

Dramatic Narrative and Musical Narrativity in Gillian Whitehead's *Hotspur*

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Hotspur is a work for soprano and ensemble (B \flat clarinet, bass clarinet, violin, cello and percussion) composed in 1980 by Gillian Whitehead, to a text (it could perhaps be called a 'libretto') by poet Fleur Adcock. Both poet and composer were expatriates in Britain from their native New Zealand at the time, and both had already lived in Britain for some years. Adcock has continued to live in England ever since, and is widely regarded there as a British poet, whereas Whitehead returned to the southern hemisphere in 1982, to teach at the Sydney Conservatorium, and then eventually, following her retirement from that institution in 1995, to her native New Zealand, though she continues to maintain an apartment in Sydney for frequent visits, and has visited the UK several times since 1982 for shorter periods. The composition of the music for *Hotspur* was completed at Great Bavington in Northumberland in October 1980, at the end of a period, 1978 – 1980, when she was composer-in-residence for *Northern Arts* and she and Adcock were both Fellows of the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

In a general way, often characterised by assertion and counter-assertion rather than demonstration, the 'Australian-ness' of Australian music has been a topic for debate for generations, so 'sense of place' has been on the agenda here for a very long time, but attempts to define more precisely the manner in which a sense of locality in music is projected have also been a particular topic of recent musicological research (eg Stokes, 1994). The choice of the topic 'Music & Locality: Towards a Local Discourse in Music' for the combined MSA/NZMSA 2003 conference in Wellington provided another recent opportunity to advance the sophistication of this debate in relation to Australian and New Zealand music. Certainly *Hotspur* is a work which evokes place vividly: in this case the place in which Adcock's libretto is set, viz the Northumberland region of the north of England, adjoining Scotland, where the composer was in residence while composing the work.

Hotspur is also a work in a genre sometimes described as 'music theatre'. 'Music Theatre' has been a widespread term for at least the last four decades for a piece in which theatrical elements interpenetrate musical ones, and contribute equally to the overall effect (or so it is often alleged), but which does not quite have all the narrative and scenic attributes of opera. A number of works composed by Sir Peter Maxwell Davies (Whitehead's teacher in the 1960s) are often cited as examples: *Songs for a Mad King* in particular. Of the several performances of *Hotspur* I have conducted over the years, one was to a degree theatrical in a literal sense, as it was given in

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front of a set: in this case a backdrop of ‘banners’ by New Zealand artist Gretchen Albrecht, complementing sonic means by theatrical – or at least visual – ones. However, my own judgment is that *Hotspur* comes nearer to being a ‘dramatic cantata’ than *Songs for a Mad King*, ie is dependent to a greater extent on the dramatic qualities of the music than on theatrical affect in any obvious sense. Nevertheless, *Hotspur* is not wanting for a strong narrative line, and or for ‘theatricality’ of a kind. This paper endeavors to show how the dramatic narrative is reflected in ‘musical narrativity’ as well.

More specifically, Whitehead has described *Hotspur*, and two related pieces from her output (*Eleanor of Aquitaine* of 1981 and *Out of this Nettle, Danger* of 1983) as ‘music theatre’ pieces of a special kind, viz ‘monodramas’. To be sure, they are all (as the word ‘monodrama’ suggests), written for a single character, but they share additional characteristics too: chiefly that they focus on the inner life and states of mind of the protagonist, which are often in turmoil, because of conflict with the outer environment in which she finds herself. Works such as Schoenberg’s great monodrama *Erwartung* of 1909 come to mind as models. This paper will therefore also try to show how this ‘inner’ life has its effect on the ‘musical narrativity’.

Following an opening vocal ‘foreword’ which gives us a taste of the character of the work (brooding, foreboding, menacing), the soprano introduces herself, but not quite as a persona in her own right. *Hotspur* is the lament of Elizabeth Mortimer, but the introduction begins immediately with: ‘I married a man of metal and fire, quick as a cat and wild, Harry Percy the Hotspur, the Earl of Northumberland’s child’. This adds an extra dimension to the dramatic intensity, derived from the fact that the story the work recounts is not hers, but that of her husband Hotspur, told from the passive perspective of a wifely *onlooker*. Nevertheless she is an onlooker whose fate is intimately bound up with that of her warrior husband, as she follows his progress through the border wars at the end of the fourteenth century, especially the Battle of Otterburn of 1388, and eventually Shrewsbury, where he was killed, and as often befell rebels against the crown, had his body dismembered and displayed in the market-place (‘pour encourager les autres’).

This *onlooker* status is the key to the particularity of the brooding, foreboding, menacing quality which suffuses this work, because these are qualities visited upon her by the action. The action swirls around her, but she is helpless to affect it. The whole piece is underpinned by a sense of simmering violence happening or about to happen ‘out there’ somewhere, in a world beyond her control. The few moments in which this sense is momentarily held at bay are the sequences (page 21, letter F2, bar 292 and page 26, letter M2+3, bar 343) where the narrative pauses to focus on the domain of the women and their domestic (sewing etc) activities. New musical material, not used elsewhere in the work (whole-tone harmony etc) appears here. Still, this contrast – feminine order, peace and tranquility, set in relief against masculine disorder, war and violence – is not a central factor driving the narrative. It’s real enough, but nevertheless a passing episode, and we should not make too much of it.

This latent inner violence helps to give us an understanding of the physical setting too: ‘brooding’,

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‘foreboding’, and ‘menacing’ are adjectives which one could well apply to the Northumberland landscape within which the action takes place. The soprano’s opening foreword gives us a sense of both the character of the place and of the events which are to be recounted: ‘There is no safety, There is no shelter, The dark dream will drag us under.’

These two opening statements from the soprano refer to two extremely contrasting genres. ‘There is no safety’ is a kind of recitative, whereas ‘I married a man’ is set to a ballad-like tune. The one is virtually pulseless, chromatic and a-centric in melodic flavour, the other strongly metrical (which is not to say metrically *regular* of course), quasi-diatonic, and centric on A (moving eventually through D to G). One may even be reminded of ‘recitative and aria’, though of course, the functions of the two reverse the ‘traditional’ functions: it’s the ballad (aria) which embodies narrative and the recitative which embodies reflection. The order also reverses the ‘traditional’ order: we hear what the protagonist feels about it first, and then afterwards find out what happened.

The whole structure of *Hotspur* is hung on a sequence of eleven appearances of these ballad-like passages (‘verses’):

- (i) I married a man of metal and fire (Page 4, letter G of the manuscript)
- (ii) The Earl of Douglas clattered south (Page 12, letter S)
- (iii) Hotspur hurried to halt his course (Page 14, letter U)
- (iv) It was as fair as any fight (Page 15, letter W)
- (v) I weep to think what Harry saw (Page 16, letter X)
- (vi) Sir I shall bear this token off (Page 18, letter A2)
- (vii) The city held against the seige (Page 20, letter D2)
- (viii) It fell about the Lammas tide (Page 28, letter O2)
- (ix) He did not fall at Otterburn (Page 34, letter V2+6)
- (x) They tied his corpse in the market place (Page 37, letter A3)
- (xi) Four fair cities received his limbs (Page 40, letter D3+4)

This is a narrative sequence which gradually builds up from our initial introduction to Hotspur to the description of his death in battle.

In the course of these eleven ‘verses’ the ballad tune is transformed in different ways and to varying degrees as various chromatic changes, decorative embellishments and metrical distortions impinge upon it, so that the traditional and modernist elements in Whitehead’s musical language (more of which below) move some way towards convergence. Whitehead has described these transformations as ‘very similar to what the Expressionists were doing in painting — heightening or distorting the structure of the piece to bring out the emotional undercurrent in the text’ (Whitehead 2003).

In the seventh of these verses (‘It fell about the Lammas tide’), a new tune of different character is substituted for the original one. This new tune has a more cumulative shape and form (with less use of antecedent/consequent phrase-pairing), possibly because this better befits a verse which is

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taking us up to the climax of the work.

Before proceeding to other elements of the vocal music in *Hotspur*, I would like to digress to consider the purely instrumental passages. Calling them ‘interludes’ suggests a subordinate function, but they are really more numerous (and often longer) than such nomenclature might suggest. Several different types of material appear in these instrumental passages, and I will describe some of these by referring to the opening instrumental introduction (bars 1 – 31) which is characteristic.

Let’s start with an ‘archetypal’ passage: bars 6 ff (Example 1):

clarinet "arpeggio"
bar 6 bar 7
bass clarinet "arpeggio"
plus violin (top 8 pitches, quintuplet semiquavers)
and cello (bottom 4 pitches, triplet quavers)

Example 1: *Hotspur*, bars 6 ff

This is an ‘aggregate’, ie a collection of all twelve pitch-classes. In the example I have given it as a chord, and indeed that’s probably the best way to think of it in the present context (rather than as, for example, a ‘twelve-tone series’), but in the passage itself it is ‘rhythmically activated’, so to speak. What this means is that each of the four instruments participating in this passage plays (some of) the pitches of this chord, each using a different rhythmic ‘character’. For example, the bass clarinet plays quavers, the cello plays quaver triplets, the clarinet plays on the second or fourth semiquavers of the beat only (ie on the ‘offbeat’ semiquavers) and the violin plays semiquaver quintuplets. Obviously, given that the aggregate is spread out over four-and-a-half octaves, each instrument plays only a selection of the chord’s twelve pitch-classes (ie cello 4, violin 8, bass clarinet 6 and B \flat clarinet 6), according to which pitch-classes are practical possibilities for the range of the instrument in question.

The example of similar treatments of twelve-tone chords in various works by Lutoslawski springs to mind here, although the succession of intervals (bottom-to-top) in Whitehead’s chord is more irregular than is often the case in Lutoslawski. The passage at bars 17 – 20 is comparable with

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material exposed is but a single pitch – F just above middle C – in a plethora of different rhythms and different articulation types (arco, pizz, normale, fluttertongue, tremolo) as well as different instrumental tone colours.

In general, *Hotspur* could hardly be said to be a twelve-tone work in any sense which Schoenberg might have recognised, but the twelve-tone chords in 6 – 8, 17 – 20 and 23 are occasionally complemented by a ‘real’ (ie horizontally, temporally ordered) twelve-tone series. An example is the twelve-tone clarinet melody at 28 – 31 with which the instrumental introduction concludes:

B \flat – A – C – D – E – G \sharp – F \sharp – B – F – G – C \sharp – E \flat

To be sure, (various segments of) this series appear to generate material for other passages in the work, but that’s a topic for another paper. Showing how and why this happens is not my present purpose.

In the ‘rhythmically-activated aggregate’ highlighted in Example 1, the factors which lead us to hear it as harmonic in character (ie as a ‘rhythmically-activated chord’) include three principal ones:

- (i) all the pitch-classes are fixed in one registral position
- (ii) the selections of pitches allocated to each of the participating instruments intersect with one another to some degree, thus (so to speak) fusing the pitch selections together into a single entity, and
- (iii) the semiquavers, quavers, triplets and quintuplets while metrically independent, to be sure, maintain rhythmic and textural continuity.

Of course, these factors of register, instrumentation, rhythm and texture may equally be applied to chords of fewer than twelve tones. Examples are the passage at page 31, letter S2+1 (bar 408), where a twelve-tone aggregate gives way to a ten-tone one, or later and at page 35, letter W2+ 3 (bar 442 ff), where the voice is accompanied by an eight-tone aggregate (see example 4), and at page 21, letter E2 (bars 282 – 290), chords of 3, 5, 5 and 9 pitches are treated in a similar way (see example 5).

In this hearing of the material, the single pitch subjected to complex timbral and articulative variation seems not so much a complete contrast to the ‘rhythmically-activated aggregate’ as it seemed when previously discussed, but rather merely a logical extension of the same harmonic phenomenon, stripped down from twelve tones to one.

A related, but nevertheless somewhat different extension of this phenomenon is heard in the first instrumental interlude, at page 4, letter F (bars 57 – 60), where only the first two of our three factors are observed. In this passage, ‘fixed register’ and ‘intersecting instrumental pitch selection’ apply, but the third factor, ‘rhythmic and textural’ continuity is abandoned (Example 6):

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The image displays a musical score for Example 4 from *Hotspur*, covering bars 408-412 and 442 ff. The score is arranged in three systems. The first system shows a piano introduction with a treble and bass staff. The second system, starting at bar 408, features a Clarinet and Bass Clarinet part with a 'trill' (argeggio) marking. The Clarinet part includes a quintuplet semiquaver in bar 409. The Bass Clarinet part includes a triplet quaver in bar 409. A note below the staff indicates that this material is also played by violin (top 9 pitches, quintuplet semiquavers), cello (bottom 5 pitches, triplet quavers) and marimba (top 10 pitches, quintuplet quavers). The third system, starting at bar 410, continues the Clarinet and Bass Clarinet parts, with a change in time signature to 3/4 in bar 411. The fourth system, starting at bar 442, features a Clarinet in Bb and Violin part. The Clarinet in Bb part includes a quintuplet semiquaver in bar 442. The Violin part includes a triplet quaver in bar 443. The Violoncello part is shown in the bass staff, playing a sustained note.

bar 408
clarinet "argeggio"

Clarinet

bass clarinet "argeggio"

Bass Clarinet

plus violin (top 9 pitches, quintuplet semiquavers),
cello (bottom 5 pitches, triplet quavers) and
marimba (top 10 pitches, quintuplet quavers)

bar 410

bar 411

bar 412

bar 442
Clarinet in B \flat

bar 443

Violin

Violoncello

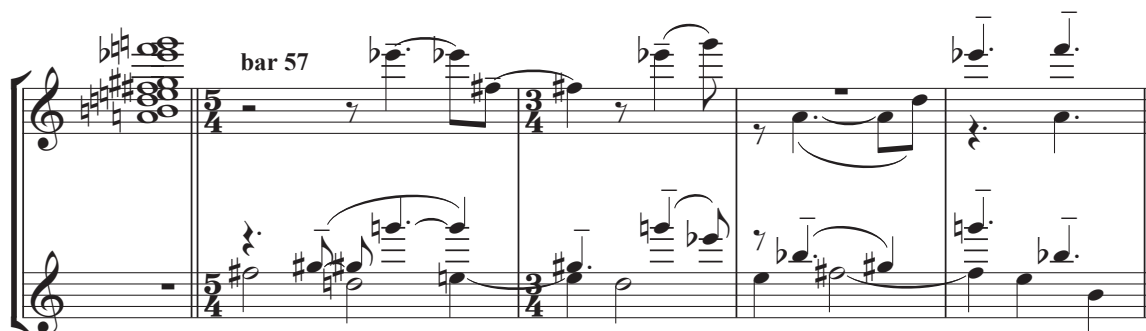
Example 4: *Hotspur*, bars 408 – 412 and 442 ff

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The musical score is divided into four systems. The first system shows the beginning of the piece with a key signature of one flat and a 4/4 time signature. The second system starts at bar 282, marked with a '5' above the staff, and features a 3/4 time signature. The third system continues the piece with a 5/4 time signature. The fourth system concludes the piece with a 3/4 time signature. The instruments are Clarinet (two staves), Violin, and Violoncello. The score includes various musical notations such as rests, notes, slurs, and fingerings (5, 6, 3).

Example 5: *Hotspur*, bars 282 – 290

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EXAMPLE 6: *Hotspur*, bars 57 – 60

As a result, this four-bar passage metamorphoses into a passage of counterpoint, despite its harmonic genesis. This technique provides a conceptual link between harmonically-conceived material and more elaborate textures with four lines of tense, dissonant counterpoint which populate the landscape in many of the instrumental interludes, and which provide such a strong impression of the bleak landscape (both physical and metaphorical) in which Hotspur's fate unfolds.

At this point I would like to return to the contrast which led me into these remarks on the instrumental prelude and interludes, viz my earlier comments on the two contrasting styles of vocal utterance with which the drama begins: a recitative ('There is no safety') which is virtually pulseless and chromatic in character and a-centric in structure, contrasting with the opening verse of a kind of 'ballad' ('I married a man'), which has a strongly metrical, quasi-diatonic character and a centric melodic structure. The instrumental passages can be said to share something of the former ('modernist') idiom, and to extend it in a particular direction, namely that of rhythmically-free recitative in dissonant chromatic atonal counterpoint, whereas the 'ballad' verses seem, on first encounter, of a more 'traditional', even 'folk-like' character.

Nevertheless, the treatment of the ballad verses amounts to something more than an insertion of material in 'folk-like' style into a modernist context. Unlike the situation in (for example) Maxwell Davies' *Songs for a Mad King*, where a confrontation of idioms serves to make suggest the confrontation of the real and imaginary worlds which characterise King George's madness, the use of such 'traditional' materials in a great deal of Whitehead's later music, from about this period on, seems to be more just a matter of broadening the composer's range of stylistic reference. Accordingly, Whitehead is more intent on integrating the two idioms, so that although the postmodern temper of the rising 1980s may have had some influence on her stylistic

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development in this direction, the outcome does not seem aggressively revisionist as some forms of postmodernism can do.

To see why this is so, I refer back to the ‘cycle of fourths’ form of the ‘rhythmically-activated aggregate’ which first appeared in the introduction (page 2, letter B+2, bar 23). This form of the ‘cycle of fourths’ material is clearly closely related to other ‘rhythmically-activated aggregates’, but the cycle of fourths also plays a principal role in the way the sequence of ballad verses is developed.

Verse one (‘I married a man’) is given out over a repeated pedal-tone on A (Page 4, letter G, bars 74 – 90), eventually moving on to D (clarinet, bar 91), at which point the pedal tone expands to a ‘pedal-dyad’ (A and E). The single bar of instrumental interlude between the first and section subsections of this verse, in which the AD is expanded to ADGC by the instruments (cf viola, cello and marimba, bar 91), prefigures what is to happen next.

The voice itself cadences on D at the end of the next sub-section (bar 101), at which point the pedal-dyad moves to D/A. At the end of the next sub-section, the voice cadences on G, by which time the pedal-dyad has become a pedal-chord, consisting of further notes around the cycle of fourths from EAD, viz ADGC in bar 110, adding F, B \flat and E \flat in bars 111 – 113. This E \flat is merely something of a ‘background’ feature at this point: part of an harmonic ‘diatonic hexachord’. Nevertheless, from the departure-point over the pedal-tone A in bar 74, we have moved half-way around the cycle of fourths to the tritone-related E \flat by the end of this first verse of the ballad. Indeed, since the A/E dyad featured prominently in the pedal-point in bars 92 – 100, the bringing into play of the E \flat in bar 113, suggests and implied chromatic element (E/E \flat), reflected in the switch of the voice-part from the use of E \natural before bar 106 to E \flat afterwards.

I don’t want to make too much of this tissue of small features at this point, but their significance become more explicit as the dramatic narrative moves on. In the second verse, we encounter Hotspur’s antagonist, the Earl of Douglas, and, appropriately, this verse’s tone-centre is E \flat , with its dominant B \flat also prominent. The accompaniment here is percussion of indefinite pitch (wood-blocks), but the vocal cadence on E \flat is accompanied by a pentachord which expands the B \flat and E \flat to the 7-tone diatonic collection (B \flat C D E \flat F G A). The process is summarised in Example 7.

The third verse of the ballad brings us to the point where Hotspur and Douglas ‘met in combat face to face’, which is reflected in the music by setting the E \flat tune against a pedal-tone on A.

The fourth verse, in which ‘Douglas drew the lucky chance, He hurled my husband from his saddle, stunned on the earth, and snatched his lance. Here the ‘chromatic’ motif (E \natural / E \flat) and the tritone motif (A / E \flat) come together. The tune is in E \flat , but its dominant B \flat is more prominent in the tune than in verse 3, and the pedal-tone A is expanded by its dominant E as well as by E \flat . The resulting ‘pedal-trichord’ of E \flat , A and E \natural , screws the tension up one notch further, a feature which is amplified by the repeated sforzandi rhythmic unisons, the clarinet flutter-tonguing and the cello

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bowed tremoli.

The fifth verse is bipolar in its organisation: a first phrase oriented around E \flat and B \flat , and a second around A and E.

Example 7: Summary of Cycle-of-Fifths Structure, bars 74 – 192/3

The accompanimental ‘pedal’ is now also more extensively elaborated, taking its cue from two additional features of the instrumental-interlude material: the ‘simultaneous-cadenza’ texture, and the harmonic aggregate structures. The first vocal phrase (‘I weep to think’) features three prominent tones (B \flat , D \flat and E \flat) which are complemented by cadenzas based on BAFG (in bass-clarinet and cello) and C D E F \sharp and G \sharp (in the violin). There are subordinate tones in the vocal part, but it seems clear that aggregate-completion is an intended feature.

Likewise, in the second phrase, the vocal part, based on the scale D E F \sharp G A B, is complemented by cadenzas based on B \flat , D \flat and E \flat (clarinet) and C D G \sharp (violin). The D is common to voice and violin, so this makes it a ‘weighted’ aggregate of 13 tones, and indeed the BAFG from phrase one carries over into phrase two, but nevertheless, an ‘aggregate-based’ structure seems again intended here.

There are several more stages to the unfolding of this musical argument, in which the narrativity of the music complements the unfolding of the story itself and its inexorable progress from ‘I married a man’ (verse 1) to ‘they hacked him apart’ (verse 10). I will not enter into detail here, except to comment briefly on the climax in verse 10 (verse 11 is a kind of coda or afterthought to this build-up).

In verse 10, the ballad starts out in A, with the prominent tones A, C and D, and gradually expands out of its diatonic character to encompass all twelve tones, ending with the tritone C – G \flat (‘they hacked him apart’). The accompaniment to this verse draws on another feature from

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the instrumental commentary material, the now-familiar ‘rhythmically-activated aggregate’ (or at least a near-aggregate: there are actually 11 tones not 12), but this time voiced as a stack of alternating perfect fourths and tritones (reading bottom to top: from low cello C to F#, B, F, Bb, E, A, Eb, G#, D and G), with polymetric rhythmic activation along lines previously described in relation to other ‘harmonic’ aggregates.

Here two worlds – the one rhythmically-free, chromatic and a-centric and the other metrical, diatonic and centric on A – are not just brought together, but fused by compositional process into a single entity. The purpose seems specific to the context here – to put the widest range of available means at the service of *musical* narrativity, reflecting the needs of the Fleur Adcock’s *dramatic* narrative – rather than the kind of revisionist agenda, whether aesthetic or spiritual, which (if Sally Macarthur and Rosemary Schaffler are right), drives at least some aspects the work of other Australian women composers such as Anne Boyd or Moya Henderson. The following contextualisation of postmodernism articulated by Robin Holloway, in an article reprinted in updated form in 2001, comes nearer to explicating the aesthetics of Whitehead’s approach: ‘And whether the attempt is for continuity, replication, fragmentation and reassembly, or takes the form of yet another start from the blank page, it will have modernism behind it. Modernism is everyone’s immediate past, and any remoter past can only be reached through it.’ (Holloway 2001, 110 – 111).

This fusing together of elements from several musical worlds is carried further in later Whitehead works, such as *Nga Haerenga* for four women’s voices, narrator and percussionist, which I commissioned for the Sydney ensemble *Voiceworks* in 1997, and subsequently conducted at the *New Zealand, New Music* Festival in Edinburgh in 2001. But that’s another story.

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