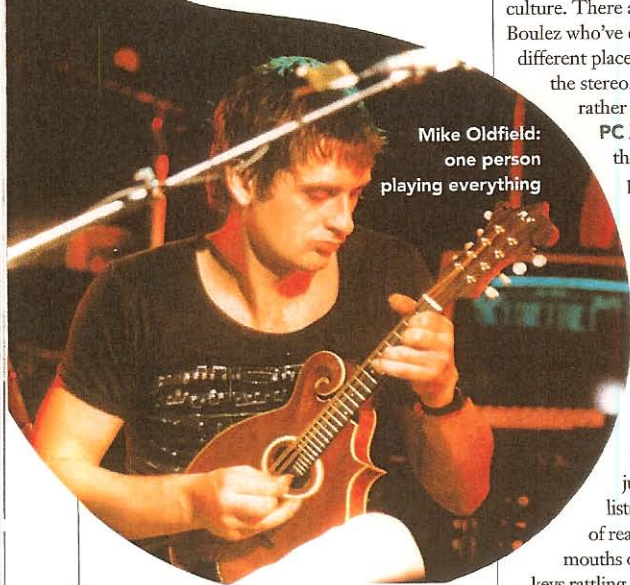


Can rock learn anything from classical music?

Philip Clark asks two musicians, **Tim Hodgkinson** and **Mike Oldfield**, what effect classical music has on rock composers like them



Mike Oldfield: one person playing everything

PC You emerged as musicians associated with different spheres of the rock scene in the 1970s, Tim in radical rock band Henry Cow and Mike as composer of *Tubular Bells*. That was a time when rock music was absorbing influences from everywhere; what impact was classical music making?

TH There was always an input of ideas from how composers worked. Mike, I know, was associated with David Bedford, and there were various people around who were pushing things that way, like Tim Souster. I started listening to Bartók and Messiaen and thought it was great stuff – it had energy that you could transfer to rock.

MO I was interested in classical music of all periods, from Bach and Handel to Bartók and Ligeti. When I came to write my own music, I chucked it all in, shook it about and saw what came out. I was into folk, rock and classical music, and was interested in what combinations of these musics might work together. If I had a bass-line that sounded Baroque, I'd ask "what would Irish bagpipes sound like over the top of that?"

PC The main point is, for both of you, the music you produced at this time was influenced by possibilities in the studio.

MO Definitely. Through mixing in the studio you make the music come alive and find new perspectives. If there's a big mass of sound, there might be one little detail that I can zoom in on in the mix.

TH Rock music was born along with the idea of exploring what you could do creatively with recording. If you're going to record your piece, how are you going to record it? Even today classical musicians don't really think that way. The idea of a recording being more than just documentation of a piece seems alien to that culture. There are sharp people like Pierre Boulez who've explored having instruments in different places from where they should be in the stereo, but that's been the exception rather than the rule.

PC Mike – what influence has the studio had on the way you perceived your new orchestral piece, *Music of the Spheres*?

MO I wrote it like I would have done a normal *Tubular Bells*-type album where I play everything, but then there was a stage of considering the music orchestrally. I decided to write for orchestra because, quite simply, it was the only thing I hadn't done before. Karl Jenkins helped me score it and I've just spent a wonderful two months listening to nearly a hundred tracks of real musicians. Fingers on strings and mouths on woodwinds – you can hear the keys rattling on the oboe. For someone with

my background that's so refreshing. As music has got more and more computerised and sampled, to the point where many artists only use samples, the result has become a facade. Even if it sounds great, it isn't real.

TH A hundred tracks! You couldn't have done that in 1973! When we went back to remaster early Henry Cow tracks we discovered the complete shambles that was the standard of the period. Things changed track for no apparent reason. Did you find the same with the masters of *Tubular Bells*?

MO Yes, and it's left me with a terrible mistrust of sound engineers. When we tried to remix *Tubular Bells* in quadraphonic, we discovered that the actual tubular bell was distorted. I'd hit it with a massive hammer which essentially demolished it and shattered the value in the microphone. The sound engineer insisted we try it again, but nothing seemed better than the first attempt. Then I realised it was the distortion that gave the sound real character. It was the feeling that, you can't get any more out of the tubular bell, it's about to burst.

PC What classical models are there in *Music of the Spheres*?

MO Every classical piece I've ever liked! In my garage is a big trunk containing my old classical vinyl collection that hasn't seen the light of day since 1976. I bought a USB turntable from PC World, and you can still hear the beautiful sounds through the crackle. As I move around the planet I hear things that become absorbed, and it's all there when it's time to make my music. If you're really lucky some originality ferments. I now see *Tubular Bells* as being at the end of a line. It came out and was successful, but it didn't spawn lots of copies.

PC Did you have trouble living up to its success?

MO Oh yes. They wanted me to make another one. The guys at Virgin were rubbing their hands with glee at the thought of the pound signs. I made this pastoral piece based on a Welsh hilltop. It sold about seven copies.

PC How much do you think the fact you played all the instruments on those early records shaped the music?

MO It was cohesive because it was one person playing everything. As the years went by it became more and more programmed. But it's the humanity that makes the music come alive. If you listen to modern rock'n'roll production, it's "perfect" and it's "powerful" but it doesn't compare to scrappy old 1960s Rolling Stones recordings. Those records are all out of time and the recorded sound is awful, but the music moves and has life. Classical music has lasted hundreds of years and doesn't show any sign of becoming less popular. Rock'n'roll started in the 1950s and, at least creatively, has died. Why is that? What gives classical music that longevity?

TH I think it may be because classical music has collected an enormous amount of cultural value. But the point about rock music is that it represented youth rebellion against all that

music grown-ups like. Rock music was eventually eaten up by commercialism, and I'm interested to see how equipped classical music is to deal with similar forces. It's got this great big cultural capital to it; all those orchestras, all that money, all that belief. It's a huge thing. It would take a lot to bring it down. But the music the classical industry promotes often isn't so interesting. I see Mike's interpretation as being rather optimistic.

PC Something that *Tubular Bells* and the music Henry Cow played has in common was an interest in unusual time signatures. Where did that come from? Dave Brubeck? Stravinsky?

MO I was just trying to keep up with people like David Bedford and Lol Coxhill.

TH Lol didn't know about 7/8, did he?

MO Yes he did.

TH But he didn't play in 7/8.

MO We all did 7/8, 5/8 and 13/8. I wanted to do it and I just accepted it.

TH The early version of Henry Cow was basically a blues band, and when I had to play in 7/8 it was quite a shock. In all honesty, I couldn't really do 4/4 properly. I guess Brubeck was important to the realisation of other time signatures, and my own personal background was in jazz. I couldn't listen to rock music at first. I just couldn't get the thing about singing. I thought The Beatles were, like, really naff. But friends insisted on sitting me down and playing me rock, and I suddenly understood that people could sing about something and it had a point.

Oldfield revealed that his indoctrination into rock was as a "volunteer engineer" who inadvertently "wiped" a Henry Cow take in the studio. But it had a profound effect...

MO Working as an engineer, I realised there was a different way of approaching music. The music world has become so obsessed with categories, but music is really just vibrations in the air. On my third album I used an African troupe. They're just musicians and they played brilliantly, but I didn't see them as "ethnic".

PC Classical composers always have to be aware of the dangers of Western cultural superiority surely? The problem of composers exploiting jazz and folk music to gain street cred without fully engaging with the cultures never goes away.

TH Composers have proved to be very good at exploiting jazz. I knew Michael Tippett, but I thought the way he attempted to get jazz into some of his pieces was terrible. It sounded so naff because it needed to be played right. Bernstein knew how to do it. *West Side Story* is great, but landed him in a conflict where he felt he wasn't been taken seriously as a composer. There are lots of famous people who get upset for not being famous in the right way.

PC Tim, you said earlier that rock music could gain from the "energy" of classical music, which surprised me a little.

TH Well, there doesn't seem to be much point in classical music drawing on Prog Rock for instance, because that's just handing the

same influences back. There is the rock music which is the opposite of what Mike and I did – something much more stripped down and violent; "proper" rock, punk and heavy duty hard-core R&B. I've been amazed at how classical composers will say they like rock music, but the people they cite are really dull. I hope experimental musicians would like Zappa or Captain Beefheart, but they tend to go for middle-of-the-road things.

PC How do you see politics impinging on your work? Tim, you have an allegiance to hard-left politics; Mike, you seem apolitical.

TH I've always thought that the "thing" itself – the music – is the most important thing. The message has another role, but if the music is crap then there's no point. I remember hearing People's Liberation Music led by Cornelius Cardew. He'd switched from the radical musical avant-garde, working with Stockhausen and dealing with Boulez, to the political avant-garde, but he went from good classical composition to bad rock. The lyrics tried to cram lines about "British imperialists out of Northern Ireland" on top of phrases that they wouldn't sit on. They thought it was OK because they were articulating a message. But that's rubbish – if you're going to do music, that's what you're doing.

MO I'm trying to understand because I've never seen a connection between music and politics. It's like trying to connect football with croquet.

TH It all depends on how you view politics. Some think politics just happens on the radio and in Westminster; but there was a moment in the 1960s where it all flowed together. I was very confused myself. For a few months I thought we should put LSD in the water supply and the world's problems would be solved. It's about putting individualism aside and thinking that, through collective effort, the world might change.

PC Mike, did you think about how an audience might relate to a piece like *Tubular Bells*?

MO Tim, you were there, on keyboards, when we played it at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in the early 1970s? I thought it was a disaster but the audience loved it.

PC What was disastrous about it?

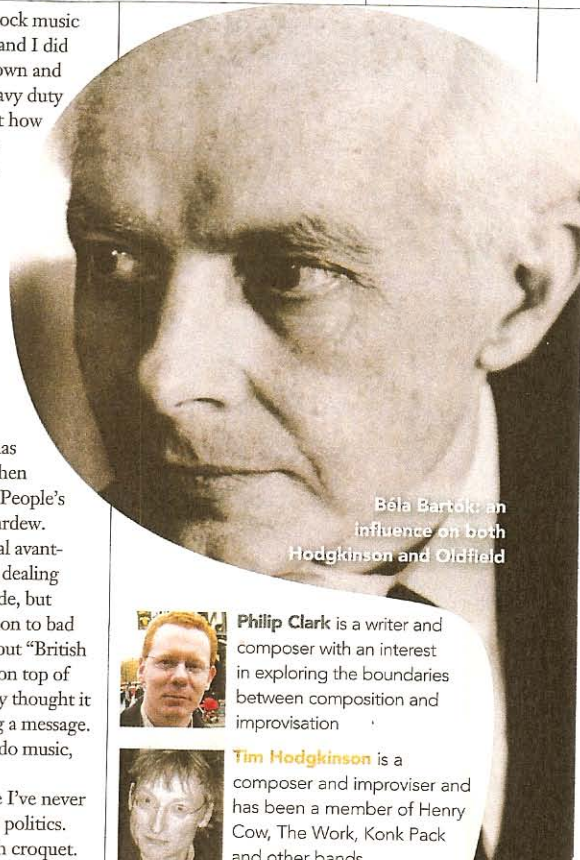
TH We didn't play anything in the way Mike wanted us to! I remember you weeping in the corner. It was so different from your vision.

MO I remember watching musicians moving their fingers and notes happened to come out. But when I played it in the studio I was the music. That's the last time I wrote everything out. I wrote out your part myself. It took ages.

TH I know and you wrote it out wrongly. That's why I couldn't play it!

PC And on that bombshell... ☹

Continue the debate at the Forum at www.gramophone.co.uk
"Music of the Spheres" is released by UCJ



Béla Bartók: an influence on both Hodgkinson and Oldfield



Philip Clark is a writer and composer with an interest in exploring the boundaries between composition and improvisation



Tim Hodgkinson is a composer and improviser and has been a member of Henry Cow, The Work, Konk Pack and other bands



Mike Oldfield is most famous for 'Tubular Bells' – the first Virgin Record – and his music ranges from concept albums to pop songs

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TIM HODGKINSON

TULLY POTTER, LÉPO MUSTO / REX FEATURES, MAURO CARROIO / REX FEATURES