Introduction

I am a classical guitarist with a strong, lifelong, interest in contemporary music. As the scores by Ferneyhough, Dillon and others were published, I looked in vain for some help with how to begin to approach learning the pieces. The recordings that gradually became available were a clear indication that it was possible to play them but the performers wrote virtually nothing about their methods of preparation. I subsequently found that some performers of other instruments had written about their own methods but I began to suspect that no one approach could be considered superior to another. The diversity of approaches was initially confusing, the requirements of the music seemingly quite clear. This thesis can therefore be considered to be a performer’s guide to learning new complexity repertoire based on my evaluation of these methods. Part Two contains three case studies that detail my readings of the scores (from a performer’s rather than an analyst’s point of view). Performance notes are given and detailed fingerings can be obtained from me directly. These implicitly show the results of the decisions that I needed to make. The case studies will hopefully be a resource for those guitarists with an interest in the repertoire who are similarly confused about how to go about learning it.

Performers of other instruments might find Part Two helpful. The guitar is essentially a contrapuntal instrument so the rhythmic problems are not restricted to one voice but to the relationships between voices. Different voices might also contain very different articulation marks and dynamics. The guitar can convey a huge variety of timbre, percussive effects, harmonics etc. There is also a great range of non-standard effects and composers often invent more. Scordatura is possible thus enabling some use of microtones. A degree of pitch ‘bending’ is also possible. These attributes may be the reason why so many composers (including those considered to be new complexity composers) are drawn to the instrument. Most have written for the solo instrument as well as using it extensively in ensemble. Thus, while the specific idiosyncrasies of other instruments are not
addressed, the essence of the approach to studying the scores is likely to be the same.

Part One of this thesis contains an account of new complexity as it developed during the 1980s and early 1990s with the views of the composers and performers critically evaluated. Methods of learning and solving the problems are given and recorded performances analysed. The question of how accuracy relates to an aesthetically acceptable performance is discussed.

Whilst several composers and performers have been consulted in the course of this research, my primary interest was not so much in what they say, but in the results of their work as documented in recordings. Performers will often say what they do to learn the works and what their criteria are for analysing the scores for performance. There is often a mismatch. The cynical interpretation of this must be avoided but there is the possibility of a degree of self-deception. Their recordings, though, must be taken as their considered views (at a particular time) of how they perceive the works. This research is therefore based substantially on the published words of composers and performers and the recordings.

My hope is also that more guitarists will become as enthused as I am with this repertoire; we have music by highly regarded composers that is just not played, and if this work helps to promote more performances, then that would be of great satisfaction to me.