too. I have written quite a lot of electronic music and done a number of improv gigs playing live electronics, as well as pieces that incorporate acoustic instrument and pre-composed "tape parts", but this was my first acoustic piece incorporating a "composed" electronic part for another performer. In many ways, the function and performance of the live electronics part was the hardest thing to wrap my head around in this piece.

### Who are your main influences?

Some of my main formative influences are not necessarily people I listen to now, but changed the way I wrote and performed music. Robert Fripp was the Rock musician that led me to concert music, in that I sought out Bartók after reading a Fripp interview where he mentioned that Bartók's violin sonatas had been very influential for him.

I spent much of my formative years as a "serious" composer obsessed with the holy trinity of Bartók, Ligeti and Kurtág. This must have been a serious obsession, eventually lead me to move to Hungary, where I lived for four years.

I was lucky enough a few years ago to have some private lessons with Michael Finnissy, which were fantastic. His music was already an influence on me through recordings and concerts, but those lessons I had with him really challenged my compositional thinking and still resonate with me today. He also thought that *Falling Out of Cars* was my only good title for a piece. Sadly, I had to confess that I "borrowed" it from Jeff Noon.

Without really realising it at the time, as a child I was hugely influenced by composers like Dudley Simpson and Tristram Carey from their work on the incidental music to the classic series of Doctor Who. I probably didn't even pay attention, but now I can see how their music has seeped into my bones.

### Who inspires you?

Inspiration comes from many places. Rock bands like Baroness just make me want to write huge guitar riffs, but then I'll put some Claude Vivier on and I'll want to write something like that. I wish I could be four people at the same time. I would be a Rock musician, a folk singer, a "serious" composer and a film composer. Right now, I'm trying to be all four and there just isn't time to do them all well.

Film inspires me a lot. Usually not particularly high-brow stuff, more often it's Italian horrors and thrillers from the 1970's

### What made you become a composer?

It wasn't a conscious decision. I didn't grow up with concert music. My parents listened to The Beatles, Cat Stevens, Vangelis, Chuck Berry and a whole range of diverse stuff, but all of it would be described as Popular music.

Although I did study formally later, I was initially self taught on the guitar and I didn't realise that it was possible to work songs out from the recordings, so I just started composing on the instrument as I learnt. Eventually, I was writing songs and performing them with my own bands.

As I got more ambitious with what I wanted to compose, I realised that I would need some traditional music skills, so I

began formal music study when I was in my 20s. This was when I was first exposed to Stravinsky, Webern, Berg, Kurtág etc.

In many ways, I don't think I chose composition, I think it chose me. It's definitely more of a compulsion than a pastime. Sometimes it's just really, really hard.

**Tell us about the background of your piece – how did it come to be written and what's it all about?**

I had been a fan of Jeff Noon's novels since my student days. Many of Jeff's novels take place in an alternate version of Manchester and it's pretty exciting to walk around your city in the footsteps of characters from a sci-fi novel. I'm pretty sure the Stash Riders from Vurt's hide out was close to the bottom of my road.

When the novel *Falling Out of Cars* came out, I was completely blown away and I wanted to respond to it musically, but the right opportunity never seemed to arise. However, this particular instrumentation of alto flute, guitar and live electronics seemed perfect. This also fortuitously coincided with a composer's residency I had in Visby in Sweden, so I had an intense month of focussed composition with this as the result.

The novel is set in a fictional United Kingdom that seems to be contemporary with our own but has suffered some form of catastrophe, which has altered the way the population is able to process information. People's normal state does not allow them to filter information properly, which causes them to eventually become hospitalised in isolation tanks. Characters in the novel refer to this overwhelming amount of information as "noise", from which the individual has difficulty extracting, or is unable to extract, the important bits of information.

One passage that struck me particularly describes a guitarist playing in a coffee shop and a "long stream of notes that almost became a tune, and then becoming lost once more". This became the starting point for my piece.

Noise is subjective, in that what is noise and what is information is determined by what the observer/listener is looking for. I will leave it to the listener to decide for themselves what is noise in this piece.

**How does this work relate to your other compositional output?**

It addresses an issue with the work that precedes it. Shortly before I started writing *Falling Out of Cars*, it was pointed out that I tend to avoid ostinati and exact repetition, which seemed odd for someone from a Rock background. *Falling Out of Cars* has a fair bit of repetition and a couple of ostinati to remedy this. Since this piece, I've embraced the ostinato a little more still.

**What are your plans for the future?**

I'm just in the process of rebuilding my home studio and I'd like to develop my production skills more.

In terms of composition, I'm planning a new electroacoustic piece, which will probably be the first thing to be done in its entirety in my new studio. I'm in the early stages of a series of short duos for violin and viola entitled [i] *The Museum of Fragile Things* for some friends of mine in the US. The title comes from Jeff Noon's *Falling Out of Cars* and will form part of a series. Eventually, Jeff and I are hoping to adapt the novel into an opera. That's my big ambition.

I've got a bunch of things happening that, I suppose, you would call popular music. I've got a single and video coming out pretty soon which is a collaboration between myself and screenwriter Mike Sizemore. Hopefully, there will be a few more singles to follow, as we've written quite a few songs already. I've also recorded an album with a Doom band called Even Vast, which should be out before the end of the year.

**What have been your career highlights so far?**

In terms of contemporary music, one highlight would be my opera, which had four performances in 2011. It was called *Flight Paths* with a libretto by Adam Strickson and was commissioned as part of the 2012 Cultural Olympiad. Off the record, being a massive Doctor Who fan, I was also pretty stoked to have had worked with Turlough's brother.

A few years back I wrote a short and very simple piano piece for the *Resident Evil 6* trailer. That trailer was on cinema and prime time tv around the world, so that was quite a buzz.

**If you could choose three pieces of music that have had a big impact on your life or musical development, what would they be and why?**

Bartók's fourth string quartet showed me that chamber music could be just as visceral and powerful as rock music and it's never stopped being one of my all time favourite pieces of music.

Ligeti's Requiem introduced me to micropolyphony and exploiting the limitations of the performer. It's also gut wrenchingly powerful.

Bert Jansch's version of *Black Waterside* blew me away when I first heard it and sent me down an unexpected turn as a performer. I'll still bust that one out when someone hands me a guitar, but I'm still looking for the right key for me.

Steve's website

rarescale premieres *Falling out of Cars* for alto flute, guitar and electronics at The Forge on 6th September 2016. Book tickets here.

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