The New English Keyboard School: A Second “Golden Age”

Sarah E. Walker

One of contemporary music’s most beguiling paradoxes has to be this: that those composers who were once to be found performing radical multi-media happenings with the Scratch Orchestra are now just as passionately engaged in building a rich repertoire of modestly scaled piano works. A simple matter of failing political zeal, perhaps? Or autumnal maturity? The briefest encounter with any of this distinct group of composers will indicate that neither answer is valid; however, how the new strain of experimental music emerged from the old is an intriguing question and one that has never been satisfactorily explained. Part of the reason for this is that a successful music whose appeal goes beyond the specialist, educated audience seems not to require explanation; it is not “problematic” enough. Composers who write prolifically for the piano, taking on board its social and musical traditions, may indeed be accepted as part of the tolerant and eclectic British new music scene, but there remains a general sense of bafflement regarding where they and their music are coming from. Bafflement can too easily turn to dismissal, hence this article and its aim to shed light on the so-called New English Piano School: to summarize its content, explain its origins and argue for its artistic importance.

The name “New English Piano School” originated with John Tilbury, a uniquely creative pianist and co-founder of the Scratch Orchestra. Tilbury and John White were compiling a concert program to be played in Innsbruck in the early 1990s, when Tilbury mentioned an interesting parallel between the proliferation of piano music by ex-Scratch composers, such as White, Dave Smith, Christopher Hobbs, Hugh Shrapnel, Michael Parsons and Howard Skempton, and the work of the Elizabethan virginalists, both movements containing music that was colorful and virtuosic as well as intimate and reflective. The scale of much of the music represents an obvious and often tonal style of composition seems in contradiction with the idea of experimentation; indeed, most of the compositions discussed here are fully notated, stylistically consistent and showing firm (if oblique) bonds with musical tradition. All of the composers mentioned, however, have been strongly associated with the radically experimental attitudes of the late 1960s and early 1970s; all were members of the Scratch Orchestra and none were unmoved by their association with Cornelius Cardew. Although their more recent music seems worlds away from that period, it is in fact profoundly connected; Cardew’s ability to look upon modern musical developments from a close and yet critical perspective gave his colleagues the freedom to accept or reject what avant-gardists were expected to swallow unquestioningly. Suddenly, popular classics, simple piano pieces and virtuosic transcriptions were no longer an embarrassment. As John White commented:

He threw every door in the house open, and okay, a lot of valuable old ornaments were blown over and aged in the process, but I think they had it coming. The analogy that comes to mind is very much that Zen thing about people who acquire enlightenment leading a perfectly normal life again . . . but a couple of millimetres off the ground, and so it’s possible to listen to Rimsky-Korsakov’s Sheherazade now with absolute delight, because I listen to it as though it had no prehistory. Whereas before Cardew, there was an obsessive toffee-like consistency in musical history that glued everything into place in a rather soggy, unadventurous way. Since Cardew, there’s something delightful about, say, Telemann; all those symmetrical constructs seem exciting. So although Cardew didn’t direct my thinking, he was responsible for a sort of waking up, which probably says something about my receptivity as well as what he had on his mind [1].

Cardew’s questioning of mainstream modernist tenets was obviously an enormously liberating force for his colleagues in the Scratch Orchestra, but that is not to say that the present characteristics of the New English Keyboard School—with its reference-rich, accessible piano pieces—were immediately set in place; they may have been present, but they were not necessarily dominant. In the late 1960s, English experimental composers were as keen as any in the avant-garde to use the piano purely as a sound source; a combination of strings, hammers and sounding board. The following extract from a Musical Times article of February 1969 illustrates this.

Michael Parsons was interviewing John Tilbury:

M.P.: You have described the piano as a “sound source.” But it is also an instrument with a history and a tradition. What is your attitude to history? Do you visualize the disintegration of the piano as it has been known?
J.T.: The words you use reflect your own attitude to change. Disintegration is too negative a word. This is one aspect of change, but there are also affirmative aspects, and I prefer to be identified by what I do with these. A musician is involved in

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a continuous dialogue with history. I believe that as part of this it is essential to negate the piano: but this is not the same as to destroy it—it would be naïve to try to destroy it.

M.P.: What do you mean by “to negate” the piano?

J.T.: It seems an essential prerequisite of its continued existence to change it and to make it unrecognizable, for example by amplification. There is a contradiction between the piano regarded as a keyboard instrument to be played and as a sound-source to be exploited. The dialectic of this contradiction must be dramatized if it is to continue to be a musical instrument.

M.P.: You mean that if you identify the piano exclusively with its past, then it’s finished?

J.T.: Yes. [2]

However, Scratch pieces such as Houdini Rite (1970) reveal that this somewhat Webernesque attitude—Tilbury felt that Webern’s Variations Opus 27 marked the inception of “using” the piano—was only part of the picture. Houdini Rite reveals a more complex approach to the instrument, one that accepted and dealt with its historical connotations. This piece, initiated by Hugh Shrapnel, was one of the Scratch Orchestra’s Improvisation Rites. These musical happenings were designed by Cardew and were established as part of the Scratch constitution; they represented a way of structuring improvisation and could be described as halfway between improvisation and composition. Houdini Rite was one of the most celebrated: it received its most notorious performance in a concert given by Tilbury at the Purcell Room in 1970, where it was combined with another Scratch concept—that of the Popular Classic. An old recording of Tchaikovsky’s first Piano Concerto was played, and after a few bars the performer was instructed to approach the piano, heavily restrained by ropes. He was then required to play the instrument tied up; a cacophony of loud, randomly placed major chords was the result.

As early as 1962, however, English experimental composers were using the piano as a vehicle for stylistic pluralism in exactly the same way that they are using it now, i.e. within a direct, tonal context and conventional structural format. John White’s Sonata No. 15 (1962) alludes to several composers who since then have remained consistently important both to him and his colleagues. White wrote:

In the first movement, shades of Brahms and Frank Martin slug it out with Weber for supremacy in a tersely jobkey sonata allegro. The 2nd movement is a pastorale about Janacek’s death (with Szymanowski as concealed observer). The 3rd is in the “cosmic” mode, containing fleeting allusions to Reger and Busoni among its reverberating 5ths and octaves [3].

The score contains instructions that constantly jog the player’s memory, indicating the kind of music with which the piece is associating itself; for example, in the final movement the comment “ker-crash” accompanies a heavy chord, preceded in the style of Schumann by an acciacatura two octaves below the bass note proper; on the final page, instructions such as “suddenly eloquent,” “sort of rocking gently,” “very steady and reflective” and “important quiet Bach cadence” urge the player to evoke the spirit of the late-nineteenth-century piano virtuoso, Busoni in particular (see Fig. 1).

Rehabilitating figures such as Busoni, who have been somewhat marginalized by the conventional view of music history, constitutes a significant aspect of the motivation behind much piano music of English experimental composers; it is a subtle and effective form of subversion, of questioning the values of mainstream musical thought. Combining references or quotations in an original way can lead the listener to reflect upon those source materials, gaining fresh insight and a view of twentieth-century music history that rejects the standard canon. In a world where experienced listeners are rarely unsettled by even the most angry and dense atonal cacophony, these little comments and comparisons, presented politely on the piano, can be surprisingly hard-hitting and as intellectually stimulating as music of greater surface complexity. As John White says:

You’ll find a kind of telegraphese, telegrams, that will communicate to you when you look back on [my piano sonatas] if you should wish so to do, and I think that happens in my music quite a lot; there is quite an exaggerated clarity of language, but it refers back to a state of spirit or a predilection or something, without stating the whole thing. So in the same way that I won’t quote a whole Bruckner symphony in a piano sonata, on the other hand a couple of fourths or fifths will inform one that there’s a sort of Brucknerian pounding going on in the background. Yes, a reference; very important, all of that. When people say “do you realise you’ve ripped off a bit of Petrohka,” or something, I say most certainly I have; delighted to acknowledge parentage. In the same way that I’m not at all embarrassed about my parents, I’m proud of being acquainted with the music I’m acquainted with [4].

White’s piano sonatas—he has written over 130 since 1956—represent a “free-ranging commentary on musical encounters in an inner landscape” [5] and richly illustrate the composer’s aesthetic. Although there is not space to discuss all these sonatas in detail here, an abridged list of these “musical encounters” and their salient features appears in Dave Smith’s 1980 article on White’s sonatas, which was published in Contact. This list reveals much about English experimental music and its alternative take on music history:

ALKAN: The exposition of mysterious order
SCHUMANN: the wealth of inner life half concealed behind the engaging and mobile nature of the musical patterns (Kreisleriana!)
BUSONI: The masterful containing of a wide range of musical vocabulary, structure and resonance
SATIE: The arcane charm of apparently simple musical statements
REGER: The sympathetic ability to be simultaneously serious and lost

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Fig. 1. John White, Sonata No. 15 (1962). White’s instructions to the performer indicate the kind of music with which the piece is associating itself, invariably to great ironic effect. (Courtesy of John White)
SCRIBIN: The volatile and winged nature of the musical thought and its manifestation
MEDTNER: The tactile fluency of piano layout and the intellectual fluency of thematic and structural organisation
BRUCKNER: The dignity and magnificence of diatonic chord-progressions and unserving metre [6].

These influences are shared by several other composers of the New English Keyboard School, in particular Christopher Hobbs and Dave Smith. Hobbs paid homage to Alkan in his Sonatina 1 for piano (1973), of which he wrote:

The eight sections of the piece present a reasonable cross-section of my preoccupations of the time. Busoni and Alkan presiding over whatever other guests my musical subconscious may have invited to the feast. At this time, John White and I were in the habit of writing pieces for each other on a weekly basis and my theft of a chord writing pieces for each other on a weekly basis and my theft of a chord progression from him in the last section is an open acknowledgement of the beneficent influence he has had, and continues to have, on my music [7].

Their shared interest in Alkan led Smith to dedicate to Hobbs one of the most significant works to emerge from the New English Keyboard School, Al Contrario (subtitled G sharp minor study). Smith describes his composition, after Busoni, as a “fantasia canonica.” It originally formed the second movement of his Third Piano Concert, where its length (over half an hour) brought it in line with epic structures such as the first movement of Alkan’s Concerto Op. 39. Al Contrario pays homage to two works of Alkan, the miniature in G-sharp minor Morituri Te Salutant, from the 2nd suite of Esquisses (Op. 63), and the chorale theme from the final movement of the Grande Sonate (Op. 33); however, a substantial portion of the piece alludes to Hobbs’s Piano Piece 10 of 1973. Hobbs and Smith shared a fascination not only with Alkan but with the key of G-sharp minor generally; the various minor key signatures encountered in Piano Piece 10 lent it a dark, often exotic harmonic color, and its sense of doom (the performing instruction is “tenebrous”) also suggested to Smith a closeness with Alkan’s G-sharp minor mood. Unusual combinations of source material are often to be found in Smith’s work; there is a certain irony in his juxtaposition of minimalistic figurations that feature the sort of slowly shifting suspended harmonies associated with the music of Gavin Bryars, with tortuously chromatic canonic passages, but all having a meditative, weighty feel and a power to evoke orchestral sonorities that allow them to coexist without clashing crudely, and Smith’s own performance of the work, which he premiered in 1992, emphasizes the continuity of the piece rather than the cut-off points in its block-like structure. Five distinct areas of material are presented in the first half of the piece; these then reappear in modified form, only occasionally being allowed to integrate, for example, at bar 162, when the four upper voices present the chorale theme in canon over a bass line of the chromatic Morituri Te Salutant melody. Busoni’s Fantasia Contrapponnistica is integrated into the musical fabric in the sense that it inspired the five-part canonic treatment of the Alkan themes, but it does not actually appear as a reference. There are several other personal touches woven surreptitiously into the fabric of the piece that connect it to Hobbs, its dedicatee, and with other composers admired by the experimentalists. The letters DSCH (Dave Smith Christopher Hobbs/D, E flat, C, B) appear at the outset, over a bass line taken from the opening of Piano Piece 10 (see Fig. 2). Although Shostakovich is commonly associated with the DSCH motif, Smith’s inspiration came from the Petite Symphonie Concertante and the Trombone Ballade of Frank Martin. Alkan’s Les Diablotins is referred to in a series of rising chromatic chords, marked “without brilliance,” at bar 150; the fugue from his Funeral March for a Dead Parrot is referred to, inverted, in a tender passage at bars 156–160. The strangely ethereal, atonal sections close to the beginning and ending of the piece involve rhythmic canons that evoke Smith’s involvement with systems music (music created according to pre-determined rules) in the 1970s. An appearance is also made by Sorabji, relevant to the experimental tradition for his Satie-like avoidance of thematic development, in that the final bars of the piece represent a skeletal version of the end of the Opus Clavicembalisticum, the longest non-repetitive published piano piece.

Typically for Smith and all composers discussed here, there is no attempt to develop any of this source material in terms of complexity; in the chorale...
theme from the Grande Sonate, for instance, Smith adheres to the original harmonies, only substituting the final bar, which modulates suddenly and restlessly towards an unexpected key, for a more static one that resolves less abruptly but still sounds in keeping with the source material. In maintaining the original characteristics of his thematic material, re-contextualized in a dreamlike way (but never parodied) by a synthetically cut-and-pasted structure, Smith respects his own subjective experience of what is for him significant repertoire.

Al Contrario is unusual in Smith’s piano concerti, of which there are seven to date. Apart from the fifth, Alla Rimanenza, which comprises one continuous movement, these concert-length suites mostly consist of shorter pieces, often less serious in mood than the epic G-sharp minor study (for example, the First Piano Concert [1985–1986] consists of 24 sonatas in all the keys, each relating in some way to a manner of performance or musical genre). Although its eclecticism and exploitation of traditional pianistic sonorities and textures make it an exemplary piece of New English Keyboard School music, Al Contrario’s grandeur is perhaps less typical. Simpler pieces have made equally important contributions to the repertoire and are equally characteristic of and identifiable with this area of contemporary music. Howard Skempton is the best-known name in relation to this: his miniatures show an astonishing imaginative range and, not surprisingly, have found great success outside the confines of the new music world [8]. Many are tonal and melodic, like the unashamedly sentimental tribute Well, well, Cornelius (1982)—a sort of song without words in E-flat major that is strongly reminiscent of Cardew’s own folk-like piano pieces; some are more oblique, lacking key or time signatures, like the Feldmanesque after-image (1990), which is dedicated to Michael Finnissy.

Perhaps less celebrated than Skempton’s at least for his piano music over the past decade he played oboe and sang in the Scratch Orchestra period. Shrapnel began to move away from high experimentation in 1973 and turned to more traditional idioms, including conventional tonality and an emphasis on melody; later in the decade he played oboe and sang in People’s Liberation Music, a folk/rock band in which Cardew participated, writing and performing songs and instrumental pieces on socialist themes. In the early 1980s he composed Scenario for 2 Pianos, the first in a series of compositions combining popular melodic material from various sources with a return to the exploratory idiom of the Scratch years. In that decade he also began teaching piano and wrote an album of 25 piano pieces for beginners and amateurs; since then, his interest in the instrument has increased, and he has concentrated on the composition of songs and piano music over the past decade. Most of his piano pieces are short, lyrical “mood” pieces rather than large, imposing structures; many of them have descriptive titles, such as Twilight Preludes (1995–1998), Autumn Pieces (1989–1990) and Cat Preludes (1994–1995). This last set of preludes reveals the pride in craftsmanship that characterizes all composers of the English experimental tradition. It consists of six movements: the Basking, Prowl, Siamese, And Mouse, Asleep and Curtain movements. Basking has an improvisatory quality, giving an impression of rhythmic inexactitude that is in fact very precisely notated. Its harmonic language is chromatic, often hinting at B-flat major tonality and with a preponderance of open fifths that give the music a clean, penetrating sound. Technically the piece would fit comfortably under the fingers of any reasonably accomplished player, but Shrapnel’s attention to expressive nuance means that there is scope for the more advanced performer to apply his or her skill (see Fig. 3). Prowl, a jaunty miniature in 5/4 time, makes a similar level of technical demands. It features a jazz-like walking bass in the left hand and, unlike the first prelude, consists of fragmentary phrases imitating the motion of a cat moving confidently forward and then abruptly stopping to reconsider its tactics. Again, the harmonic language is elusive; Shrapnel alternates one bar of white-note crotchetts with a bar of mostly black, giving the impression of corrupted pentatonic scales. Siamese has been described by the composer as a study in fourths; these impart an oriental character to the music, which features the
same rhythmic flexibility as Basking. This prelude is written on three staves, allowing Shrapnel to create a string quartet–like impression, with three lower parts moving in rhythmic unison in open fourths beneath a soaring, improvisatory melody. The third layer moves in rhythmic unison in open fourths beneath a soaring, improvisatory melody. The third layer is created by the use of simple, repetitive notes in the left hand conjuring a heartbeat or steady breaths; in the right hand, range over an unpredictable chromatic pattern of notes, with the left hand occasionally required to shoot up to the top of the piano in a humorous imitation of a mouse’s squeak. Asleep is similarly evocative, with its calmly repeated notes in the left hand conjuring up a heartbeat or steady breaths; in the treble, Shrapnel’s characteristic fourths-and-fifths-dominated harmonies create the impression of a melodic duet. The final movement, Curtain, is another toccata, mostly in 7/8 time and featuring rapid demisemiquavers. The first of each group of four is taken by the left hand, creating a gradually descending melody; later this is reversed so that the sustained melodic line is played by the right hand. The piece ends in a tumbling descent to the lower end of the keyboard. At the end of 1995, Shrapnel wrote an additional movement, Dusty Dreams; this could be considered as a postlude to the set or could be performed alone. It is in a contemplative style with the regular rhythmic feel of Asleep and is perhaps the most strongly melodic piece of the set.

The traditional textures and imagistic quality of Cat Preludes reveal a respect for the technical boundaries of the non-specialist performer, an attitude that points clearly to Shrapnel’s association with Cardew. When asked why such a lot of piano music has emanated from the experimental tradition, Shrapnel is keen to emphasize these practical considerations:

> There are always pianos around and in the absence of lucrative commissions from august New Music bodies such as the London Sinfonietta we haven’t in the main had the opportunity to write orchestral music, so, amongst other things, we have often written piano music for ourselves or pianist friends to play. Another reason is historical: the numbers of outstanding pianists there were in the Scratch Orchestra. Cornelius himself was a wonderful pianist who gave landmark performances of new music. Together with the pianist and improviser John Tilbury, other composer/pianists from the Scratch include John White, Chris Hobbs, Michael Parsons and Dave Smith who all give concert recitals of their own and other composers’ works. Other composers, including Howard Skempton and myself, have written a lot for the piano but are not recital pianists—I have, however, sometimes given performances of my own pieces. The final reason is just how extraordinarily versatile, subtle and sensitive the piano is; you have a whole world at your fingertips. For an instrument burdened by 200 years of musical history. I am always amazed by its seemingly endless new possibilities [9].

It is hardly surprising, given the intimate, domestic nature of a great deal of this music and its respect for matters of practicality, that the New English Keyboard School features a strong preponderance of piano duets, a selection of which should be mentioned here.

Shrapnel’s South of the River (1993–1994) is a suite of six movements that illustrate his continued use of stylistic reference, including baroque music (the fourth movement, Vanbrugh Castle, is reminiscent of Handel’s Zadok the Priest), Ealing comedy film scores (the jaunty second movement, East St. Market) and funky hip-hop (the aggressive finale, Deptford Broadway). Similar in length and stylistic eclecticism is Dave Smith’s suite Beyond the Park (1996), which consists of five movements: Nocturne, Mechanique, Reverie, Promenade, and Bell Tower. The first and third movements show Smith in his characteristic crepuscular mood, also to be found in Al Contrario and certain movements of the 1st Piano Concert; the second and fourth are mechanistic, with much repetition of rhythmic cells in a manner reminiscent of the early minimalists. Bell Tower provides a stunning finale; a sonorous, gamelan-like effect is created by the use of simple, repeated rhythmic figurations (continuous chains of demisemiquavers alternating with chains of semiquavers) over a cycle of colorful harmonic changes.

A duet by Michael Parsons, Arctic Instrumental Music II (1987), is also worth a closer look, as it sums up so much of his compositional character. Like the others mentioned here, Parsons has contributed a great deal of solo piano music to the repertoire, much of which he has performed himself and indeed recorded; he has recently released a CD of solo pieces dating from 1977 to 1996 [10], including Jive and Jive2 (1996), the four Skopelos pieces (1992) and Four Oblique Pieces (1996), among others. Parsons was closely associated with the visual artists of the English Systems group [11] in the 1970s; as a result his music is crafted with a fine sense of proportion and an objective approach to the actualities of sound and performance. Stylistically he shows the broad-mindedness of Skempton, and both tonal and atonal harmonic languages are equally characteristic of his work. Arctic Instrumental Music II is in a brief single movement, mostly soft in dynamic range. Both parts begin with sustained slow half-note chords, featuring open fourths and fifths; the primo part then breaks into an accompaniment of crotchetts and finally lilting quavers beneath a simple continuous melody that is also pervaded by fourths and fifths. Rising intervals alternate with descending ones, “sharp” tonalities such as C-sharp or B minor harmonies with mellow ones like G and F major, giving a feeling of calm and systematic exploration of the material from different angles (Fig. 4). More decorative figuration enters later, as the melody is given over to the lower part, and the piece builds to a restrained fortissimo climax in which the note-lengths are augmented once more. Despite its romantic undertones of arctic exploration, the systemic nature of the piece bespeaks Parson’s experimental heritage more strongly than does the music of his colleagues: he is often referred to as Cardew’s heir.

To sum up, for most English experimental composers, the practicality of the piano, solo or duet, assumes an importance equal to that of its rich cultural heritage. John White explains:

> I write a lot for piano for two main reasons: (a) being a pianist allows me to be in touch with a rich and exciting repertoire, which gives me a great variety of role models in terms of vocabulary and gesture with which to formulate and “clothe” the ideas which come to me and seem to need expression, and (b) being an idealistic rather than a “career” composer, I find the piano a handy vehicle for the uttering (“outlining”) of compositional thought, in that the inspiration goes directly into a performable medium without the salesmanship required for getting ensemble pieces played [12].

White’s refusal to become a “career” composer is a typically experimental attitude; it also may represent the missing link between the Scratch Orchestra and the current outflowing of piano music. Expressing themselves through the piano allows composers to have their music performed without having to worry about the approval of the new music establishment; artistic survival independent of such approval was one of Cardew’s concerns. As the art critic Suzi

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Walker, The New English Keyboard School 21

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Gablik has written, “Pursued as a career, art becomes inevitably less concentrated as a charismatic activity, and less able to break with prevailing cultural values or archetypes” [13]. Furthermore, a music that is accessible to the non-specialist music lover—the typical amateur pianist, perhaps—is obviously related to Cardew’s impatience with the alienating complexity of avant-garde music. This artistic independence combined with accessibility is a matter of pride for White, whose description of a recent concert tour seems to put the New English Keyboard School perfectly in perspective:

I had the great good fortune to be asked to give recitals in various places in the USA and found favourable responses to concert proposals involving music by myself and a circle of like-minded composers (Dave Smith, Michael Parsons, Howard Skempton, Andrew Hugill, Jamie Crofts and Laurence Crane). I also programmed pieces by Satie, Grainger and the pre-Elizabethan Blitheman to demonstrate some historical/inspirational context. This all went down very well, both with university audiences and with ordinary music lovers, representing as it did, a friendly face of contemporary music and an aspect of piano music which homed in on compositional statement rather than a mere wish to astound with prestidigitation. I was delighted to find that the issues touched on in my introductions to the pieces such as systems, reference, irony and a simple delight in “style” seemed of real interest to the audiences.

There are some fundamental differences between the pieces being written by myself and the composers I mentioned in connection with my American tour and others [including those] loosely defined as part of the “New Complexity.” The latter seem to me to be very concerned with a highly evolved sense of musical vocabulary and ultra-sophisticated compositional handling, often at the expense of immediately audible clarity of rhythm, part-leading and gesture. I and my circle of composer friends are unashamed of the relatively uncomplicated external appearance of our music and work in our particular manner by choice rather than through ignorance. We follow the inner necessities of composition using the most direct means to hand [14].

Directness of language, accessibility to non-specialist audiences and players, and reference to figures normally considered misfits in music history: White’s testimony shows how English experimental composers are going against the flow of the mainstream now as much as ever. The subversiveness is still there, only it currently comes in the guise of apparently traditional piano music rather than graphic scores and text pieces to be performed in unorthodox venues. It is my view that by adapting and changing with the passing decades, experimental composers have in fact maintained their thought-provoking “alternative” stance, whereas those who seek to challenge the audience through the use of more alienating idioms run the risk of achieving the very respectability they fear. As Cardew said in the 1970s, “Ten years ago, Cage concerts were often disrupted by angry music lovers and argumentative critics. . . . But they soon learned to take their medicine. Nowadays a Cage concert can be quite a society event” [15]. No doubt.

Fig. 4. Michael Parsons, Arctic Instrumental Music II (1987). The simple rhythmic divisions in this piece show Parsons’s systemic approach, but there is also a strong awareness of harmonic color and mood in his music that give it an emotional warmth. (Courtesy of Michael Parsons)
when the rest of the musical world catches up with the experimentalists, they will have moved on again.

References and Notes
3. Program note from a concert of White’s Sonata No. 15 given by Ian Lake, Blackheath Concert Halls, 13 November 1990.
4. White [1].
7. See [3].
8. Many of these works have been published by Oxford University Press, for example in Collected Piano Pieces (1971–1995) and Images (1989). See <http://www.oup.co.uk/music/repprom/skempton/catalogue/>.
9. E-mail from Hugh Shrapnel to author, 30 December 2000.
11. The Systems group of artists consisted of Malcolm Hughes, Michael Kidner, Peter Lowe, David Saunders, Jean Spencer and Jeffrey Steele. Their work was based on the choice of a limited set of elements and the use of consistent principles, or rules, to determine how these elements were used.
12. E-mail from John White to author, 11 December 2000.
14. E-mail from John White to author, 30 December 2000.

Discography
Shrapnel, Hugh. South of the River (Sarah Walker, Robert Coleridge, piano), musicnow mncdx02 (1996). Musicnow has a web site with extensive information on Shrapnel <http://www.musicnow.co.uk>.

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