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Long music and the short now: on Rodney Graham's music

[C: International Contemporary Art, Summer, 2004](#) by [Dave Dymnt](#)

I have a mere three days to write about an artwork that is thirty-nine billion years long. I was asked to interview Rodney Graham about his band and their new recording *Rock is Hard*, but my own bad time-management skills and inability to look beyond the next deadline (which preceded this one by a weekend), coupled with Graham's own hectic schedule, has left me to instead contemplate music measured in decades, millennia and beyond.

Parsifal (1882--39,969,364,735 AD) or *Verwandlungsmusik* (Transformation Music) is one of the first Graham pieces I encountered, and remains a strong favourite.

The work originates from a story Graham had read about Richard Wagner and the 1882 rehearsals of *Parsifal* in Bayreuth. When the curtains closed too slowly, Wagner was asked to compose some additional music to smooth over the transition. He refused, declaring "I do not write music by the meter." (1)

Fortunately for the producers, Wagner's assistant Engelbert Humperdinck (not the 60s crooner) was willing to oblige. His additions to the score were accepted by Wagner, used for the first few performances, but eventually dropped after the curtains were altered and the stage machinery was overhauled.

Graham hunted down these obscure excised bars and upon further investigation determined that Humperdinck had actually composed no new music, but rather manipulated the existing score so that the piece could loop back on itself. Graham recognized the similarity to his own 1983 work *Lenz*, in which he takes the reoccurrence of a phrase within the first five pages of a novel, and re-typesets them to facilitate a narrative that could loop back upon itself, mirroring

the story of the protagonist, who is continuously retracing his own steps. (2)

By returning the extra bars of music to the score of Parsifal as a progression of repetitions, their durations determined by the prime numbers between 3 and 47, Graham was able to create a series of asynchronous loops that would not resynchronize for 39 billion years.

He tried to pinpoint the exact time that the work would conclude (7:30 pm on June 18th), but a letter from Alan H. Batten of the Herzberg Institute of Astrophysics suggests that an accurate calculation would be impossible. He goes on to list the problems with the speculation, not the least of which is the likelihood that long before that time the sun will cease to shine.

The CD recording of Parsifal (3) contains 'Orchestral Highlights' and whenever Graham has the work performed, a software program determines where the composition, begun (hypothetically) in 1882, would currently be in the continuum, and starts there.

Unlike Wagner, Jem Finer is quite content to compose music by the meter. His Longplayer project for Artangel is a composition in which length is the primary component--it is exactly one thousand years long. It debuted on December 31st, 1999, international time and will continue to play--without repetition--until the end of the year 2999.

Pages from Finer's notebooks reveal that the source material was secondary to the duration of the work. He began intending to use the Judy Garland version of Somewhere Over the Rainbow, which worked out fine for the first 70 years, but once the singing started, would become problematic. A thousand years of royalties to EMI, the copyright holder, nailed the coffin closed. Excerpts from various classic avant-garde works (4) were then considered before Finer settled on using Tibetan bowls and gongs. The resulting sonic tapestry consists of a 20 minute and 20 second recording of the Tibetan composition from which six overlapping loops are created, each at a different pitch and advancing at a different speed. The constant shifting of these layers creates ever-changing textures and harmonies. The loops are mathematically determined to complete the cycle at the end of a thousand years.

As future generations will have to inherit the responsibility for its upkeep, the project demands serious long-term planning. To ensure its viability, a trust fund was set up with a think-tank that includes individuals and corporations such as composer and theorist David Toop, Brian Eno, and Apple Mac Computers.

Eno's own musical explorations can provide a precedent to both Longplayer and Parsifal. Little known as a visual artist and less known in music circles than his influence would suggest, there are few familiar with western culture who have never heard a Brian Eno recording. His output includes solo recordings, film scores, production work for U2, James, David Bowie, Peter Dinklage, Laurie Anderson, Roxy Music, Elvis Costello, Sinéad O'Connor, the Talking Heads and countless others, and even the start-up music for Windows95--to many a sound now as common as the morning alarm clock or telephone ring.

Of his solo records, the 1978 instrumental release Music For Airports is considered the most groundbreaking and important. Subtitled 'Ambient 1, the record includes an essay in which Eno coins the term to describe a new type of non-rhythmic, unclocked music (5)--sounds

which would play simultaneously, rather than as synchronicities -that rewarded close attention, but do not demand it: aural wallpaper.

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