

JAMES ERBER

CONVIVIVUM
RECORDS

The 'Traces' Cycle for solo flute
Flourish · A Small Revelation · ein anderer Hauch

MATTEO CESARI





Grids and ruins: The 'Traces' Cycle in context

James Erber's music has been concerned with traces—signs of overwriting, both revealing and concealing what lies beneath—for even longer than the fifteen years spanned by the composition of the main work on this disc. An excavation of his interest both in archaeology as a metaphor for music and in archaeologies of music itself might begin ten years earlier still: with the thirty-year-old Erber, newly arrived in Freiburg, embarking on the composition of *Music for 25 Solo Strings (Epitomaria–Glosaria–Commentaria)*. That work was, first of all, a “reading-through” of Byrd's motet *Emendemus in melius*, making explicit both Erber's interest in music of the Renaissance and early Baroque and his concern with spiritual and artistic continuity. But its tripartite scheme of source and multiply layered commentary was confirmed by a visit the composer paid while working on the piece to the site of the Roman town of Herculaneum, where he saw the ancient ruin set alongside the present-day settlement of Ercolano, itself consisting of the old town on the cliff and the

modern buildings behind it, all three layers visible to varying degrees from a single vantage-point.

Although the audible presence of an earlier composer's work, “composed into” the texture as the Byrd is here, is unusual for Erber,¹ almost all of his music uses rhythmic processes of proliferation and contraction which are ultimately derived from a study of variation technique in early 17th-century music. These processes can be applied both to the formants with which he extends his basic material across the span of a large piece, as in *Music for 25 Solo Strings*, or to the “grids”—themselves patterns of rhythms, bar lengths etc.—which in the decade that followed increasingly came to constitute his basic material, so that an entire piece often consists of a pre-composed structure which is obscured by and perhaps occasionally glimpsed through multiple layers of decoration and permutation: although it is the layerings themselves, of course, which in the process become the music's most characteristic voice.

¹ The pitch and/or rhythmic content of several later pieces is again derived from Renaissance or early Baroque music—Trabaci in *àNeM* for piano (1996), Corelli in *Trattenimento da Camera* for two bass flutes (2000; the title is borrowed from Corelli's Modenese contemporary Bononcini)—but in general the origin of the material is not of great significance except as a private tribute to favourite music. The sources are, perhaps, of greater importance to their new contexts in the abstracted blues of *You done torn your playhouse down* for piano (1996) and *Am Grabe Memphis Minnies* for solo guitar (1997).

Flourish for solo flute (1986)

Whist a man is free, — cried the corporal, giving a flourish with his stick thus —

James Erber

This layering is not always achieved through the use of such a large complement of players as in *Music for 25 Solo Strings*—in fact, all the other early works are for five players or fewer, one of the several reasons for which one hopes that the present recording will attract enterprising chamber groups to this music’s distinctive personality and fragile optimism of spirit.² Still, by the middle of the decade Erber had decided to experiment with clarifying the surfaces of his music, and turned for the first time to the idea of a work for solo instrument, the idea being to treat it as a melody instrument and not as the reservoir of parametric possibilities with which composers such as Barrett, Ferneyhough and Hübler (composers with whom Erber otherwise had much in common) were at this time choosing to work even in music for one player. **Flourish** is at one level a straightforward portrait in sound of its epigraph from Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, its single melodic line subdivided into a series of downward curves like an abstracted representation of the path traced in the air by the corporal’s

stick. But the line is further punctuated (or interrupted?) by a succession of long, *senza vibrato* notes in the instrument’s lowest register (using quarter-tones, whereas the upper-register line is mainly confined to semitones)—a layer of implied counterpoint which briefly turns to real polyphony in the final long, low D natural, the flautist’s voice joining in to hold the pitch as the instrument bends the note in an ending which not only takes the work back to the pitch from which it began but also unites the work’s two primary gestures, flourish and sustained note.

² The other early works still acknowledged by the composer are: *Seguente* for oboe and piano (1976/80), *Night-Music with Doubles* for clarinet, viola and piano (1980–82), *Tacciano i boschi* (1981) for soprano and piano, the Javanese-influenced *Cantata I* for soprano, piano and percussion (1980–81; Erber had spent time in Indonesia in the mid-1970s), *Benedicat te Dominus (Offertorio)* for soprano and harmonium (1982), and *...working together* for two clarinets, trumpet, violin and cello (1984). One further piece begun in this period, *The Ray and its Shadow*, achieved belated completion in 1997.

By the time Erber returned to the solo flute

five years later, to compose a 20-minute work intended from the outset as the first part of a cycle, he was able to integrate *Flourish*’s gestural immediacy into a more characteristically multi-layered conception, so that an extended work for one player could now manifest the same kind of formal ambiguity as had characterised Erber’s earlier ensemble music. And **Traces** is a return in other ways, too, to the concerns of that earlier body of work. What was glimpsed through the layerings of *Music for 25 Solo Strings* was Byrd’s motet, or at least its rhythmic shell; what underlies *Traces* is the abstract rhythmic grid on which the entire piece is based. But Erber had come to see the layerings themselves as analogous to time or human history, producing effects that could be observed in a single image—as he had done at Herculaneum a decade before. The image Erber had in mind while composing *Traces* was an even earlier memory: the track of a Roman road he had come across while on a walking holiday in the Lake District in his late teens, a major thoroughfare faintly discernible through the grass, the evidence of former life in a now barely peopled landscape.

Clearly, in unfolding such an image of the operations of time in a structure which was itself temporal, the music would have to contain elements of process in motion as well as of process “already having happened”: the dialectic of grid

and ruin would be joined by a dialectic between ruin unfolding and ruin unfolded. In *Traces*, the constant and multiple layerings of rhythm, pitch and playing technique—“complex enough”, as the composer says, “to defy categorisation into structural hierarchies”—establish a fragile consensus of utterance into which groups of repeated notes in the instrument’s lower register, appearing from halfway through the piece, seem to intrude as a foreign voice. The previously established material types are not eclipsed by this new material, but nor is it able to be subsumed by them, and the story of the piece increasingly becomes one of an uneasy coexistence.

In taking as his starting point for *Traces* a memory of a ruin rather than the ruin itself, Erber had found perhaps an even closer point of reference than the gradually distanced object implied by the ‘epitomaria–glosaria–commentaria’ structure for the nature of his musical processes, in which the underlying grid would itself never be clearly stated and arguably had no separate existence within the piece (any attempt to realise it unadorned, as we shall see, would be essentially problematic). As he extended the cycle first, six and a half years later, into **Traces B**, and then, another eight years on, into **Traces C**, the nature of its concern not only with the memory of a ruin but also with the gradual ruin of that memory would become increasingly evident.

Top:
James Erber with
Matteo Cesari

Bottom:
James Erber (right),
with Matteo Cesari and
Richard Barrett

Photography:
Tom Kuglin



Both more disparate and more consciously virtuosic than its predecessor, *Traces B* nonetheless shares the earlier work's sense of semantic overload, of a richness and multilayeredness so extreme as to constantly threaten the work's cohesion. The use of extended playing techniques defines much of the piece, as do constant changes of texture and behaviour. Towards the end, a bravura section featuring high *staccatissimo* runs occasionally cut into by multiphonic trills finally offers something akin to a sense of stable character and even of climactic function—it carries the perhaps somewhat unlikely indication *maestoso*—but even this can only yield to a strange, muted conclusion of barely audible dynamic fluctuations.

This valedictory music seems not only to close *Traces B* but also, in the context of the cycle, to bid farewell to the idea of narrative cohesion as such. *Traces C* carries over the use of descending glissandi on longer notes from this passage, but little more. The same rhythmic arch runs into this third piece but its treatment is very different in effect, a change which came about partly in accordance with shifts in Erber's musical language in the decade since the earlier parts of the cycle had been composed, and partly in a reflection of the difficulties of "continuing in the same vein" in a work-sequence which was already concerned with disintegration and which by now had to trace a path through

the disintegration of disintegration itself. The lengthy grace-note groups and the generally constant high register that characterise *Traces* (at least until the entry of that 'foreign voice') and *Traces B* are considerably less in evidence here; the new focus on the flute's lower register was a conscious decision on Erber's part, and is achieved both by specific decisions made on the level of pitch structure and by a gradual focus on playing techniques (lip pizzicato, tongue ram, key percussion) which can only be produced in the lower part of the instrument's range.

Like *Traces* and *Traces B*, the work reaches a critical moment near the end. But where *Traces* found an equilibrium of sorts, and *Traces B* withdrew at the very point where structural disintegration threatened, here it is the grid itself that we encounter, the work's underlying material: exposed at last, but in such a way—at the slowest tempo used in the entire cycle, and with each component note decorated by just a small flurry of grace-notes—that the continuity of the line is threatened, not now by ambiguities of rhythmic and textural layering, but by the challenge the tempo and note-lengths pose to the player's breath and lung capacity. "Throughout the cycle," Erber has written, "the possibility of taking the music further has become less likely with each piece. Here, finally, there is a situation in which a continuation is inconceivable. The music has arrived at its dissolution,



In the control room after the first recording session, 29 January 2013.
From left: Joe Erber, dedicatee of *Traces*; Adaq Khan; James Erber; Matteo Cesari; John Fallas; Richard Barrett

as must the original memory that brought the cycle into being." The piece returns to the high register, where it concludes inconclusively, with five-second pauses separating four short, snapshot-like passages in which the layering techniques used throughout the cycle are applied at maximum density.

The two remaining works on the disc

were both inspired by the musicianship of Matteo Cesari, who had premiered *Traces C* in the context of the first complete performance of *The "Traces" Cycle* in May 2011. **A Small Revelation** is Erber's 70th-birthday present for his former teacher—a tribute to Ferneyhough via Cesari, now a leading member of the youngest generation of Ferneyhough performers. It is in four short sections, each of which peels away a processual layer until in the last there is only one layer of "overwritings" in operation. The generating material, typically, stands just beyond our (and the music's?) reach.

Also written for Cesari, the piccolo piece **ein andrer Hauch** takes its cue, and its title, from the third of Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*, a paean to the power of music figured in the idea of human breath. Two tempi alternate throughout the piece, the first presenting music which is dynamic and constantly mutating, created in typical Erberian fashion from multiple layerings of rhythmic and pitch material, the second subjected to a radical procedure in which all notes above a certain duration are written as harmonics—an extraordinary, unearthly sound, as if hollowed out of the instrument. In the work's final stages the first type of music is hollowed out, too, the overlaying of different strata of material in the first tempo (which Erber associates with Rilke's image of two arteries intersecting "where", as the poet says, "is no temple to Apollo") reaching a stage where rests in each layer cancel out the notes provided by the other layer, so that towards its end the work exists on a precipice of silence: grid and ruin, again and always.

JAMES ERBER

DISCOGRAPHY

You done torn your playhouse down (Ian Pace, piano; **NMC** D066)

Strange Moments of Intimacy (Kate Romano, clarinet; **Metier** MSV CD92074)

le colonne d'Ercole (Franklin Cox, cello; **Centaur Records**, forthcoming in early 2014)

Also visit www.soundcloud.com/james-erber

Born in London in 1951, James Erber gained degrees in music from the universities of Sussex and Nottingham before working as Music Editor for Peters Edition, London (1976–79) and as a freelance editor, writer and translator. Still largely self-taught as a composer, it was in this period that he produced his first acknowledged works, beginning with *Seguente* for oboe and piano (1976, rev. 1980). The guidance and encouragement he received from Brian Ferneyhough prompted him to a serious study of composition, first with Jonathan Harvey at the University of Sussex (MPhil in Composition), then in 1981–82 with Ferneyhough himself at the Musikhochschule, Freiburg-im-Breisgau.

On returning to England, he combined composition with teaching and lecturing, including three years in the Music Department at Goldsmiths' College, University

of London (1991–94). He was invited as guest lecturer to the Darmstadt Summer Courses in 1988 and 1990, having won a *Stipendienpreis* there in 1986. In 1994 and 1996 he was shortlisted for the prestigious Hinrichsen Foundation bursary, and in 1994 received a Holst Foundation Award which enabled him to write *Abiya*, one of a number of solo piano pieces completed around this time (as was the violin and piano duo *Te'amim*).

Erber's music has been performed and broadcast widely throughout Europe, in Australia, New Zealand and the USA by soloists such as Mario Caroli, Matteo Cesari, Carin Levine, Nancy Ruffer, Christopher Redgate, Carl Rosman, Darragh Morgan, Franklin Cox, Ian Pace and Jonathan Powell, as well as by ensembles including Lontano, Ensemble Exposé, 175 East, the Arditti Quartet and ELISION.

In addition to *The 'Traces' Cycle*, important work of the last two decades includes the 50-minute, two-movement string quartet *An Allegory of Exile* (1992–95); two further piano pieces, *Fluctuations* (1999/2006) and *Qfwfq* (2003); solo works for guitar, violin, cello, treble recorder, clarinets in E flat and C and tenor saxophone; duos for two bass flutes and two soprano saxophones; the ensemble works *Das Buch Bahir* (2004–5) and *The Death of the Kings* (2007); and most recently *Mox Nox* (2009) for bass clarinet and string quartet, *String Quartet No 2* (2010–11), and *Landscape [with Laocoön and his Sons]* for clarinet, trumpet and percussion (2010–12).

MATTEO CESARI

Artist photography of Matteo Cesari (page 2) by Jean Radel; venue courtesy of the Italian Cultural Institute, Paris



Winner of the 2010 Kranichsteiner Music Prize for performance at the Darmstadt Summer Courses and of numerous other awards and scholarships, Matteo Cesari studied flute with Mario Caroli at the Conservatoire de Strasbourg, and is at present a doctoral student at the Paris Conservatoire, pursuing research into the works of Brian Ferneyhough and Salvatore Sciarrino.

Cesari has performed extensively as a soloist in Japan, China, the USA, Australia and throughout Europe, including in Paris, London, Vienna, Madrid and Rome, and he has worked closely with ensembles such as Ensemble intercontemporain, the Nieuw Ensemble and L'itinéraire.

He has worked with many of the leading figures in the music of our time, among them the composer-conductors Pierre Boulez and Peter Eötvös, the conductor Tito Ceccherini, the soprano Barbara Hannigan, and the composers Salvatore Sciarrino, Ivan Fedele, Brian Ferneyhough, Hugues Dufourt, Stefano Gervasoni, Bruno Mantovani and Michael Finnissy.



RECORDED AT

All Saints' Church, East Finchley on
29 January, 2 March and 25 May 2013

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

Adrian Green

PRODUCER

Richard Barrett

ENGINEER, EDITING & MASTERING

Adaq Khan

CREATIVE DIRECTOR

John Bevan

BOOKLET EDITOR

John Fallas

COVER IMAGE WITH THANKS

Margaret Erber: *Green Garden*
WEA London Region



COPYRIGHT

This digital booklet is made freely available through the website
www.conviviumrecords.co.uk for personal use and reference only.

Copyright subsists in all recordings, associated artwork and supporting imagery from Convivium Records, including within this digital booklet. It is illegal to copy this / them in whole or in part, for any purpose whatsoever, without permission from the copyright holder, Convivium Records Ltd. Any unauthorized copying, reproduction, distribution, re-recording, broadcasting or public performance of this or any other content provided by Convivium Records Ltd. will constitute an infringement of copyright.

To apply to use any recordings, associated artwork and supporting imagery from Convivium Records, including any content within this digital booklet, for anything other than personal use, please email: hello@conviviumrecords.co.uk

Applications for a public performance licence should be sent to:
Phonographic Performance Ltd, 1 Upper James Street, London W1F 9DE.
For more on copyright, please visit: www.conviviumrecords.co.uk/copyright

The 'Traces' Cycle for solo flute *Flourish · A Small Revelation · ein andrer Hauch*

MATTEO JAMES ERBER CESARI 