



Michael Nyman's Bricolage: A Unique Approach to Composition in the 20th Century

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The article presents Michael Nyman's work which has been identified as close to bricolage. He is a famous composer, and his compositions are widely performed, earning his work to be compared to that of Philip Glass, an American composer. Nyman ensured that his work was original and unique from the contemporary composers. His work looks original compared to the works of British composers of the second half of the 20th century. Nyman's bricolage is characterised by a unique composition strategy, including the analysis of the original source, the selection of material, and its recombination based on a new compositional logic. His style is based on processing someone's materials through disassembly and reassembly, which is vital for the production process. For instance, the transformation of 'I'm not angry' is different, and the composer heavily relied on the original source's potential. Nyman is not afraid to integrate art from different periods, as demonstrated by his decision to settle the folk melodies in 18th-century Venice. The process of creating analysed opuses is consistent with the laws of bricolage. When creating bricolage works, Nyman turns to combinatorics, minimalist techniques, and elements of ground form. Nyman's reliance on the bricolage technology makes the principles of combination significant as the

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Abstract

The article presents Michael Nyman's work which has been identified as close to bricolage. He is a famous composer, and his compositions are widely performed, earning his work to be compared to that of Philip Glass, an American composer. Nyman ensured that his work was original and unique from the contemporary composers. His work looks original compared to the works of British composers of the second half of the 20th century. Nyman's bricolage is characterised by a unique composition strategy, including the analysis of the original source, the selection of material, and its recombination based on a new compositional logic. His style is based on processing someone's materials through disassembly and reassembly, which is vital for the production process. For instance, the transformation of 'I'm not angry' is different, and the composer heavily relied on the original source's potential. Nyman is not afraid to integrate art from different periods, as demonstrated by his decision to settle the folk melodies in 18th-century Venice. The process of creating analysed opuses is consistent with the laws of bricolage. When creating bricolage works, Nyman turns to combinatorics, minimalist techniques, and elements of ground form. Nyman's reliance on the bricolage technology makes the principles of combination significant as the techniques borrowed from minimalism. His composition type makes it easily understood as the choice of the original source and the combination of its elements in a new work. An analysis of Nyman's work highlights that his technique arises from the artistic practice of the 20th century.



Introduction

The music of minimalist composer Michael Nyman is enjoyable to listen to online since there is no extraneous detail and the sound emphasises the exclusivity of piano music. The music of the well-known British composer is frequently played. They frequently compared the American composer Philip Glass to British composer Michael Nyman, yet a listen to Nyman's music reveals that the British artist has a unique and consistent style.

The distinctive creative method of 'taking' fresh sonic and artistic space out of previously created music is recognised as a trademark of Michael Nyman's work, ensuring the pieces' uniqueness, and distinguishing him from other contemporary composers¹.

Manchester School of Music

The persona of Nyman, the composer, stands out when compared to other British composers from the second half of the 20th century, especially the more senior members of the New Music Manchester Group, Peter Maxwell Davies and Harrison Birtwistle². The school was open for two years, from August 16, 1964, to August 22, 1965, and from August 15, 1965, to August 20, 1965. Harrison Birtwistle, the project's primary founder, organised all the events with the help of his friends and associates from Manchester, the Davies and Alexander Goehr. Michael Tippett was chosen to lead the institution. The School has brought together over 100 of Britain's upcoming professional composers in just two years.

The concert program featured a lot of variety. It blended compositions from the first half of the 20th century (Bartók, Schoenberg, and Satie), as well as pieces that were brand-new with English music from the XV–XIX centuries (Dunstable, Byrd, Bach, Mozart, Haydn, and Brahms) (Burtuysl, Deyvitsky and Walsh). works by Bartók, Schoenberg, and Satie), as well as pieces that were brand-new at the time (Birtwistle, Davis, Wood, Cardew, Feldman, Stockhausen, Cage). Although the composer lost or did not keep the sheet music for these opuses, the experience of writing serial works is nonetheless subtly reflected in the British author's later works.

Due to the Manchester group's involvement, the serial technique had become a cult at the School. Nyman tried writing in it, but the experience turned out to be visually

¹ 2. Siôn, P. ap The Music of Michael Nyman: Texts, Contexts and Intertexts / P. ap Siôn. - Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007. - 242 p.

² [1]Rupprecht P., Rupprecht P.E. British Musical Modernism: The Manchester Group and their Contemporaries / P. Rupprecht, P.E. Rupprecht. — Cambridge University Press, 2015, 504.



unappealing for the aspiring novelist. He began an arrangement of a Venetian tune in the first half. Nyman used the British Museum's holdings to choose folk tunes from 18th-century Venice, which he then instrumented for an ensemble that had an unusual lineup: banjo, rebek, sakbat, shalmei, and soprano saxophone³. Nyman developed his style of music-making.

The Originality of Nyman's Music

Its specificity is connected to the reworking of other people's material and one's own. An analysis of opuses from different years shows all of them, to a greater or lesser degree, are connected either with someone else's music or with the British composer's own. The composer himself repeatedly draws attention to this feature in his commentaries to his works: 'I always accurately point to primary sources (Purcell, for example), I always say what I have taken, how and from where... I do not conceal that I am stealing ...' [1]. Over time, Nyman's technique stabilises, and its distinctive feature becomes the 'growing' of new work from an existing one.

The notion of 'bricolage' is not used regarding Nyman's works either by the author or by scholars (Sayon in his monograph only once calls the composer a 'bricolourer' [2], yet it appears to be the most suitable for defining the author's technique for several reasons).

On the one hand, a significant proportion of the composer's works are based on revisions of previously composed music - either others' or his own. In his works, the British author refers to works from a wide temporal range: from the Renaissance and Baroque to Classicism and Romanticism⁴. Occasionally he uses music from the 20th century, pop compositions and folklore sources.

On the other hand, how borrowings are handled is quite similar to bricolage: before a piece is produced, the composer selects particular bits and modifies them in various ways to create a new opus. Nyman regularly employed well-known methods from American minimalism, English baroque variations on the ground bass, combinatorics, and British experimental art, i.e. the music he performed, as a bricoleur in this process⁵.

³ 5. Nyman Michael. Interview by V. Anderson / V. Anderson // Journal of Experimental Music Studies (Reprint Series). URL: http://www.experimentalmusic.co.uk/emc/Jems_files/nyman1983interview.pdf (accessed: 02.05.2022).

⁴ [6] O'Shaughnessy, M. 'Romantic Minimalist': Meaning and Emotion in the Film Music of Michael Nyman (PhD Thesis) / M. O'Shaughnessy. — University of Western Australia, 2010. — 321 p.

⁵ [3]Sion, P. ap Hidden Disunities and Uncanny Resemblances: Connections and Disconnections in the Music of Lera Auerbach and Michael Nyman / P. ap Sion // Contemporary Music Review. — 2018. — № 2, bar 33. — P. 167–187.



Nyman as a Master of Bricolage

Bricolage is a complex phenomenon (thinking-process-result) that maintains a consistent approach to working with other people’s materials across situations. Its steps include appropriating an existing object, choosing components from it, and recombining those components. First impressions of Nyman’s music lead one to believe that bricolage is a close relative of his creative process.

Working on the score for Greenaway’s 1982 film *The Draughtsman’s Contract* for Nyman was a significant step toward formalising the bricolage technique. He was unable to explicitly quote Greenaway’s work due to the movie’s extreme conventionality in terms of style. Without detracting from the film’s ambience, Nyman transformed Purcell’s content while still making it clear where it came from⁶. The author created a work with unique artistic substance that, in his words, covered a wide range of historical perspectives, which was a determining factor in the decision⁷. The composer’s soundtrack is a kind of anthology of Henry Purcell’s music and uses material from his works of different genres: two operas, separate keyboard pieces, a song, and two odes.

Table 1 - Borrowings from Purcell's music in Nyman's soundtrack for The Draughtsman's Contract

The table is based on the scheme presented in P. ap Sayon's monograph [see 200, p. 96].

<i>M. Nyman's soundtrack number</i>	<i>Original work by G. Purcell</i>
1. Queen of the Night	‘Queen of the Night’ ode from Yorkshire Holiday Songs
2. The Disposition of the Linen	The song ‘She loves...’ (Z. 413)
3. A Watery Death	Chaconne from Suite No. 2 g-minor
4. The Garden Is Becoming a Robe Room	‘Here is the deity’ from the ode ‘Welcome to all pleasures’ (Z. 339)

⁶ [2] Karolyi, O. *Modern British Music: The Second British Musical Renaissance* / O. Karolyi — From Elgar to P. Maxwell Davies. — Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1994, 151.

⁷ [5] Stanley, J. *Bricolage in the Music of Elena Kats-Chernin* / J. Stanley // *Context* 20. — Summer 2000/2001, 5–18.



5. Chasing Sheep Is Best Left to Shepherds	Semi-opera King Arthur, v. III, Scene 2, Prelude
6. An Eye for Optical Theory /	Grande c-minor (D. 221)
7. Bravura in the Face of Grief	Semi-opera The Fairy Queen, V d., The Complaint

In writing the opera *The Man Who Mistook* (1986), Nyman used fragments of Schumann’s songs from various cycles. When choosing the material, the composer relied on the fact from the libretto that the protagonist, Professor P, loves Schumann. The opera’s libretto, by Rawlence, is based on a clinical case described by the American neurologist and neuropsychologist Oliver Sacks (1933-2015). In the story, a doctor sees a talented singer and vocal teacher, Professor P, and his wife, Mrs P (Dr S). The professor suffers from visual agnosia, a disorder in which the individual cannot recognise objects he has seen⁸. His exceptional musical ability allows Professor P to partially restore meaning and wholeness to the visual world around him by accompanying his everyday manipulations with music.

Directly fragments of Schumann’s songs are included in the sonorous fabric of the work but appear to the listener transformed in different ways. In the commentary, the composer states he invented a harmonic sequence comprising C-D ♭ -F-B-E ♭ -A-D ♭ -G-B, which is first heard in the prologue. The structure of the chain was ‘invented’ by the composer borrowed material prompted him: the chords are the main tonalities of Schumann’s songs or are indirectly linked to their tonal plan.

Table 2 - Tones of selected songs by Schumann

<i>Song title by R. Schumann</i>	<i>tonality</i>
‘Enigma.’	B-major
‘The Highlander’s Lullaby’	D-major
‘Hazelnut.’	G-major
‘I’m not angry.’	C-major, F-major
‘Both roses and lilies’	D-major

⁸ [6] O’Shaughnessy, *Meaning and Emotion in the Film Music of Michael* .2010. – 321 p.



'The violin's tune charms'.	d-minor - D-major
'The blacksmith's song'	E^b -major
Nyman sequence: C - D^b - F - B - E^b - A - D^b - G - B	

This sequence is repeated many times and is subjected to variations: it is played in abbreviations, with chord regrouping, and with the addition of other Harmonies. These are mainly triads of side-step tones, e.g. D-major (bar 236), B-major (bar 256), and f-minor (bar 268). The sequence is used in various ways in the opera.

Directly fragments of Schumann's songs are included in the sonic fabric of the work but appear to the listener transformed in different ways⁹. This fact refers to the approach worked out in the Quartet, where it was designated by the composer as 'active' concerning the Bull Variations and 'passive' concerning the Schoenberg fragment.

In opera, both strategies apply to the music of one author: it identified some of the original themes as 'alien', out of step with the general flow, while others 'dissolve', almost indistinguishable from the ear.

We observe various transformations of songs, such as using only the poetic text in 'The Violin Charms with a Tune', bringing the melodic line to a uniform rhythm in 'The Nut Tree', 'And Roses and Lilies', using a separate vocal part and accompaniment ('The Nut Tree'), transposing a brief fragment ('The Lullaby of a Mountaineer'), and changing the majoration of the primary source ('The Nut Tree', 'The Enigma', 'And Roses and Lilies', 'The Smith's Song').

Table 3 shows that quotations of various kinds are arranged in such a way that the 'alien' material is gradually emancipated in the opera, and the song 'I am not angry' is performed in its original guise (in the basic key, in the original texture, with the melodic line and language preserved). Except for this song, the author works with this layer of musical material uniformly, using transposition, changing of majoration, and rehearsal.

⁹ [4]Sion, P. ap The Music of Michael Nyman: Texts, Contexts and Intertexts / P. ap Sion. — Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007, 59-60.



Table 3 - Transformation of Shumanian material in M. Nyman's opera

<i>Schumann song</i>	<i>Episode from Nyman's opera</i>	<i>Transformations Primary source</i>
'The viol tune char in 20- ms' 's (v ol s. 27)	Part 1, First Examination (vols. 51-55)	Only text is used
'Hazelnut' (vols. 2-4) Accompaniment texture cell	Part 1, Shoe (vols. 236-238) Part 1, Shoe (vols. 271-277)	Changed rhythm (smoothed dotted line in melodic phrase), augmentation of majorations, phrase moved down b3 transposed in key As-major
'The Enigma (vols. 1 - 5)	Part 2, Dressing Rituals (Vols. 427-434, 474-484)	Changed rhythm (smoothed dotted line in melodic phrase), augmentation of majorations, phrase moved down b3 transposed in key As-major
'The Highlander's Lullaby (vols. 1- 4)	Part 2, Dressing Rituals	Transposed in E flat-major
'I'm not angry' (in full)	Part 2, House Call The	Sounds unchanged



	(Vols. 533-567)	
'Both roses and lilies' (vols. 1 - 8)	Part 2, Rose (vols. 908-924)	Vocal part transported to A flat-major, rhythm smoothed, majoration augmentation
'The Blacksmith's Song' (vols. 1 -3)	Part 2, Paintings (Vols. 1304-1309)	Smoothed of rhythm, diminution majorations, repetition

The emergence and concentration of borrowed material support the musical dramaturgy of the opera. In the first movement, Schumannian fragments appear sporadically, as uncomplicated allusions (e.g. only the recitation of the German text from the song 'With a Tune the Violin Enchants') and interspersed with original Nyman material, most of it inspired by Schumann¹⁰. In the second movement, the Dressing Rituals section (in the story, when Professor P takes in the second movement, the Dressing Rituals section (in the story, when Professor P takes his wife for a hat), and Dr C finally diagnoses his patient, the amount of transformed material increases. Here Nyman builds up the 'tension', which culminates in a lengthy 'I'm not angry' quote¹¹.

The transformations of 'I am not angry' are different, and the composer refers to them as 'montage-like'. His choice was based on the musical potential of the source, a 'sequence of repetitive eighths'. He defines the nature of the work with the theme: 'The functional harmony [of the song] gradually disintegrates into figures, separates into patterns, losing its 'representational' quality through a simultaneous process of accelerating and slowing down the melody, harmonic changes.

In this way, creating the analysed opuses appears quite consistent with the patterns of bricolage. The technique of bricolage is inherently 'secondary'; it is based on working with ready-made objects and is broadly linked to several steps: selection-analysis-recombination. In the second movement, the Dressing Rituals section (in the story, when Professor P takes his wife for a hat), and Dr C finally

¹⁰ [11]Nyman M. Interview by V. Anderson / V. Anderson // Journal of Experimental Music Studies (Reprint Series). URL: http://www.experimentalmusic.co.uk/emc/Jems_files/nyman1983interview.pdf (accessed: 02.01.2023).

¹¹ [7] Sion, P. ap The Music of Michael Nyman: Texts, Contexts and Intertexts / P. ap Sion. — Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007, 242 .



diagnoses his patient, the amount of transformed material increases. Here Nyman builds up the ‘tension’, which culminates in a lengthy ‘I’m not angry’ quote compositional process. He also states that all his works share a common principle: ‘to take an object apart and put it back together again’ [5].

Results

We have found that the obligatory stages in Nyman, the composer’s work, boil down to the separation of borrowed material, its systematisation and the creation of a new artistic whole based on the elements selected from the source material. His works embody the idea of dialogue ‘with a collection of instruments and materials’, described by Lévi-Strauss as characteristic of bricolage. In the opera, the author, in his own words, ‘tried to construct a Nyman-Schuman creative dialogue¹². I wanted, so to speak, to hold the Schumann pen in my hands’.

Reliance on bricolage technology makes the principles of combinatory relevant for Nyman, as well as individual techniques borrowed by him from minimalism: its effect extended to different layers of the musical text: bars, harmonic framework, rhythmic drawings, and texture lines. More often than not, the composer turned to minimalist means: pattern construction, additions, subtractions, building up of texture lines, crystallisation of thematic relief, patterns of practice and variations on basso ostinato less often to counterpoint techniques. Besides working with other composers’ material, Nyman ‘reworks’ his own previously composed works, expanding the boundaries of his technique¹³.

As a result, Bricolage ‘in Nyman’s way’ can be understood both narrowly - as the choice of a primary source and the combination of its elements in a new work, and broadly - as the bringing together of all the formative means under the sign of a single strategy. In the music of the British composer, bricolage actualises the pragmatic side of compositional creativity, accentuating such meanings of the word ‘to compose’ as ‘to compose’, or ‘to arrange’.

Thus, by interpreting Nyman’s opuses from the perspective of bricolage, we see this authorial technique among others emerging in the artistic practice of the twentieth century. Of particular value for us is the parallelism that emerges between Nyman’s words: ‘I do not hide that I steal...’ and the phrase attributed to various artists, including Igor Stravinsky: ‘A good composer does not imitate - he steals.

¹² [10]Yap B.T.W. The Composer as a Bricoleur: Notions of Contemporary Opera in Genesis of a Short Film: Thesis of the Degree of Master of Arts / B. Tsok Wee Yap. – Edit Cowan University Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts. – 2016. – 141 p.

¹³ [12] Lévi-Strauss C. Myth and Meaning: Cracking the Code of Culture. London: Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005, 48.



Stravinsky's words are an adaptation of an aphorism by the poet T.S. Eliot: 'Immature poets imitate, while mature ones plagiarise' [3].

However, behind these similarly formulated ideas are different aesthetics. If Stravinsky's work belongs to that conception of creativity which developed in the music of the New Age, Nyman's works reflect the practice of 'post-composition' - one of the specific phenomena of postmodernism.

Conclusion

1. Nyman's technique is essentially close to bricolage;
2. Nyman's bricolage is linked to a specific composing strategy that involves analysing the source material, selecting material, recombining it based on a new compositional logic;
3. When creating bricolage works, Nyman turns to combinatory, minimalist techniques and the elements of sound-form.



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