

# *Keith Humble's Modernism: From Homogenous Motivic-thematic Organicism to Heterogenous Gestural Constructivism*

## Graham Hair

Keith Humble was born in the Australian provincial city of Geelong in Victoria in 1927, but in 1932 his family moved to the Melbourne suburb of Northcote, where he attended Westgarth State (Primary) School and University High School. He left school in the fifth year of secondary education, and thereafter spend a short period undertaking various menial jobs and playing popular music for a living.

Around 1945, he entered Melbourne University Conservatorium of Music, where he completed the Diploma of Music, with piano as his major study. His piano teacher was Roy Shepherd. Around 1948, a local newspaper, the *Melbourne Herald*, ran a campaign to raise money for him to study abroad, and in December 1949, he went to London to study at the Royal Academy of Music, where he studied piano with Vivian Langrish and composition with Howard Ferguson.

During Easter of 1950 he paid a short visit to Paris, where he visited the celebrated piano teacher Madame Bascourret. Madame Bascourret had previously taught Roy Shepherd. He resolved to return to study in Paris, which eventually, in August 1951, he did. He lived a hand-to-mouth existence in Paris in the following years, boarding with a family and undertaking various casual jobs, such as playing in a bar at 2am. Various opportunities to improve his musical education arose: for example, he was invited by an elderly musician friend to play piano four-hands with him, and by another couple (string players, who also provided a meal) to read through the chamber music repertoire with them several times a week.

Through friends, he visited the *American Centre for Students and Artists* in early 1952, and was invited to play a concert there (May 30, 1952). It so happened that the job of receptionist there was vacant, and he was offered a job filling in, until the summer holidays of 1952, and afterwards in September 1952. From 1953, he studied composition with Rene Leibowitz, who introduced him to the idea that music could have a logic to it (a new idea for a raw young composer from Australia). Leibowitz was an active conductor as well as a teacher, and helped his pupil to get various jobs as copyist and repetiteur, which also helped the struggling young composer to keep body and soul together. Gradually his life began to improve. He was hired to play numerous concerts for the United States Information Service, in Paris on Sunday afternoons, but also in other parts of France and in Germany and Belgium.

In 1955 he married, and returned to Australia, working part-time at the Melbourne University Conservatorium, but was unsettled and dis-satisfied, so in 1956 he returned to Paris, where despite great financial difficulties, he managed to continue working with Leibowitz.

In 1959 he gathered around him a group of young composers and performers to create the *Centre de Musique* at the American Centre. This was a centre for performances of contemporary music by young musicians studying in, working in, or visiting Paris. During these years (1959–1964), he also paid his first visits to the United States, and got to know various young composers working there. These contacts were to have a considerable effect on his later career and development as a composer. Composers whose influence he acknowledged were an extremely diverse group, who had little in common with one another. They included Milton Babbitt, Robert

Erickson and Ross Lee Finney, albeit not so much Finney himself as the *ONCE* group of young (in the 1960s!) avant-garde composers who studied with Finney: Gordon Mumma, Roger Reynolds, George Caccioppo and others.

Humble acknowledged a few specific influences from these composers: for example Robert Erickson's idea of re-composing the instrument (not just the music) for specific projects. But what Humble admired in his American composer-colleagues such as these artists was, above all, mutual respect for diversity and difference, more than the compositional approach of any particular individual.

During a brief visit to Melbourne again in 1964, he was offered an appointment to the University Conservatorium of Music, and after another year in Paris in 1965, he joined the permanent staff of the Conservatorium in 1966. Several further visits to institutions in the United States followed during the nine years he was based at Melbourne University. In 1968, he spent a period as Regency Lecturer at the University of California at San Diego (UCSD) and a further 3 months there as Visiting Professor in 1970. Jean-Charles Francois, the percussionist and composer with whom he had worked in Paris, came to Melbourne for a period in 1966, and collaborated on various projects.

In these years, Humble also began to work with electronic resources, although, because his background did not provide him with the necessary technical background to work comfortably in this medium, he often needed assistance from younger colleagues with technological knowledge. So electronics remained a somewhat peripheral medium for him. In the interview he gave to Hazel de Berg for the National Library in 1969, he emphasised his interest in the medium of electronics combined with instruments, but even this combination never became a matter of central importance for him. He was essentially a composer whose material grew out of his experience as a pianist and conductor, and live instrumental and ensemble performance remained for him the principal catalyst in the development of his works (see the quotes, later in this article, from his 1969 interview with the National Library of Australia's Hazel de Berg). Nevertheless, he acknowledged (with great vigour) the importance of the electronic medium, and organised an international conference on the topic at Melbourne University in 1972.

In 1974, he was appointed Professor at the newly-formed Music Department of Melbourne's LaTrobe University. His years at LaTrobe were interrupted by various periods of illness and by periods spent on academic visits to the United States, but essentially he remained based at LaTrobe until his retirement in 1992.

By way of exemplifying the stylistic distance Humble travelled as a composer, I shall consider three works: two composed in the 1950s while still living in Paris, and one composed right at the end of his life, following his retirement from his Professorship at Melbourne's LaTrobe University.

***String Trio***

The first piece is his *String Trio*, composed while still studying with Rene Leibowitz. The manuscript, now in the National Library of Australia indicates quite precise composition dates (01/06/1953 – 04/04/1954). The piece is composed in something like a traditional ‘Sonata Form’: Introduction (section 1: *Sehr langsam*) > Principal Idea (section 2: *Allegro molto*) > Contrasting Idea (section 3: *Molto meno mosso*) > Development (section 3a: *Tempo primo* and section 4: *Molto moderato*) > Recapitulation of Principal Idea (section 5: *Allegro molto*) > Recapitulation of Contrasting Idea: section 6: *Molto meno mosso*).

<b><i>Section #</i></b>	<b><i>Tempo</i></b>	<b><i>Metronome</i></b>	<b><i>Bar references</i></b>
1	Sehr langsam	Crotchet = 44	1-13
2	Allegro molto	Crotchet = 112-120	14-41
3	Molto meno mosso	Crotchet = 72-80	42-87
3a	Tempo primo (allegro)	Crotchet = ??	88-107
4	Molto moderato (poco rubato)	Crotchet = 66-69	108-147
5	Allegro molto	Crotchet = ??	148-204
6	Molto meno mosso (molto sostenuto)	Crotchet = ??	205-260

### ***Three War Poems***

The second piece I shall examine is Humble's *Three War Poems* for voice and 5 instruments, also composed in Paris, but five years later than the *String Trio*, in 1959. One of the reasons for choosing this piece is that it affords us an insight into Humble's relationships with writers, especially poets. Such relationships with writers, and indeed with artists in other media more broadly, were to play an important part in the development and course of Humble's career as a composer throughout his lifetime.

The librettist of the war poems (Harry Matthews) is typical of his choice of poet:

Mathews, Harry (1930–), New York City-born author, long expatriated in France, whose esoteric, experimental works include short novels concerned with curiously convoluted quests. *The Conversions* (1962) presents a person who can inherit a huge fortune if able to answer three recondite riddles. *Tlooth* (1966), also told by an obscure narrator, is a kind of plotless story of a search for revenge. *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* (1975) is an odd epistolary account of a search for treasure. *Selected Declarations of Dependence* (1977) prints a novella and "Proverbs and Paraphrases." *Cigarettes* (1988), and other odd novel, deals with complex relations among a small group of people of different generations in Saratoga Springs and New York City. *20 Lines a Day* (1988) is a work dealing with various and often odd personal issues. *The Ring* (1970), *The Planisphere* (1974), *Trial Impressions* (1977) and *Armenian Papers* (1987) collect his poems. (Hart 1995, 421).

The text of Mathews's *Three War Poems* is given in Example 1.

The instrumentation of the *Three War Poems* is:

Flute d Clarinet in B flat d Alto Saxophone in E flat

Clarinet in B flat d Bass Clarinet in B flat

Violin

Xylophone

Voice

Piano

*Three War Poems* is, like other Humble early works, in a tightly-disciplined, small-scale 'post-Webernian' vein. These pieces are straightforwardly twelve-tone in one sense of that term, although right from the beginning of his career (including in the *Three War Poems*) the composer's tendency is to treat his series not so much as ordered sequences of twelve pitchclasses *per se*, but rather as two (multiply-ordered) collections of complementary hexachords, rather along the lines of the late Schoenberg (as in the *Ode to Napoleon*, for example), rather than in a Weberian manner. Anthony Hughes describes the basic material of Humble's late *Piano Bagatelles* as 'serial', but his additional qualification, that the series is always used 'harmonically' seems to imply simply that it is in fact used as a 'collection', *not* as a series, and this observation about the late works is equally true of the early ones.

As an example of Humble's compositional technique in this work, consider the second movement, *Field Observation*. This is a twelve-tone piece in the sense defined in the preceding paragraph. It is built on a limited selection of forms of the series given below, using the 'series' as a collection of two complementary hexachords (the complementary hexachords whose 'prime' form is— to use Allen Forte's integer nomenclature: 0, 1, 2, 6, 7, 8) together with its transpositions/inversions. This hexachord is sometimes further subdivided into a collection of four trichords, in the following way:

## *War Poems*

### **1 Sunk**

Skin Diver  
Wipe your mask  
This is Man  
One who swam  
Through glittering night

Greenish petty flesh  
Blown on grey slime and shell  
His hiss pillow  
Eel cast far

### **2 Field Observation**

Skies  
Shaddock  
Silver  
Stick  
Blue  
Wool  
Some Dying  
Speak no word

### **3 The Widow**

Mother murmur these green helms  
Glance easy  
Hee  
Sweet smoke  
Fly seaward  
Plume for ease  
Wry dumb bell death

Example 1: Harry Mathews's text for *Three War Poems*

Graham Hair: *Keith Humble's Modernism*

t0S	B G# F#	C E $\flat$ F	E B $\flat$ D	C# A G
t3S	D B A	E $\flat$ F# G#	G C# F	E C B $\flat$
t6S	F D C	F# A B	B $\flat$ E G#	G E $\flat$ C#
t9S	A $\flat$ F E $\flat$	A C D	C# G B	B $\flat$ F# E

The following table provides a short synopsis of the way in which three of these four-trichord collections are actually deployed in the course of *Field Observation*.

Bar	Instruments	Series	Trichords
1	BCl, Vln, Xyl	t0S	3, 4
1-2	Pf	t0S	2, 1
1-3	Voice	t0S	1, 2, 3
2-3	Cl, BCl, Vln, Xyl	t0S	3, 4
4	Cl, Vln, Xyl	t0S	2, 3
4	Pf	t0S	1, 4
5-7	Voice	t0S	2, 1, 4
6	Vln arco, Cl [+Voice]	t6S	1, 2
6-7	Xyl, Vln pizz, Cl	t6S	1, 2
7	Pf	t6S	1, 2
7-8	Cl, BCl, Xyl	t0S	3, 4
8-9	BCl, Xyl [+Voice]	t9S	1, 2
8-11	Voice	t6S	1, 2, 3
10	Cl, Vln, Pf	t9S	2, 3

During his period of residence in Paris in the 1950s, Humble met another rather obscure poet, who was to play an important role in his later life and whose words he was to set to music several times:

Albert-Birot, Pierre (1876 – 1967). French poet and dramatist involved in the Cubist and Futurist movements. His poetry, from *Trente et un poemes de poche* (1917) to *Graines* (1965), constantly strives for new forms and imaginative combinations. His theatre (*Larountala*, 1919; *Le Bondieu*, 1922) draws on circus and pantomime to create fantastic effects. (Fallaize 1995, 18)

The works of Albert-Birot give an indication of the direction in which Humble's music was to develop in later life: away from the rather careful approach he learned from Leibowitz, to something altogether more turbulent and even chaotic, one aspect of which involves – as my title has it – a change 'from homogenous motivic-thematic organicism to heterogenous gestural constructivism'.

One can get a glimpse of the attitudes behind this development from listening to the interview with him conducted by the National Library of Australia's oral historian Hazel de Berg in 1969 (see Humble 1969), of which I give extracts here:

With regard to my method of work, or my method of composing ..... I don't think of composing as just being in the abstract. I think the process of music includes performing, it includes the presentation of the music, and I take all of these things into account ..... Very frequently the piece will be for a specific concert, for a specific artist.

..... when I am in America I am going to give a series of concerts with Bob Gartside ..... I'm using some words of Pierre-Albert Birot ..... In this case, this will be a work where I am concerned with pitch ..... and the relationship of sounds with one another .....

I work fairly slowly and not always necessarily at the one thing: I have four or five going always at once, but I find things just have to grow and you can't force them.

Now with Theatre Nunique ..... you're considering a mass of sound rather than a specific note that I was talking about before, now it's concerned with mass (block) of sound.

Briefly, those are two (opposing, if you like) ways of working, which to me nevertheless have a singularity [are a single entity?], because I am concerned with the sound. The sound has to be a compound sound, and sometimes I may use the note to articulate the sound, or sometimes I may use the block.

..... it's not so much to have a finished work – a monument – so much as it is to have the musical activity ..... this is the important thing .....

..... in the latter part of the twentieth century, we're beginning to invent new instruments just like the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries ..... When you think about it, they didn't invent very much in the nineteenth century; they invented the saxophone, but everything else was evolving .....

..... it's not a revolutionary period, either; the revolution was in the beginning of the twentieth century

Later again, following his retirement from his Professorship at Melbourne's LaTrobe University, he developed a style which is something like a synthesis of the two approaches. This is the style of his *Little Sonata in Two Parts* for Solo Cello, written at the very end of his life.

In the *Three War Poems*, we noted the use of chromatic aggregates, divided into complementary hexachord collections, with the hexachords sometimes further subdivided into trichord collections. In the *Three War Poems*, the collections are indeed all hexachords, and they remain fixed to within transposition or inversion throughout, deriving as they do from the same hexachordal collection and its complement. It is therefore hard not to see the structure of the *Three War Poems* as 'serial' after a fashion, even if this series remains implicit rather than explicit. From this point of view, the early *Three War Poems* actually seem to accord with Hughes's characterisation of a 'series used harmonically' better than do the late *Piano Bagatelles* about which he was writing.

By contradistinction, the approach to totally chromatic musical language which Humble developed during the last couple of decades of his life was based from the ground up on a more heterogeneous repertoire of pitch collections, constantly changing in cardinality and (therefore) intervallic content throughout a work. The *Three War Poems* are based throughout on the hexachord whose 'prime' is 0, 1, 2, 6, 7, 8 together with its transpositions/inversions, but in *A Little Sonata in Two Parts* a much more diverse repertoire of collection-types is deployed: collections containing as many as ten pitch-classes or as few as two.

The score of the first movement of *A Little Sonata in Two Parts* is given in Example 2.

# A Little Sonata

In Two Parts

Fanfare

♩ = MM 72

1 3 2 I 3 Keith Humble 1993

ff *molto* *f subito* *molto* *mf e cresc molto*

4 5 6 7 8 9 10

*p* *più f subito e cresc* *pp subito*

11 12 13 14 15 16 17

*p* *mp* *p* *f* *mf*

18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25

*p* *poco f* *sffz sub* *f* *mp cresc*

Example 2 (beginning): Keith Humble: *A Little Sonata in Two Parts* for Solo Cello, Movement 1 (bars 1-25)

Graham Hair: *Keith Humble's Modernism*

26      27      28      29      30      31      32

*cant*

33      34      35      36      37      38

39      40      41      42      43

44      45      46      47      48      49      50

$\text{♩} = \text{MM } 112 - 120$

51      52      53      54

*Suddenly much slower and in a deliberate manner*

*breve*

*sul pont*

$\text{♩} = \text{MM } 120$

Example 2 (continued): Keith Humble: *A Little Sonata in Two Parts* for Solo Cello, Movement 1 (bars 26–54)

Graham Hair: *Keith Humble's Modernism*

55      56      57      58      59      60      61

*p*   *mf*   *f*   *mp*   *p*   *mp*   *p*   *f*   *ff*

62      63      64      65      66      67

*mp*   *f*<sub>sub</sub>   *mf*   *f*   *mp*   *p*   *f*

68      69      70      71      72      **Allegro con fuoco**  
*♩* = MM 92      (*♩* = MM 120 +)

*sfz*   *sfz*   *p*   *molto*   *ff*

73      74      75      76      77      78      *molto rit e rubato* ---

*sfz*

79      80      81      82      83      84      85      86      87      88

*much slower*      *suddenly faster*

*poco*   *sub fp*   *f*   *ff*   *p*   *f*

Example 2 (concluded): Keith Humble: *A Little Sonata in Two Parts* for Solo Cello, Movement 1 (bars 55–88)

In Example 3, I list the sixteen 'heterogenous collection-pairs' which Humble deploys in the work, in order of occurrence, with bar-number references. Because the pitchclass background for *A Little Sonata in Two Parts* is assembled in something of an 'ad hoc' manner, these tables have been compiled by means of a combination of hypothetical ('ad hoc'!) reconstruction, constant reference back to the composer's sketches and a 'close reading' of the published score of the final version. Despite the fact that the sketches are a chaotic mess, and that there are a few typographical mistakes in the published score (over and above those identified in the errata sheet published with it), my reconstruction of the generation process does seem to accord with them pretty well.

Bar #	Collection		Complement
1	G A# C C# D E F	and	G# A B D# F#
4	D D# F F# G A A# B	and	C C# E G#
15	C# D# E G G# B	and	C D F F# A A#
24	A B C C# D D# F G	and	A# E F# G#
31	E F F# G G# A A# B	and	C C# D D#
33	E C	and	F F# G G# A A# B C# D D#
36	C C# E F	and	F# G G# A A# B D D#
40	F G G# A A# B C#	and	D D# E F# C
44	C C# D F F# G	and	D# E G# A A# B
52	D E G B	and	C C# D# F F# G# A A#
52	C# D D# E F# G A# B	and	C F G# A
54	C C# F F# G# A#	and	D D# E G A B
63	F G G# A A# B C D	and	F# C# D# E
69	C# D D# F F# G	and	G# A A# B C E
75	C# E F G#	and	D D# F# G A A# B C
79	G# G F D# C# C	and	F# E D B A# A

Example 3: Complementary collection-pairs for Keith Humble: *A Little Sonata in Two Parts* (*Une petite sonate en deux parties*), Movement 1

The basic procedure for generating each successive line of this table from the previous one seems can best be summarised by example, viz by explicating the process with respect to the generation of the second collection-pair (bars 4 ff) from the first.

Bar reference: 1

Collection pair = Start-Set [G A# C C# D E F] and its complement [G# A B D# F#]

Take all the semitone-pairs within the collection and its complement, viz

[(C C#) (C# D) (E F)] and [(G# A)]

Select one item from each semitone-pair, viz

C C# E and G#

Select the residue within [G A# C C# D E F] after C C# E has been extracted, and the residue within [G# A B D# F#] after G# has been extracted, viz [D F G A#] and [A B D# F#]

The new Start-Set = the sum of these residues [B A# A G F# F D# D]

Bar reference: 4

Collection pair = New Start-Set [B A# A G F# F D# D] and its complement [G# E C# C]

Proceed in the same way to generate the third collection-pair (bars 15 ff) from the second (bars 4 ff)

All subsequent lines of the table – and in the tables for the other 3 movements – are generated by the same procedure, except in four places where it is varied slightly. I have explicated this procedure in detail elsewhere (see Hair 2004).

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