

Well Tuned Brass 2020

Interview with Ellen Arkbro and Zinc & Copper (Robin Hayward, Hilary Jeffery, Elena Kakaliagou)

Conducted by Thomas Glaesser

Recorded on 8 September 2020 at KM28 in Berlin Neukölln

Thomas:

"CHORDS for Brass" is part of a series of works, you started doing a series called "CHORDS"?

Ellen:

Yeah, I don't know how much they're related but I guess by title at least. They all focus on a very simple chord progression and very basic chords, lots of fifths and octaves, and some types of modulation that re-occur in all three pieces. They're more scaled down than other pieces which I've written before, even more minimal and even more boring I guess you could say (laughs). I guess it can be perceived like a framework, not really a complete piece, something incomplete, just like a material and the title points towards that – "CHORDS for Brass". I think there's more to find in it.

Thomas:

I was quite surprised, I got a chance to look at the score, and it's really just a sequence of chords, and then the interesting thing is what happens within those chords and between, in the relationship of those chords in time.

Zinc & Copper play the first eight chords, one after another in a sequence.

Thomas:

Now we heard them in a fast sequence, what changes musically when they're played as intended by you, and how do you find the durations of the chords? Because it's not so clear from the score how long they are sustained.

Ellen:

The score does not have very much information in it, it states how many times you are repeating each chord, and sometimes there is a little textual instruction such as "slowly" or "carefully" or something like that. Sometimes some dynamics, but otherwise it's very much up to you to make it musical with the breathing and the timing. The timing is of essence. Often with my music there's a sensed pace or breathing, a rhythm, something that you're either following or detaching yourself from, but there's always a pulse in the background, most of it plays with that. I kind of heard the piece now when you played it. This is how I wrote the piece – starting from the beginning, just sitting by the keyboard and playing the first chord, then waiting for a bit, listening... okay... what's the next chord? Playing that and then going back to the first and hearing the first and the second, then adding a third chord. This was very much connected to how I know the song, in my head, like a fast forward, and then it slowed down and you perceive less of the form – the harmonic form – when you repeat the chords and stay in it for longer.

Thomas:

So the decision making in the composition is mostly about the combination of the tones and then getting a sense of the rhythm of the audible architecture.

Ellen:

Yeah and I feel like its something that we had to try out together, to hear you play. I've been revising it after every time you've played or rehearsed it, and I've realised – oh actually this chord here needs to be four repetitions and not three, and this chord here has to be a little bit slower for it to come together as this one thing.

Thomas:

What is the role of the ensemble's interpretation. How do you collaborate, could there be a misinterpretation for example? If you gave it away to a brass trio and they...

Ellen:

Yeah, as I said, there's not much to know from the score, so there's a shared understanding and a shared aesthetic – an understanding of what kind of music it will become. So I think that with both this piece and "For Organ and Brass" and "Three", I feel like they're all written for you and the experiences you have with jazz music and tuning, all of that comes together. We talked about that as well together, the sound, there's a sound, a deep sound that we all...

Hilary:

Yeah it's interesting, because it was really that record ("For Organ and Brass" / "Three" - 2016) which clicked – "okay that's the sound – that's the Zinc & Copper sound". That record helped us to define our sound, but I think vice versa for you too?

Ellen:

Yeah, and I feel I could just write pieces for you.

Hilary:

Yes please!

(laughter)

Ellen:

This is the band!

Thomas (question to the ensemble):

When you think of large form, I would imagine that you have to be very much in the present moment to find the tunings. Can you still retain a sense of the next chord coming, is there a sense of the larger

form and where you are moving in the form, or is it basically just find the very chord you are playing? What's the relationship of the sequence of chords to the present time tuning?

Hilary:

That's a really interesting question because actually tuning is very much vertical, and to really tune you've got to hear vertically, but of course the piece is also progressing, one chord after another. I think probably we have to just do that chord and really focus on that, its kind of timeless in some way.

Ellen:

Yes, I wanted to ask you how much you perceive a form of the piece. I was curious about what the experience is for you playing, because the chords are so simple, so when they're in tune it becomes such a stability and a grounded feeling, and then right after that you have to rebuild your whole sense of a ground.

Elena:

That is the challenge of this music and that's the challenge to play this music. Yesterday in the rehearsal I was quite distracted, in the beginning I would immediately forget in which repetition are we, I wouldn't read immediately the note, I wouldn't think of the next... You have to be focused, you have to be very much in the hear and now, but at the same time correct all the time, or check – is it there? But you have to be aware as a musician of what comes after, otherwise you could put a synthesizer to play it. I think as a musician you always have to have a little bit of a thinking forward, even if you play a wrong note or whatever, you still have to have a form, that is maybe not defined like – now we have 20 minutes, 21 minutes or the break between the chords is for 6.5 seconds. But you still have a form – do I want to have an open end? What do I want to bring to the audience – what am I sharing? Do I want to bring a surprise on the end? Do I want to guide? I think all these things play inside you when you play music. So it has this responsibility of the chord, the vertical thing that Hilary said, but it has this linear thing, for me at least I think. I know Robin is a specialist of vertical stuff...

(laughter)

Robin:

One thing I notice when playing this piece, I become very aware of the ensemble because you're constantly tuning. So if something's not quite in tune, you're slightly adjusting, everybody's adjusting. When it works its like you lose the sense of being the individual and you become part of this thing which is hopefully working, when its working... I actually find it very meditative and its very calming, you have to get into the right space to play it. It was actually quite stressfull doing it right now because I'm used to having a few attempts each time, and this time it was one chord and then the next, which is a very very different experience. We've only actually performed it once and it was a slightly different version, but we played it through today and yesterday. That was a very different experience to what I had just now where it did feel more like a demonstration, because its this and then this and this... and I couldn't get deeper into it.

Ellen:

So the music is something more than a demonstration?

Robin:

Absolutely!

Ellen:

Because sometimes I think this music as being like a demonstration of chords somehow.

Robin:

When I first saw the score I actually did have that question, but the more I play it the less I think that. I think it becomes more musical the more the ensemble is working together to work on the tuning and also to make music together. Its chamber music.

Thomas:

I was wondering, when you zoom in closer, there's not only the relationship from chord to chord as in a progression but due to the duration, I would imagine that there's an interior process within the sustaining of one chord, at least for the listener. I think there's a perceptive change that's happening when a chord is sustained. Your perception is unfolding and getting more colourful and more detailed over time. And also there's a fading out of the chord before, that's there as a kind of backdrop, as a fading image and its still informing the listening of the current chord. How is that when you're playing it? What is happening in the one chord you're repeating? What's your experience as a player?

Elena:

It gets better. After five times you have repeated it, you kind of figure out how to play it!

(laughter)

Robin:

Its like going deeper and deeper into something. The more we play it, the deeper we go into it and the more enjoyable it becomes.

Thomas:

But is it also that you're getting closer to the actually intended intonation?

Robin:

Yes.

Elena:

Sure.

Robin:

We're trying to get it in tune!

(laughter)

Thomas:

Okay, so that's something to listen for.

Ellen:

I think for both the repetitions of each chord and how the modulations work, the chord progression, its like a music that starts from the beginning, very many times. There are lots of beginnings and every chord can almost feel like a new beginning, and every repetition of the chord. It has this beginning feeling to it the whole time, which is something I find interesting, I appreciate it.

Thomas:

In terms of the duration, its not really fixed, you don't give seconds or anything for holding the chords. So that's basically improvised but also intuitive together in your rehearsal process? How much does it relate to the time of day and the space you're working in, how long the durations the chords will be?

Hilary:

There's an interesting example from when we played in Hamburg... There's a chord and then there's a silence, and then there was someone outside the venue was pulling a trolley and it was very loud. I had to queue the next chord, so I deliberately waited, and it was quite a long time, until the trolley passed by! That wasn't in the score.

Ellen:

That version was really slow. The space was quite reverberant.

Elena:

Yeah it was a big space, very demanding.

Ellen:

Also it must correlate with the nerve in the room, sometimes its tense and you have to be so careful.

Elena:

And lets not forget that this piece is written in a way that every chord is one breath. If Hilary starts, then Robin, then I – if Hilary runs out of breath he cannot just breathe and replay the note. He has to queue us to finish, to close the chord. So its a very organic process actually, a length of a chord, more or less. Of course it depends on the volume, it depends on the range and where we play. If we do not enter into a circular breathing then it going to be our organic breath. So a pace arrives, somehow. It would be weird if Ellen was to write above every chord "fifteen seconds". It becomes very physical.

Thomas:

I was wondering anyway how much it is immediately physical, also in how that getting in touch with the sound modulates your nervous system, like something that is a continuous steady touch that you relate to.

Elena:

Sure.

Thomas:

I remember being at a European conference about body psychotherapy year ago, and there were legends of body psychotherapy there, there was Malcom Brown and his wife. And they had a method which was called "long sustaining nurturing touch". It just consists of touching someone and staying there for an hour plus.

Elena:

Not in Corona times!

(laughter)

Thomas:

Or just with your family! I found that very interesting that they explored the healing potential of being constantly in touch with something and getting a trusting relationship into the two surfaces that are touching each other. Somehow that reminded me a little bit of being in one chord, being in that sound and coming back to it and then taking all the time to move onto the next one.

Elena:

It is a deeply physical experience. If the chord fits, if it works, then everybody feels it, not only the players but everybody who is in the space, whoever shares the space feels it, it gets to your body and it feels good. Even if its frequencies that beat in a very intensive way, you still feel good with it. Okay sometimes it might feel a bit weird, but if its rightly placed then it feels good, its frequencies, I mean what else? Because everything is frequencies, it makes sense.

Ellen:

I would say that the sound, when its in-tune, becomes a completely different experience than the sounds that's not completely in-tune.

Robin:

That's when it becomes one thing. What I was saying about losing the sense of being an individual and being just part of this thing. When its in-tune it just aligns. All the harmonics match and its a very physical sensation. That's when its pleasant. It becomes increasingly pleasurable the more you get that alignment.

Thomas:

Talking about pop and that kind of music, it occurred to me that your music, also Duane's music which is going to be played on Friday, is also received in popular music contexts. You can find a Pitchfork review for Ellen's record, quite adamantly received in that context. Is that immediacy what's shared with popular music?

Ellen:

I think so, yeah. Something like the simplicity. Its very direct in its expression in the same way.

Hilary:

Yeah, its like a good pop song – you don't need to understand what created the pop song, it just speaks to you and I think its the same with tuning, a well tuned chord – you don't need to know why, you don't even need to know if its in-tune or not, it speaks to you, its not intellectual.

Ellen:

Yeah, definitely. It's not an intellectual process I would say, writing this music, its more about just feeling it and playing and listening and sensing when its coming together and when you feel it. Because I also write pop songs and for me the process is very similar, working on a piece like this and working on a pop song in how I create it, its just about listening and waiting for it to just sit right.

Thomas:

So you're actually working on a pop album?

Ellen:

Yeah, its something I'm slowly working on. You'll (Zinc & Copper) play on it, I'm sure! I have a little dream project. I have lots of ideas, lots of sketches for songs and I want to bring a lot of musicians together.

Thomas:

I think, as the music has something very immediate we don't need to go deeper into the secret mechanics of the music now. But you actually brought one of those sketches...

(discussion between Thomas and Hilary about the next item in the programme)

Thomas:

We could listen to the Robert Wyatt song which you brought if you want.

Ellen:

It was Hilary who asked me to bring somethig that I am influenced by.

Hilary:

What is the song – its Robert Wyatt?

Ellen:

Robert Wyatt, its called "Stay Tuned"!

(laughter)

Robert Wyatt's song "Stay Tuned" is played.

Hilary:

Why did you choose that song, of all the pop music that you could have chosen?

Ellen:

Its my very favourite song. It speaks on the right level. Its very timeless and eternal somehow. Its just very direct in its expression. I can feel that this music is inspiring all the music that I'm making, not only the pop music, but also the pieces that I write for you and for other ensembles.

Ellen and Zinc & Copper perform her pop song "Speak All Voices" to end the interview