Chapter Three

Complexity after Toop’s Facets

3.1 Introduction

Toop's paper contributed to the idea of complexity – increasingly known as new complexity - as being more than a putative musical genre. Whilst Ferneyhough and the composers loosely associated with complexity continued to be enthusiastically performed, sceptics continued to question the aesthetics of complexity and indeed its viability as a genre at all. The two significant events following the publication of Toop’s paper were the festival Complexity in music? An Inquiry Into Its Nature, Motivation and Performability in Rotterdam, held between 8th and 10th March 1990 and the Perspectives of New Music volumes 31 and 32 in 1993/4. The festival was a series of concerts, lectures and forums with the purpose of elucidating the issues for composers, performers and listeners. The curator, Joel Bons, compiled a questionnaire to which 36 responses were received and published in the booklet Complexity? (Bons 1990). These responses consisted mostly of short essays with few respondents giving direct answers to every question. Of the 36 responses, 20 were from composers, 11 from performers (including conductors and one composer and conductor), 4 musicologists and one poet. Two of Toop's representative composers, Dench and Barrett, responded with short essays but Finnissy simply submitted a score1. Whilst there was no contribution from Dillon it is unthinkable that he would not have been invited to participate and one of his pieces Spleen was indeed scheduled for performance during the festival2. The contributions from the performers, in so far as they relate to the process of learning new complexity repertoire, will be summarised in the next chapter but it is worth giving here a précis of some of the views of the other composers. Dench and Barrett, the composers already interviewed by Toop, must be examined carefully, especially where they offer information about their aesthetics that might
be useful to the performer. Whilst they abhor their association with new complexity they are, apart from Finnissy, keen to elaborate on their ideas. Clearly, these are of importance as they are here unmediated by Toop’s selective quotations from his interviews with them for his paper. The means by which they explain their compositional methods and their views on the psychology of musical perception, could be construed as having the paradoxical effect of reinforcing the notion of complexity (faux de mieux new complexity), in some form or other, as a fundamental part of their compositional aesthetics. These précis are followed by short critical commentaries. Some views from the other composers will then be very briefly summarised.

This will be followed by a similar analysis of papers from the Perspectives of New Music volumes.

Dillon did not contribute to either the festival or the PNM volumes, but following a performance of one of his pieces at a promenade concert in 2010, he was interviewed by the BBC for a Composer’s Portrait program. A summary of some of his views will be given as they give some insight to his aesthetic concerns and are therefore of interest to the performer.

It will readily be seen from all the contributions that such a wide diversity of views about complexity precludes a purely thematic presentation. The discussion at the end of the chapter will identify some common threads and counter arguments will be made for the purpose of elucidation. Performers might find this a useful synoposis of the aesthetic concerns (at the time) of some of the composers associated with new complexity.

### 3.2 The Complexity? booklet

Barrett saw the ‘syndrome’ of complexity as a ‘misleading prioritisation’. Whilst some of the symptoms of this syndrome might be textural density, performative difficulty and structural intricacy, none could be said to define a ‘style’ (Barrett
1990, 11). He is not interested in the categorisation. To the intrinsic complexity of musical phenomena, which is under the composer’s control, must be added the complexity of perception/reception by the auditor, which is not. The listener filters the music through pre-existing societal contexts. He would like listeners to develop their own ‘traditions of hearing’ (Barrett’s quote) but the education system militates against this. A further consequence of this is that performers are ill prepared to ‘examine the implications of a music whose notation refuses a simple ‘equation’ between itself and a hypothetical sound’ (Barrett 1990, 11). The necessity to see beyond the notation to the ‘grain of the music’; to see beyond the surface virtuosity so as to emphasise the expressive characteristics, is fundamental to the adequacy of an interpretation of his music. A refusal to engage with these notions will result not only in the failure of an interpretation but an ‘inadequate failure’.

This issue pervades new complexity: are there objective criteria to discriminate between such theological issues as successful and unsuccessful, adequate and inadequate performance of music whose realisation entails a non-standard view of the score as the descriptor of musical action? If the notion of ‘inadequate failure’ is to be introduced is the compensating corollary of an adequate failure to be explored? Barrett is unrealistic in expecting listeners to develop their own ‘traditions of hearing’ in one sense but in another sense that is what they already do; listening is itself a complex phenomenon in which the educational system plays only a part.

Dench asserts that, for him, music is the medium by which the metaphorical nature of human thought can be revealed. Our understanding of ourselves can therefore only be metaphorical and hence mythic. Myths embody non-narrative, complex internal relationships. Music is therefore the most effective means by which the myths of humanity can be understood. There is an equivalence between musical, metaphorical and mythological meaning. This logic requires him to demand that ‘Expressivity is not enough, music must also demonstrate its meaning, and that meaning must be incorporated into the fabric of the music at every level.’ (Dench 1990, 14). He further demands (in recognition of the essential uniqueness of the
world) the quality of a ‘ceaselessly unforeseeable originality’ and that the surface of the music ‘be as transparent to the mythical undercurrent as possible; the atoms of the music should be distributed like traces to reveal the force fields by which they are articulated’ (Dench 1990, 14). He makes further demands of a similar nature, the purpose being to ‘map that sound world into the fabric of human meaning’ (Dench 1990, 14). He allows that, while this is an explanation of his thought processes that bring each work into existence, the music might have its effect by some other means.

This is an almost solipsistic position in that, as Barrett pointed out, the composer has no control over the reception of his or her music. How should the performer try to mediate between the composer and audience? Dench’s demands on his compositions lead to the, perhaps uncomfortable, conclusion that it is doubtful that a performance practice (of Dench’s music) can exist on a pragmatic level.

It is interesting to compare Dench’s thoughts expressed in Complexity? (as summarised above) with those he expressed in Toop’s paper as the differences might be indicative of a development in his thinking. Toop does say however that Dench asserts his right to contradict himself (Toop 1988, 19). As reported by Toop, Dench says nothing about myth or metaphor and the ability of music to be the means by which such meaning can be conveyed. He does say he believes ‘the only reason human beings are able to communicate is because there are certain kinds of brain phenomena which are congruent throughout humanity’ (Toop 1988, 19). This seems quite plausible but inadequate to convey the complexity, indeed the richness, of human existence (signified not least by cultural artefacts) and the subtlety of musical phenomena. It often seems the other way round: that musical phenomena have a way of generating, or provoking, unique human emotional and intellectual responses that are unlikely to be conveyed by any other means. Toop also states that Dench ‘admits to an almost bewildering diversity of origins and inspirations, unified only by the fact that they are all 20th century’ (Toop 1988, 7). Dench is referring specifically to his musical influences and it is understandable that his musical directions might be fashioned by the cultural milieu in which he finds himself. Combining this with his later writing, the inference must be that, for
Dench, while the mythological undercurrents must be age old – timeless perhaps – their re-expression through contemporary composition must be by ways that are ‘ceaselessly’ original.

3.3 The contributions by other composers in the Complexity? booklet

Of the two interviews with Ferneyhough, the first is a reprint of a conversation that took place in 1982, so cannot be said to be a response to Toop’s paper. In the second, written in 1990 (Ferneyhough 1990), he (understandably) makes many points about complexity that he has made several times before. For the performer, Ferneyhough reiterates his distinction between fidelity and exactitude – the former necessary and the latter not – for assessing the adequacy of a performance. He does not elaborate on just how fidelity might be perceived in a performance but he does state that:

If the score may be understood as being a constant ‘token’ of the work of which it is the notated form, any and all performances which represent a conscious attempt to realize that score are valid interpretations. (Ferneyhough 1990, 19)

Asked about the limits of the perceivable Ferneyhough states, ‘Observation of textural niceties is not necessarily very rewarding without some feel for the *scale* of events within which these elements are embedded’ and that it is ‘up to the work to make plausible its individual integration of nuance and structure’ (Ferneyhough 1990, 19).

Toop’s contribution to the booklet is, unexpectedly, one of the shortest. For him complexity lies in the relationships between elements of the musical material that, if the work is successful, results in a richness of perception. (Toop 1990, 37) He elaborates on this in his paper in *PNM* that will be summarised in the next section. Jonathan Harvey makes the distinction between the complexity in compositions by, for example, Xenakis, where the notational details become subsumed into a
perceptual ‘unity’ and the complexity of Ferneyhough where they do not (Harvey 1990, 25). He thinks perception is potentially unlimited but suspects many composers are insufficiently discriminatory – unable to perceive the subtleties of their notation. He states ‘Real complexity is finer perception’ (Harvey 1990, 25).

He finishes with a challenge to all the composers associated with complexity:

At any historical moment, a composer should write only things he can mentally play, conduct, tap out, etc. Otherwise abstraction (dehumanisation) wins over revolution (an advance in human evolution). Players are often correct in detecting which is which. (Harvey 1990, 25)

The Dutch composer Theo Loevendie holds a conservative position: ‘Complexity in one field often causes a loss of complexity in another’ (Loevendie 1990, 28). For example, the lack of a perceptible pulse causes a catastrophic loss of rhythmic complexity. Karel Goeyvaerts makes a similar point; the exploration of new compositional resources results in discoveries of new possibilities for musical expression. The acceleration of this process since the 1950s has not resulted in a concomitant development of musical perception by even trained listeners. (Goeyvaerts 1990, 23)

Following the cancellation of three performances of one of his orchestral works, Milton Babbitt, a self admitted ‘representative of old complexity’ saw the problem as one of performers being inadequately trained, comfortable with their conservative repertoire. (Babbitt 1990, 10)

3.4 The Perspectives of New Music volumes

In 1993, the journal Perspectives of New Music (PNM) initiated a Complexity Forum. This was the second significant event after Toop’s paper. Volume 31 contained three papers by Ferneyhough, Il tempo della figura, The Tactility of Time and Form,
Figure, Style: An Intermediate Assessment, which had all previously appeared elsewhere in translations. These were subsequently reprinted in his Collected Writings (Ferneyhough 1995). Volume 31 also contained a paper On Complexity by Toop – a paper version of his introductory talk for the Complexity in music? festival, Rotterdam in March 1990. This probably represents the development of his thoughts on the subject since his original paper. Also included are papers by the pianist, composer and conductor David Burge and composer Thomas DeLio. James Erber and Finnissy contributed scores. Volume 32 contained an interview with Ferneyhough conducted by James Boros (also reprinted under a different title in the Collected Writings), a text piece by Boros, a further analytical paper by Toop on Ferneyhough’s Carceri d’inventione I-III, and papers by the composers Barry Truax, Erik Ulman, Ezra Sims (who specialises in microtonal composition) and Daria Semegen, pianist Stephen Drury, and composer, pianist and poet, Stuart Saunders Smith. Most importantly this volume contains possibly the first detailed description by a performer, Steven Schick, of the process of learning a complex score – in this case Ferneyhough’s Bone Alphabet for solo percussion. Not surprisingly, the performers Schick and Burge took more pragmatic, less questioning views of complexity, evidently seeing their work as primarily to communicate the compositions in as faithful and persuasive a way as possible and not to be critical of the aesthetic stance of the composer whose work they were playing. The composers Boros, Truax, and Ulman were more interested in conveying their interpretations of the meanings of complexity, the compositional scope, the philosophical implications and role or work of the listener. As with the Rotterdam festival, it was a ‘complexity’ forum and not a ‘new complexity’ forum. Not all the contributors felt the need to restrict their views to the narrower area. It is of interest that the contributors to the Perspectives of New Music volumes were predominantly British or North American (and Canadian) whereas those contributors to the Complexity? booklet are overwhelmingly European (including British) with only two composers from the USA and one from Canada.

The papers in Complexity? are mostly short – sometimes aphoristic. Those in the PNM volumes are, on the whole, much more substantial. There were no papers by Barrett, Dench or Dillon but attention should be given to Toop’s paper. Short
précis of some of the other papers will follow in order to understand more fully how complexity/new complexity was seen in the wider academic sphere.

In *On Complexity* (Toop 1993), Toop takes a more historical view of complexity, emphasising that composers have always moved away from available, accepted norms by way of deeper exploration of musical material. The resulting compositions are rarely perceived as compositionally more ‘complex’. Even the well-informed listeners will usually express their opinions of the merit of the works in more general terms. Toop emphasises that we expect a work of art to inspire a complexity, or richness, of thoughts in any person willing to spend the time contemplating and exploring it, even if the composer’s aesthetic is obscure. Superficiality – not to be confused with simplicity or naïvety – is rarely seen as a positive attribute.

Toop attempts to tease out concepts that get confounded with ‘complexity’. Notions such as ‘complicated’, ‘intricate’ and ‘difficult’ are not synonymous with ‘complex’. All these terms can be applied to areas such as performance, conceptual appreciation or the appreciation of a sonic event. This is relevant to new complexity as one (dubious) aspect of the aesthetic is often said to be an appreciation of the heroic struggle of the performer to realise the composer’s intentions. Difficulty in performance is clearly dependent on the skills and experience of the performer. Toop makes the obvious, but important, point that musical ideas can be easily comprehensible from an intellectual stance but extremely difficult to achieve technically (e.g. Ferneyhough’s nested ‘irrational’ note groupings).

Toop does make an important point that applies to all composition:

difficulty in composing normally arises out of the struggle to come to grips with unfamiliar material. This is the difficulty of almost any kind of exploratory artistic intent: not a material difficulty in “doing it,” so much as the difficulty in “making it work,” and even in deciding what “making it work” means. Moreover ... one should not underestimate the
degree to which composers ... have also sought to make their own (compositional) lives difficult. This is not always a matter of transcendental aspirations; it may just be a flexing of artisanal muscle. Yet even here, it is always hard to determine at what point the slightly masochistic joys of compositional problem-setting and problem-solving mutate into something more elevated. (Toop 1993, 47)

For Toop it is in this situation that complex relationships might exist. Acknowledging the difficulties for the listener, he quotes William Byrd (writing in 1611) to the effect that, whilst in an initial hearing such music might be misunderstood, several hearings are necessary for a full appreciation⁵. Toop sees this as the justifiable need of the composer to ‘create something that resists immediate decoding, while seeking to offer some kind of incremental revelation through repeated listening’ (Toop 1993, 48). This attitude is not of course restricted to modernist composers. Toop finally gives his own view: ‘complexity is a subjective, perceptual phenomenon – not an objective, material-based one.’ (Toop 1993, 48) There must be the impression of ‘many levels of relationships’ that is sensed (on reflection) as ‘richness’ He is clear that the cause of these relationships could be ‘organic, mechanistic or even fortuitous’ (Toop 1993, 48).

Toop acknowledges the complexity and richness in some of the music by composers, such as Ockeghem, seeing Ferneyhough as being in much the same aesthetic tradition. He thinks such ideas as integral serialism and the statistical approach to compositional practice were necessary for the composers of the mid 20th century to explore, and sees the fruits of this work in the musical complexity and hyperexpressivity of Ferneyhough. New complexity might easily have been New Transcendentalism!

Toop writes as a musicologist, perceiving and analysing trends, common mores, not a composer explaining their own attitude to complexity and its aesthetics. To his argument about difficulties for the listener might be added an even more fundamental (perhaps simplistic) point: difficulty for the listener is essentially subjective. A lack of prejudice and a willingness to explore the ideas of
contemporary composers would therefore seem to be a prerequisite for there to be the possibility of coping with the labyrinthine ‘difficulties’ of much contemporary composition. Toop’s final view of ‘complexity as a subjective, perceptual phenomenon – not an objective material based one’ must be contrasted with Ferneyhough’s view that ‘Complexity’ needs to be seen more as a *terminus technicus* and less as a convenient blanket term for a style or school* (Ferneyhough 1990, 17). Toop is obviously referring to the fact that complexity isn’t a technique in the sense of serialism. Ferneyhough is referring to the relationships linking situations, tendencies or states (Ferneyhough 1990, 17).

3.5 Views of the other composers

James Boros, the guest editor, saw new complexity as a ‘grass roots’ movement (Boros 1993, 7). For Boros, artistic, creative activity has ‘always been associated with a reckless sense of adventure, with an inextinguishable need to explore the limitless inner space of the imagination.’ He was clear that the artistic aesthetic in his own work lies beyond pre-compositional activity, where mechanistic ideas may have a presence, and he saw musical complexity as having the potential to express the complexity of the world. (Boros 1993, 8)

He develops these ideas in the second part of his essay (Boros 1994). This paper contains his attempt to provide some way towards a definition of complex musical phenomena. His first concern is the connection between quantity and quality; the amount of information in the score is not an indication of musical complexity. The quality of the information resides in the relationships between different parts of the musical material that may be complex. The delivery of complex information does not necessarily correlate with complexity of audible reception – a stream of complex musical relationships is likely to be perceived as an undifferentiated ‘continuous ripple’ (Boros 1994, 91). Boros cites Xenakis and Feldman as being at opposite extremes of some sort of perceptual axis – by which he means that while the complexities of Xenakis’s music may be necessary to achieve his textures, they are unlikely to be perceived, whereas the complex subtleties and minute
details of Feldman are perceived as unpredictable disturbances to their ‘unfolding over time’ (Boros 1994, 91).

Boros's second point is ‘multifacetedness’ – the very fact of there being a perceptual overload implies an ambiguity of identity. Primary, secondary, foreground, background notions become superfluous when different performances are perceived by different individuals in a unique, contingent way. By the necessary act of selecting from the stream of musical information, each listener creates their own interpretive strategies and the lack of ‘ready-made aural handholds’ ensures uniqueness to the experience. Boros’s comparison here is with some minimalist music that he sees as ‘monolithic’ (Boros 1994, 91), the composer forcing the listener into a particular sonic experience. He sees this as ‘inflexible and authoritarian' (Boros 1994, 92).

Boros's third point is ‘intent’. He sees the ‘refusal on the part of many composers to submit to a stifling of the exploratory urge in favour of engaging in an open-ended search for a form that not only “accommodates the mess”, but that springs from and therefore mirrors in a genuine way the very chaos of our existence’ (Boros 1994, 92). Boros is quoting Samuel Beckett (Boros 1994, 98, footnote 8) and working with musical material beyond that which ‘received (Western European) knowledge accepts as musically viable’ (Boros 1994, 92). Boros is quoting Richard Barrett (Boros 1994, 98, footnote 7). He sees that much complex music has ‘ragged, tattered edges’ and lays bare its ‘imperfections, flaws, its intrinsic awkwardness’ (Boros 1994, 93).

The American pianist and composer David Burge takes a transparent, direct view in Mere Complexities (Burge 1993). He sees the public equating complexity with difficulty, forgetting that the complexity of the music of past generations has become less difficult through familiarity. He finds complexity impossible to define in either relative or absolute terms. Complexity in other art forms is equally problematic. Complex ideas might be presented simply and simple ideas might be presented by complex means. While our abilities to appreciate more complex ideas usually increase with age and experience, this does not of itself guarantee that the
knowledgeable listener will be sympathetic to new music or the younger, more inexperienced listener, less so. In addition, complexity of presentation is not necessarily indicative of complexity of structure. The performer’s duty is to present the complexities of the works in as lucid a way as possible so as to minimise the difficulties for the listeners, recognising that for most the music will be unfamiliar. Rather controversially he sees the performer’s job as being to bring out the ‘beauty of the music’ (Burge 1993, 62).

The Canadian electro-acoustic composer Barry Truax takes a broad view of complexity in *The Inner and Outer Complexity of Music* (Truax 1994). The narrow, compositional, parametric (pitch, rhythmic, dynamic etc) view of ‘inner’ musical relationships (Truax 1994, 177) is essentially a simplistic view of complexity! Merely continuing a linear extension of traditional musical forms ignores other relationships (acoustical, psychological, sociological etc) that are manifestly complex. Composers must not ignore the wider context.

Truax proposes three levels to his perception of the paradigm shift away from the traditional models of (presumably) art music in society. The first is the acoustic and psychoacoustic. The second is the compositional process and the idea of the score. The third level is the relationship of music to the outside world. Truax recognises that a simplistic one-to-one mapping of the external world into the interior musical world does not usually result in works of musical depth or sincerity, being either programmatic or transparently manipulative (e.g. music used to enhance or stimulate political activity or music composed specifically for advertising purposes for the benefit of the corporate sector).

Truax thinks that the current ‘inherited’ paradigm of contemporary ‘abstract’ music ‘promotes the illusion of context free art.’ (Truax 1994, 180) To develop his concept of context Truax presents three categories, or levels, where he believes complexity can reside: the physical, the social and the psychological. The physical contextual level comprises all the aspects of the space in which musical events occur that are instantiated by some material phenomena such as the performance space and time, the instruments and the audience.
The social level ‘includes all of the material aspects of the context surrounding the musical performance that only indirectly affect it’ (Truax 1994, 185). He cites social, political, cultural, economic and environmental factors. References and associations from the real world are resources for the composer.

The psychological level is that of ‘emotions, archetypes, imagery, metaphor, myth, symbols and dreams.’ (Truax 1994, 188) He notes the subliminal effectiveness of the use of music for advertising and the like, and how the ubiquity of music, or organised sound in one form or another in the real world, goes unnoticed.

In *The Inner and Outer Complexity of Music* (Ulman 1994), Erik Ulman focuses on new complexity and to what extent it can be considered a new genre. He starts by making the point others make: that the composers associated with it are so completely different stylistically, philosophically and temperamentally that connecting them with this label serves only to highlight some similarities of surface details and obscure the variety, depth and richness of their individuality. He notes this is the fate of all composers who become labeled and associated with schools, and mentions the New York School of Cage, Feldman, Wolff and Brown as an example. Labelling is usually rarely more than a journalistic convenience. Ulman is concerned that whilst all interesting music is complex, some music pursues and explores the implications of its rich multiplicity. Other music is purposely constrained for external reasons – perhaps communicative or performative. He writes:

> [Good art] defies immediate categorization (and assimilation), and from its often bewildering fertility unfold continually new experiences that reveal our capacities to us by testing and, perhaps, dissolving our limits. This is what I mean by “complexity”: a music that privileges ambiguity and subtlety, nourishing many paths of perception and interpretation. (Ulman 1994, 203)

This is very close to Toop’s view, though Ulman would include Feldman, Bussotti, Kagel and La Monte Young in his concept of complexity. At the same time he
recognises that some apparently complex works, while having some of the supposed attributes such as density of notation and performative difficulty, lack richness and subtlety. There is the danger of banality. Complex techniques might still result in dull works. It follows that, for Ulman, complexity inheres in the resulting perceptions and not the means by which these results are achieved.

Ulman recognises the power of the score as text and that the complexities of notation can be the psychological component which encourages (or forces?) performers to realise musical structures which written in any other way would produce results much less profound. He then points out the contrary position: that such notational complexities might mask the meagreness of the composer’s ideas, serving only to obfuscate critical examination. The probability of an inaccurate performance will only reinforce this view. Quoting his experience on listening to a performance of a work about which he was enthusiastic, he noted several inaccuracies. The fact that the performer took the license that the composer apparently sanctioned, Ulman concludes:

I was unconvinced that the score’s extreme rigour was necessary. This experience, coupled with my disappointment at hearing pieces whose scores had fascinated me, made me suspicious of some of my own recent work, whose “complexity” had been increasing: I was no longer certain whether my notation was commensurate with the density of ideas, or camouflaged their insufficiency. (Ulman 1994, 205)

3.6 James Dillon – his thoughts in 2010

As a counterpoise to the thoughts of the composers writing in the early 1990s, it is interesting to hear Dillon’s recent thoughts on complexity. These are extremely pertinent coming just over two decades after Toop’s first paper.

Following the BBC Proms 2010 performance of La navette, the BBC broadcast a Composer Portrait devoted to James Dillon7 (Hear and Now 2010). After first
stating that ‘in the end the only teacher is nature itself’, he describes himself as ‘responding to a certain kind of complexity in the world and it’s a very nuanced (complexity). I am interested in the smallest musical transition – the musical nuance itself’. He describes his fascination with the characteristics of playing itself, e.g. ‘the way that Glen Gould will take a note and the way that András Schiff will take a note – the way Muddy Waters will bend a note and the way that John Williams will not bend a note’. He finds ‘the smallest transition can have the largest effect, the most expressive effect’. His work is to ‘weave the microscopic information into a larger architecture’. Referring to complexity as a genre, he explained he had been trying to detach himself from the label for over two decades thinking it was ‘too associated with the look of the score’. He explains he was ‘trying to organise things which previously would be seen as the player’s business, because I was fascinated by the difference it made’. He was fascinated ‘by the act of interpretation’. Most importantly he thinks that what distinguishes western classical music, as against, for example Indian classical music, is the score: ‘The score enables one to move into a territory which is unimaginable at a more spontaneous level’.

In line with the other composers mentioned, Dillon’s compositional inspiration comes from the complexity of nature. It is odd that he wants to distance himself from the idea of new complexity as the definition given earlier seems to fit his ideas very closely. Most peculiar though is his interest in trying to work with the musical nuances that the performer brings to the composer’s score. Performers distinguish themselves from one another by these nuances. Any performer will rightly interpret any score adding another layer to the composer’s draft. So if the composer writes such a nuance this will inevitably be ‘interpreted’ by the performer in his or her own way – imposing a nuance on a nuance – to the extent that any original intention of the composer might be inadvertently occluded. In this way it is clear that Dillon’s idea is contradictory and that an interpretation cannot be prescribed. Furthermore, if he is interested in the complexity of the performer’s interpretive nuances, then that complexity will be there no matter what he writes. The nuance is indeed fascinating, but not in the composer’s purview. His insight
about the score as a means of provoking transcendental performances is extremely important and is resonant with Ferneyhough’s ideas.

3.7 Discussion and conclusion

While complexity is an ‘umbrella’ term that can accommodate very different interpretations, several points emerge from the above summaries. The first is that the composers rarely comment on the practicalities of performance. Barrett and Babbitt rail against the inadequacies of conservatoire training and Harvey insists the composer should be able to mentally play what they have written – a point Ferneyhough also makes in his interview with Sheridan (Sheridan 2005). Burge suggests the performer’s role is to bring out the beauty of the music. Toop is the only one to refer to the notion of the performer’s ‘heroic’ struggle to realise the composer’s intentions being part of the composer’s aesthetic – an idea not mentioned by any of the composers quoted here, although Barrett hints at it. The composers only comment on their own compositional and aesthetic concerns.

The notion of perception is raised several times. The problem is that perception cannot be prescribed for the listener. Barrett is aware of this and there is a sense that what is lacking is musical education. Dillon is fascinated by nuance but, as was pointed out, the performer’s mediation of the nuance will only result in a nuance on a nuance. This is likely to be perceived as a nuance. Ferneyhough is characteristically obscure when he remarks that it is ‘up to the work to make plausible its individual integration of nuance and structure’ and one wonders how this can be achieved. On the other hand, Loevendie and Goeyvaerts seem to see genuine appreciation of this overloading of perceptual information to be either impossible or unrealistic. This points to a conflict between the various views of what new complexity is. Does the wealth of detail result in such an overloading, or does it allow the potential for the appreciation of relationships between the elements of the musical material that can consequently be described as ‘richness’? Smith emphasises the need for concentrated listening (Smith 1994, 216) and DeLio (DeLio 1993, 65) requires listeners to immerse themselves in the composer’s
work. These are rather idealistic and possibly patronising as audiences generally prefer to determine how to appreciate the works themselves.

For some, complexity resides in context. This could be all-encompassing, as it is for Truax who considers the complexities of acoustical, sociological, economic and psychological relationships to be as important as those that are purely musical. All music exists in many contexts and listeners tend to value the ability to ignore other contexts as a prerequisite for appreciation of the composer’s work. Boros takes a slightly different view when he says that complexity in music has the potential to represent the complexity of the world. Dillon says he is responding to the complexity of the world. This is similar to Finnissy’s comment quoted in Chapter Two, but Kaija Saariaho makes the opposite argument in her essay in Complexity?:

Should our music reflect the endless information surrounding us, or should it reflect our personal way of filtering the world? The latter seems to me more interesting. (Saariaho 1990, 34)

Boros and Harvey make the distinction between the notational complexity of Xenakis and Ferneyhough. Xenakis’s textures are often built from small complex figures, his intention being that the auditor appreciate the totality of the resulting sonic experience. Perhaps this is what Ferneyhough means – the work demands this attention to scale. But does Ferneyhough want a similar level of attention to the macro events as opposed to the micro details of his scores? He does state that: ‘Observation of textural niceties is not necessarily very rewarding without some feel for the scale of events within which these elements are embedded’. There seems to be a difference between the composers as to the extent to which the recognition of the minutae is a part of appreciation of the composer’s aesthetic and we recall Harvey’s stricture that ‘real complexity is finer perception’.

The contributions of Barrett and Dench are so dissimilar they only emphasise the diversity of aesthetic concerns of new complexity and reinforce Ulman’s view of an uncomfortable commonality through labelling.
Ulman is a perceptive commentator whose ideas correspond closely with Toop's. Unlike Ferneyhough, Ulman finds complexity in the results and not the techniques by which they are achieved. The problem with his argument is that it applies to all music that pretends to communicate anything other than its superficial functionality. All music is complex and interesting to some degree to the particular individual listener. His stricture about 'good art' applies to Bach, Byrd, Monteverdi up to the present day and we do not need the concept of complexity or new complexity at all. It is *sine qua non* of art music. It must also be said that because Ulman finds that a particular work turns out, despite initial promise, to be banal, this does not imply that everyone else will come to the same conclusion and his subjective response is simply that. Ulman recognises this subjectivity.

Ulman admits the uncomfortable fact that notational complexity might mask the paucity of the composer's ideas. This is the cynical argument and it is persuasive. It is a thread that has run from the inception of new complexity to the present day. Ulman is about the only composer in the *Perspectives of New Music* Complexity Forum to address it. On the other hand, the value or worth of any cultural artifact takes time to accrue and judgement is always provisional.

The essays in *Complexity?* and the collection of papers in the *PNM* Complexity Forum show the range of views that composers, performers and musicologists had in the early 1990s. They tend to be concerned with their aesthetics and philosophical positions, understandably giving examples from their own works.

The performers generally demonstrate enthusiasm for the music they have undertaken to play, showing a keenness and determination to do justice to the work and thus serve the composer and the audience. Their views are sometimes helpful for showing how to solve some of the practical problems in the scores. These will be explored in the next chapter.

Toop's *Four Facets of 'The New Complexity'* (Toop 1988) focused on the words and works of the four composers following in Ferneyhough's wake and he was careful not to compare their work with his or use his ideas as a filter for theirs. This was
important if new complexity was indeed a new genre – a situation that was not clear at the time. A definition of new complexity can be found in *Grove’s Dictionary* and is quite close to that given at the beginning of Chapter Two. It is however, too narrow as it focuses largely on the highly descriptive aspects of the scores forgetting the fact that many of the scores contain large sections that are to a large extent indeterminate. A narrow definition of new complexity must necessarily include Ferneyhough’s work but runs the risk of excluding everyone else. A definition of new complexity that sees complexity, in the sense employed by some of the composers mentioned above, runs the risk of needing to include every composer who has ever lived.

Notes

1. Finnissy’s score was apparently only partially printed in the booklet. The lack of a final double barline however, might have been deliberate.

2. No pieces by either Dench or Finnissy were scheduled for the festival. There was one piece by Barrett and several by Ferneyhough.

3. Dench might be referring to ideas such as those expressed by Lakoff and Johnson (Lakoff and Johnson 1980)

4. The opposite is of course also true: the guitarist can also point to examples of idiomatic writing, which might be considered phenomenally complex by an audience, that rely on quite standard, and relatively easy (Grade 8 suffices) techniques. Villa Lobos’s *Etude 11* (Eschig) is an example.
5. The guitarist can usefully append the comment by Alonso Mudarra under a dissonant passage in his *Fantasía que contrahaze la harpa en la manera de Luduvico* in 1546 – ‘acerca del final hay algunas falsas; tañiéndose bien no parecen mal’ translated in the edition by Emilio Pujol as ‘From here on to the end there are some false notes: when played well they do not sound bad’.

6. A similar argument is made by Jerome Kohl about Stockhausen’s piece for tape, *Cosmic Pulses* (from *Klang*). Kohl found the density of material so great that there was ‘perceptual overload’ which just meant that in every performance the ear could focus on different musical events – “it is a different piece every time I hear it because I can’t possibly hear it all at once” (Hear and Now 2008). This excerpt is included with the supplementary data files.

7. (Hear and Now 2010) broadcast on 19th August 2010. The relevant extract is included with the supplementary data files.

8. See Groves online for the entry written by Christopher Fox.