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Anthony Pople, 1955–2003: an Appreciation

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Death not only robbed Anthony Pople of more than two decades from his three score years and ten; it robbed a community dedicated to the study and promotion of western classical music, especially twentieth-century music, of one of its leading lights. Pople was a prolific thinker and doer, and quite a bit of his legacy is in the form of influence, as a teacher, of course, but also as an imaginative person of action who gave of his time and expertise in all sorts of ways – on committees, as an editor, examiner, adviser, studio producer – and, let us not forget, as a most gifted composer and performer of music. There is also the black-line legacy. His writings show, consistently, his rare talent for both clarity and depth of thought. I think he was one of those authors who wanted every piece to be special, shunning the routine as well as the speculative: and if that sentiment might remind us of the composer Alban Berg, it is no accident.

For many, it is with technology that Pople's name is intimately connected. It was in mathematics that he won his scholarship to begin university life at St John's College, Oxford. At Lancaster, where he was first appointed in 1983, he was the driving force, with a good team, of the Computers in Teaching Initiative; and, as discussed below, he went on to develop conspicuous music software. Always with an eye to dissemination, he founded in the CTI programme a new journal called *Musicus: Computer Applications in Music Education*. There was a particularly revealing little article in vol. 4 (1995), where Pople discussed the spread of IT in tertiary music study.[1] This involved a degree of prediction at a time when, as readers will remember, a moment of technological revolution was overtaking, if not the whole world, then certainly the whole prosperous world, with the spread of what then was still charmingly being called the 'InterNET' – a revolution that entailed our rapid assimilation of a new working and living linguistic environment with all its new meanings: 'browser', 'download', 'mouse', and so on. 'How did we ever manage without such things?', Pople asked, and answered with characteristically trenchant analysis:

> In truth, we managed perfectly well: the upward curve of fast, more powerful machines and software, viewed over a period of years, is essentially continuous – however much the launch of products like Windows 95 and the PowerPC may be hyped as quantum leaps – and the large companies involved know that a strong measure of both genuine backwards compatibility and a recognisable continuity of 'look and feel' are crucial in maintaining the customer loyalty that locks us into buying software and hardware upgrades. (3)

1 'The Spider and the Fly', *Musicus: Computer Applications in Music Education* 4 (1995), 3–6. Subsequent page references to this article are given in the text.

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At that time, downloading was slow, and off-putting to students. Pople considered the argument that 'if it can't be done well, better not to do it at all. Let us wait until the whole thing is owned by Microsoft and everyone can run it on their sub-notebook 986 machine using the Windows 7 bundle' (5). He felt, though, that there was a real pressure which those studying music could ill afford to resist: 'if we neglect to expand on our present resources then the danger of an inward subject focus looms all too large' (5). How right he was, though interestingly he was still thinking about the relative place of music within academia, when in fact overwhelming global forces were soon to technologize the whole of Western society, regardless of local inclinations such as those of music educators.

Around this time some of Pople's remarkable software was disseminated. The RowBrowser™ package was useful for getting easy access to twelve-note functions, and, not so incidentally, hearing the results. SetBrowser™ was a superb line in to Fortean pitch-class set analysis. Many other programmes were of course available, not least the one from Yale that Allen Forte had himself been using for years; yet SetBrowser™ was state-of-the-art for those using the new generation of personal computers, and it came with a 'read me' tutorial package enshrining Pople's lucid pedagogical experience in a way perfectly adapted to undergraduate study. If students of some ten years ago had been generally interested in atonal music, Pople's disks would have been pirated all over the place.

This is some of the background to the *Tonalities* software project on which he concentrated in recent years. There is no better description of this than can be read on the *Tonalities* website, which begins by observing that it provides

> a theoretical framework capable of handling a wide diversity of tonal systems with both rigour and flexibility. It offers an approach which is based on explicit definitions and procedures, but is also highly configurable: not all features are necessarily active for every analysis, and some features can be fine-tuned to provide further flexibility within well-defined constraints. Drawing on a range of tonal theories including recent neo-Riemannian theory, and also taking inspiration from set-class theory, its analytical potential ranges from Bach chorales through the 19th century to Debussy and beyond. It can also address 'atonal' music that is texturally similar to tonal models, and has the potential to engage with neo-tonal styles of the later 20th century.[2]

No amount of description, though, is a substitute for actually using this programme, which was the thinking behind the second of its three principal outings, between the presentation at the Oxford University Music Analysis Conference in September 2000 ('Using complex set-theory for tonal analysis') and the presentations and round table discussion at the Fifth European Music Analysis Conference at Bristol in April 2002. The second outing was at Reading in October 2001, when fifty potentially expert users were invited not only to experience presentations, but to work at desktops and try out the system for themselves.[3] A

2 <www.nottingham.ac.uk/music/tonalities/>, accessed 24 December 2003.

3 'TP^2: The Pople Tonalities Project', study day, University of Reading in association with the Society for Music Analysis.

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report on this meeting appeared in the Society for Music Analysis Newsletter in January 2002.[4] Pople was not happy with the report, to put it mildly. He was particularly concerned by questions about release of the software, and wrote in the subsequent 'Newsletter' that 'as any software developer will tell you, it's one thing to get it working for oneself, quite another thing to make it "user-proof" in the hands of others'.[5] It remains to be seen whether that can be achieved as a development of Pople's music-analytical legacy, and as a powerful tool for researchers of the future. He was, of course, fascinated by the responses of actual experienced users. I personally got most out of *Tonalities* when I had the occasional privilege of sitting with its author and seeing him 'play' with it – a passage from Bruckner, for instance, where if you believe the first horn to be more prominent sonically than the mere score might suggest, and 'instruct' the software accordingly, then the harmonic analysis changes. But also, in common with others, I enjoyed putting the author of *Tonalities* to the test. I sent him a piece of piano music with all evidence of authorship removed, and of which the pitch structure seemed deeply obscure by anyone's standards. The answer came back that he could not actually identify the piece, but it was clearly post- or sub-Schoenbergian (not that one needed software to tell that), and obviously, so the *Tonalities* output demonstrated, 'worked' in hexachords. This was intriguing, because that aspect had not been unearthed, technically, by me nor by the research student working on this music; yet it was a piano piece by Nikos Skalkottas, one of only ten of the hundreds of Schoenberg's pupils whom he acknowledged as having become 'real' composers[6] – the Skalkottas who did indeed, documentary evidence suggests, compose using hexachords.

A rich discussion has been part of the history of the development of the *Tonalities* project. I always sensed in that discussion a resistance among theorists to interactivity. Those used to doing twelve-note analysis, and perhaps especially 'classical' pitch-class set analysis, expect to make decisions reflecting or validated by the theory. In the various relevant publications, though, Pople was gradually educating us into thinking in terms of networks (as has become now strongly embedded in some American theory circles), in terms not of strict procedures but of 'preference rules'. People have expressed concern that you can make *Tonalities* analyse the harmony of a piece of music pretty much in any way you want. As a statement, that is more or less true. As a concern, it is understandable, but perhaps also unnecessarily 'scientific' or 'logical', since, after all, the software is merely reflecting the position of the analyst, who is certainly free to work in any way at all. Underlying this concern, or allied to it at least, is something that might be more substantive, which is the self-evident fact that when you instruct *Tonalities* to analyse in a certain way, your way, sensitive to the stylistic context of the music, or possibly its poietic features, you do not actually know how it comes up with the results. Although it seems to me that that is in the nature of any application programme – and the reason we need computers in the first place: to do what we ourselves cannot expect to do – nevertheless it is undoubtedly unsettling to replace one's own intuition with a

4 Chris Kennett, 'Reading University Study Day: Review', <www.hull.ac.uk/sma/news/2002_01_reading_htm>, accessed 24 December 2003.

5 <www.hull.ac.uk/sma/news/2002_07_corr.htm>, accessed 24 December 2003.

6 Arnold Schoenberg, 'The Blessing of the Dressing', in *Style and Idea* (London: Faber, 1975), 386.

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pre-determined and, literally, incomprehensible 'intuition'. The processing done by *Tonalities* is visible enough, but involves vast amounts of information crunching, at such a level that I for one do not pretend for a moment to know 'how' it is doing it. This all merits much more discussion, of course, including comparison with related antecedent and current projects elsewhere; but do not forget that Pople had a vision that produced a most remarkable music analytical 'toolkit' – robust in itself, and, in terms of its overall capability, hugely flexible to reflect the wide array of kinds of question that different musicians will be asking about the pitch content of different pieces of music from across the ages. It is a tribute to the depth of Pople's musical insights and the breadth of his epistemological enquiries.

Let me indulge also in one personal reminiscence. I had the pleasure of sitting in Pople's office at Nottingham discussing details of the Reading Study Day, including our search for a title, something catchy to replace my working title of The Pople Tonalities Project – 'well it's TP squared!', he said, with evident delight, scribbling down that memorable 'TP^2' gleefully on the back of an envelope.

Pople's sheer flair – for what we have come to call 'spin' I suppose, but in his case harnessed to total intellectual and personal integrity – along with his deep expertise as a practising musician (including being a composer who in his late twenties was receiving conspicuous London premieres), and range of musical knowledge, made him the favoured successor to Derrick Puffett as Editor of *Music Analysis* in 1995. His editorial skills were already well known to contributors to his first Cambridge (multi-authored) book, *Theory, Analysis and Meaning in Music*,[7] which he gathered together with tremendous energy and focus from various conference contributions in the UK and the USA, and the intellectual coherence of which bears his stamp on every page – as was testified to by a number of thoughtful reviews in leading journals. Although Pople was no armchair theorist, he did reflect on music analysis a great deal, and profoundly. He even reflected on reflecting, as it were, when he wrote some paragraphs about his thinking in doing the tough work of updating Ian Bent's classic *New Grove* article on 'Analysis', work that – in my opinion – paid rich dividends.[8] This thinking led Pople to three 'orientations':

> What interests me here, against the backdrop of evidence-gathering as a bottom line for analysis, is that each of these broadly-defined orientations assumes that the object of its focus is potentially fluid, or once has been fluid, during the lifecycle of the musical work, from its origins (whatever they may be) through to the point at which analysis engages with it. The question 'How does it work . . . in terms of the notes?' assumes, even if it regards the musical text as inviolate, that the notes were once subject to things such as 'compositional choice', 'selection', 'configuration' and so on. It's a composition-oriented point of view and its lineage in the development of analysis is clear enough in those terms. Asking 'How does it work?' in terms of what the music 'says' or 'means' assumes that the 'interpretation' of the text can vary – this, then is a performer-like viewpoint,

7 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

8 'Analysis', *Grove Music Online*, <www.grovemusic.com>, ed. L. Macy, accessed 7 March 2004.

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> from which the analyst interposes those 'How does it . . .?' and 'What if . . .?' questions of the interpretative imagination at a point between the musical text and the mind's ear. And the 'How does it work . . . on us?' question delays still further the analyst's incursion into the work's lifecycle – its underlying assumption being the Romantic one that 'music hath powers to move . . .' and its search for evidence being focused on that which might allow such 'movement' to be measured. The fluidity here comes from the variability of human reaction and the uncertainty engendered by leaving analytical intervention so late.[9]

At the heart of Pople's historical research, however, was Berg. Possibly his best known contribution was the Cambridge Music Handbook on the Violin Concerto.[10] It is confident, reliable, persuasive. For example, we are offered a compact review of the 'secret programme' aspects of the concerto where, in the space of just a few sentences and footnotes, Pople points out that the relevant aspects of Berg's own 'life' story, if present in the concerto, are pretty much the same as Manon's, and indeed pretty much the same as the 'secret' path through Mahler's Ninth Symphony. Just like that! Reassuringly, 'whether the listener conceives this alternative programme in sufficient detail to include, for example, an interpretation of the first "groaning" *ritmico* at II/23 as a reference to Berg's first attack of asthma, is not of fundamental importance' (63). But there is great subtlety of thought also:

> The discontinuous nature of the programmatic interactions between music and narrative makes the details of such interpretations a matter of individual taste and response. On the other hand, the discovery of a precise musical reference for the extraordinary – yet also musically appropriate – expression markings in the chorale . . . would make an important contribution to those developing interpretations, just as [Douglas] Jarman's apparent solution of the jigsaw-puzzle of numerology, folk song and youthful indiscretion has done. The nature of his work also demonstrates that watertight scholarship alone is not enough: for although numerological 'analysis' of musical works is a minefield – it is perhaps a blessing that Berg comfortably missed the Golden Section in his division of both Parts I and II – there is no doubt of its potential relevance to an understanding of Berg's intentions. And in so far as the listener's programmatic interpretation of the work depends upon the possibly illusory reassurance that the composer's intentions have indeed been understood, then such discussion will surely continue. (63–4)

9 'Analysis: Past, Present and Future', *Music Analysis* 21, Special Issue (2002), 19. In this quotation the ellipses are all part of the original text.

10 *Berg: Violin Concerto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Subsequent page references given in the text. Pople's other substantive writings on Berg, apart from reviews for which most readers can easily find citations in *RILM*, were, in chronological order, 'Secret Programmes: Themes and Techniques in Recent Berg Scholarship', *Music Analysis* 12/3 (1993), 381–99; 'Serial and Tonal Aspects of Pitch Structure in Act III of Berg's *Lulu*', *Soundings* 10 (1993), 36–57; and 'Early Works: Tonality and Beyond', 'The Musical Language of *Wozzeck*', and 'In the Orbit of *Lulu*: the Late Works', all in *The Cambridge Companion to Berg*, which Pople edited (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 53–82, 145–64, and 204–26, respectively. The *Companion* was translated by Ute Henseler and Susanne Ganshirt as *Alban Berg und seine Zeit* (Laaber: Laaber-Verlag, 2000).

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Particularly impressive, perhaps, is the fifth chapter, 'Harmony, Tonality and the Series', where Pople has to sustain a delicate balance between the lucidity that can hold the reader's interest and the necessary technical credibility in exegesis and discussion of the tonal/atonal question, 'extensions' of tonality, complex harmonic resources, serial 'working', the first chorale variation, and 'form and programme as context'. It results in a rich, convincing overview, strikingly encapsulated in Pople's closing remarks:

> Almost by definition, this way of reading coherence into the Violin Concerto through constant reference to external musical archetypes has been unable to assert the kind of self-referential unity which Schenkerian tonal analysis might aim to show. But in fact this kind of unity is a myth even in 'common-practice' tonal music of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, not least because it is this common practice, rather than any individual piece itself, which provides the models of harmonic progression, linear motion and so forth, in terms of which such 'unity' is charted. Only piece-specific materials such as themes and motives can participate in genuine self-referentiality; and while such writing seemed in the years before the 1914 war to be some kind of ideal in the minds of progressive composers of Schoenberg's generation, it was generally abandoned in the genuine modernism of the 1920s. The introspective, almost self-communing works written by Skryabin in his last years supplied a restricted musical language whose vogue was inevitably as brief as its subsequent eclipse was to be total. Schoenberg, on the other hand, formalised the self-referential principle in the technique of serial composition, which allowed for greater integration of this kind than had been seen in music hitherto. While Webern followed this path, pursuing the classicism inherent in Schoenberg's formalistic approach, Berg tackled the larger problems which had been exposed. The tension between internal and external reference which is so clearly focused in his last work has a profoundly historical dimension which is merely hinted at by its accommodation of pre-existing melodies. (90)

Pople's taste in music of the twentieth century was wide, and in fact his first book publication, based on his Oxford PhD dissertation, was on Skryabin and Stravinsky.[11] In 1998 he published another Cambridge Handbook, on Messiaen's much loved, early modern masterpiece *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*.[12] This book was largely an outgrowth of his

11 *Skryabin and Stravinsky 1908–1914: Studies in Theory and Analysis* (New York: Garland, 1985). Among other significant publications on music of the twentieth century are, again in chronological order, and again not citing reviews, 'Skryabin's Prelude Op. 67, No. 1: Sets and Structure, *Music Analysis* 2/2 (1983), 151–73; 'Messiaen's Musical Language: an Introduction', in *The Messiaen Companion*, ed. Peter Hill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 15–50; 'Misleading Voices: Contrasts and Continuities in Stravinsky Studies', in *Analytical Strategies and Musical Interpretation: Essays on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Music*, ed. Craig Ayrey and Mark Everist (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 271–87; 'Vaughan Williams, Tallis, and the Phantasy Principle', in *Vaughan Williams Studies*, ed. Alain Frogley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 47–80; 'From Pastiche to Free Composition: R. O. Morris, Tippett and the Development of Pitch Resources in the *Fantasia Concertante on a Theme of Corelli*', in *Tippett Studies*, ed. David Clarke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 27–54.

12 *Messiaen: Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

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teaching at Lancaster and Southampton universities, and he acknowledges 'the lively contributions of dozens of students in my seminars on this work' (ix): indeed, there were generations of students there, as well as at Nottingham, who in turn in their various different ways acknowledge the profound and lifelong impact that this kind and inspiring teacher had on them. As one reviewer noted, Pople's writing in this book (and as was usual for him) 'shows true craftsmanship', and, she adds nicely, 'often, it is poetic . . . As his last sentence so eloquently states, the Quartet ''remains a unique document of a great composer at the height of his powers responding to extraordinary circumstances with sustained and magnificent invention''.'[13]

The serpent bites its tail in the majestic *Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Music*, which Pople was in the course of editing jointly with Nicholas Cook in recent years.[14] Its twenty-seven authors, including Pople himself, have produced a mammoth story of the century in which we were born. There will be further posthumous publications to add to the rainbow of musical insight that Pople spread through the sky for us. When they come to an end, we shall have had the privilege of seeing the final curve of his intense life.

13 Diane Luchese, review of *Messiaen: Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, *Music Theory Online* 5/2 (March 1999), sections 5–10, <www.societymusictheory.org/mto/ >, accessed 21 March 2004.

14 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

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