

TEMPO

A QUARTERLY REVIEW OF MODERN MUSIC



EDITOR *Calum MacDonald*

VOLUME 58 NO. 228 APRIL 2004

2 xx ...



MAGICAL THEATRES: THE MUSIC OF PARAM VIR

Bernard Hughes

Introduction

Param Vir was born in Delhi in 1952 and has lived and worked in Britain since 1984. His greatest success has been in opera, and the two orchestral works in his catalogue also testify to a remarkable theatrical sensibility. Vir's music embodies and feeds off the contradictions of his life. Although rooted firmly in the modernist aesthetic of Western contemporary music, Vir's Indian background and education have left a mark on his music. His emigration has resulted in alienation from a national identity, leaving him an outsider both in India and Britain. He is contracted to a venerable English publisher – Novello & Co. – but is himself outside the contemporary music establishment and academy. These contradictions are reflected both in Vir's central themes of otherness and self-discovery and his exploration of exotic and colourful instrumental sonorities, which together make him an important and unusual voice in contemporary music.

Param Vir's major works are: *Before Krishna* (1987) for string orchestra; the double-bill of one-act operas *Snatched by the Gods* (1990) and *Broken Strings* (1992); *Horse Tooth White Rock* (1994) for orchestra; *Ultimate Words: Infinite Song* (1997) for baritone, piano and percussion ensemble; the full-length opera *Ion* (2003); and *The Theatre of Magical Beings* (2003) for an enlarged chamber orchestra. Of particular importance are *Broken Strings*, which marked a creative maturation for Vir and established the techniques which were his stock-in-trade throughout the 1990s, and *The Theatre of Magical Beings*, a work of symphonic dimensions and scope which exhibits several new technical features which may similarly provide points of departure for Vir's next projects.

'A fortuitous conjunction of influences': background and works to 1990

Param Vir's mother was a singer of classical Indian music, but Vir showed an early interest in Western music, learning the piano from the age of nine. From then on he pursued a Western music education, including composition lessons from a pupil of Schoenberg, apart from a period studying the *tabla* while at university. At 16 Vir read a newspaper article about Oliver Knussen, his exact contemporary, who was then enjoying the high-profile performances of his early success as a composing prodigy. This article was an inspiration to Vir – he still keeps the cutting – and it was fitting that Knussen was Vir's first teacher when he moved to Britain in 1984.

* Quotations, except where otherwise indicated, are taken from interviews with, and programme notes by, Param Vir.

After studying philosophy at Delhi University, Vir was 'discovered' while teaching in a secondary school in Delhi, where he was writing and producing collaborative musicals with the students on contentious topical themes, which brought him into conflict with the school authorities. He came to the attention of Peter Maxwell Davies, who initiated a scholarship for Vir to visit the Dartington Summer School in 1983, which led, the following year, to formal study at the Guildhall College in London.¹

In his first few years of work, under Knussen's tutelage, Vir met with considerable success, winning several international composing awards² and attracting the attention of the publishers, Novello. He quickly began receiving significant commissions, notably *Brahma*, *Vishnu*, *Shiva* for the London Sinfonietta Voices, and the opera double-bill commission for the Munich Biennale in 1992.

'I am not an Indian composer': issues of cultural identity

Vir is alive to the ambiguous status of his nationality: 'I have no interest in any kind of nationalistic agenda. I am neither an Indian composer nor a British composer. These categories don't actually mean anything at all to me.' Versions of this remark appear in almost all Vir's published interviews; but although he may be neither properly British nor properly Indian, it is in the collision of these two cultural sensibilities that his unique music originates. Vir's awareness of 'the need to be free of any culturally bound definition of myself, my roots, or my aesthetic stance'³ is partly the unwillingness of any artist to be pigeonholed – particularly in this case to be racially categorized; but Vir's music does not seek to escape its cultural location within the mainstream of Western avant-garde music.

However, without becoming complicit in any pigeonholing, or questioning the composer's assertion, it is legitimate to identify Indian-derived features of Vir's music. Although he uses exclusively Western instruments, Vir is attracted to unusual timbres, probably not as a consequence of a peculiarly Indian sensibility so much as because Western instruments are for him a 'second language'. His approach to scoring, particularly for percussion, has something of the air of a child in a sweet-shop, urgently trying a bit of everything. Some passages of his music can sound over-scored or lacking in restraint, although his orchestration is always vivid and distinctive.

An Indian mind-set is certainly evident in Vir's approach to rhythm. Vir uses *taal* as a structural device – large-scale chaconne-type designs underpinning entire sections – but he concedes 'my use of *taals* is idiosyncratic'. His irregular and rapidly changing metres, complex subdivisions of the beat and frequent avoidance of accented downbeats are clearly an Indian trait: 'for me thinking in fives and sevens was natural to the way I heard rhythm even as a boy'.

It is also the case that, despite Vir's distancing of himself from his Indian roots, all of his works, in the decade from *Before Krishna* (1987) have Asian subjects. Although Vir's music avoids being multicultural – and he has expressed a horror of 'crossover' music in the manner of *Bombay Dreams* – it successfully absorbs, transforms and integrates Indian vernacular features into a Western post-tonal idiom.

¹ Maxwell Davies conducted the première of *Horse Tooth White Rock* in 1994; he is also the dedicatee of *Snatched by the Gods*.

² His Kucyna Prize winning piece *Concertante* (1984) was revived by the Ensemble Modern in 2003 and is now Vir's earliest acknowledged work.

³ Param Vir, 'The Intergalactic Song', website essay.

In an interview Vir summed his early influences thus: ‘Ragas, talas, plainsong, Palestrina, Strauss, 12-tone rows and Greek ecclesiastical modes all meeting in the mind of a teenager in post-colonial Delhi.’ To which one could add: the insight and rigour of a student of philosophy, an artist’s eye for colour and contrast, and the experience in practical musicianship of working with children.

‘I’m going to the sea’: *Snatched by the Gods*

Param Vir had the good fortune and judgement to work with two exceptional writers on the librettos for his double-bill, *Snatched by the Gods* and *Broken Strings*, commissioned by Hans Werner Henze and premièred in an acclaimed production by Pierre Audi in Amsterdam in 1992. *Snatched by the Gods* was Param Vir’s second collaboration with the poet, translator and Bengali scholar William Radice (b.1951), both based on poems in Radice’s translation of Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941).⁴ *Broken Strings* was written with the playwright David Rudkin (b.1936), after the traditional Buddhist story *Guttal Jatak*.

Both librettists have written about their collaborations with Vir, and describe intense processes of re-drafting, in particular to re-imagine written narratives as living theatrical experiences. A large part of the success of these two operas must be ascribed to their librettos, a respect in which so many recent operas fail. *Broken Strings*, in particular, is a masterpiece – one of the most perfectly conceived librettos of post-war English opera.

Snatched by the Gods was composed in 1989-90, and *Broken Strings* in 1991-2. Where *Broken Strings* shows Param Vir establishing a technical vocabulary which sustained his works through the 1990s, *Snatched by the Gods* is a triumph of musical instinct. The source for *Snatched by the Gods* is a 183-line Tagore poem, which in the 1994 edition of his book Radice has re-titled *Devoured by the Gods*. Radice describes Vir’s opera as being an ‘electrifying reincarnation’⁵ of the poem.

The story tells of a pilgrimage by boat; a young boy, Rakhhal, stows himself away and persuades Maitra, the leader of the group, to let him come. His mother, in a fury, curses her son. After the journey and sacred festival, the pilgrims wait for the tide to turn to return them home. As the boat sets out, the current and wind rise and a ferocious storm imperils the boat. The pilgrims, in hysterical panic, claim that Rakhhal has brought them misfortune and must be sacrificed to appease the gods and save all their lives. Rakhhal is thrown into the water. In a terrible denouement ‘the boy’s drowning screams awaken Maitra’s conscience. As the sun sets and darkness falls, Maitra leaps into the sea.’⁶

The story has several points of similarity with the first of Britten’s church parables, *Curlew River*, whose story and theatrical manner borrow from Japanese drama. In both operas there is a pilgrimage by water, a last-minute addition to the party, a chorus of pilgrims who comment on, but also contribute to, the narrative, and a martyred child invested with supernatural significance by the pilgrims.

There are also similarities in the music, most notably in the writing for chorus. Example 1 shows a typical passage of Vir’s heterophonic choral writing setting simple scalar melodies, which is very similar in texture to passages in *Curlew River* (e.g. fig.16, or the chorus at fig.18).

⁴ Rabindranath Tagore, *Selected Poems* trans. William Radice (Penguin, 1994). The first collaboration was *Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva* (1988) – see Preface, p.8.

⁵ *ibid.*, Preface, p.8

⁶ From the synopsis by William Radice.

Curlew River was the score in which Britten first used a system of aleatoric notation, where players repeat fragments of music in independent tempos, a device also used by Vir (e.g. fig.69).⁷ Vir's opera has less hieratic ritual than *Curlew River*, being much more spontaneous and impassioned, but both operas share an essential, reductive quality which is fundamental to their theatrical articulation. *Snatched by the Gods*, however, without the redemption offered by Britten's Christianity, has no resolution. This profoundly disturbing piece is a parable with no comforting moral.

18 (Poco animato ♩ = 100c.)

MAITRA
Gods of the sea and ri - ver, ...

Pilgrim 1
Gods of the sea and ri - ver, ...

Pilgrim 2
Gods of the sea and ri - ver, ...

Pilgrim 4
Gods of the sea and ri - ver, ...

Pilgrim 5
Gods of the sea and ri - ver, ...

Mai.
Keep the boat sound, ...

P.1
Keep the boat sound, ...

P.2
Keep the boat sound, ...

P.3
Keep the boat sound, ...

P.4
Keep the boat sound, ...

Example 1:
First pilgrims' chorus from *Snatched by the Gods* (vocal parts only)

In all Param Vir's work there is a balance between spontaneity and premeditation which is a result of his working method. Early works like *Concertante* (1984) and *Contrapulse* (1985) use strict technical devices (respectively Stravinskian transposition-rotation technique⁸ and polyrhythm), and pieces from *Broken Strings* evince a systematic technical apparatus. Conversely, *Snatched by the Gods* is written almost entirely intuitively, without 'leitmotifs, thematic development, modes, or tetrachords'.

⁷ Vir may have come across *Curlew River* while studying with Oliver Knussen, whose father, Stuart, played the double bass in the première in June 1964. To complete a neat circle, Oliver's brother Ken played the double bass in the London première of Vir's *Ion* in October 2003.

⁸ An idiosyncratic serial method used in most of Stravinsky's late works starting with *Variations: Aldous Huxley in Memoriam* (1965) and also widely by Oliver Knussen, e.g. *Ophelia Dances* (1975).

What is pre-planned in this, as in all Param Vir's pieces, is the essential 'energy-template' of the work, in which the overall shape, what William Radice describes as the music's 'ebb and flow, the placing of climaxes, its beginning and end'⁹ is drawn onto a single sheet of paper, with the length of each scene, aria and chorus carefully calculated in proportion to the whole. Vir believes that 'all music is formed from energy'; it was this feature of Vir's music that first appealed to Radice. But beyond this level of planning *Snatched by the Gods* is held together only by the force of its dramatic momentum, and the strength of Vir's musical ideas. As with pre-serial Schoenberg, it is possible to write music in this way, but demanding and unpredictable, and Vir has not written another piece with such a slight endoskeleton.

'Ever with less, sing on': *Broken Strings*

For all their differences of dramaturgy, tone and musical palette there is a conceptual unity between the two halves of the double-bill: 'both operas deal with pilgrimage ... Both works deal with Shadow in a broad sense.' And although Vir says that 'in *Snatched by the Gods* ... we encounter here the perennial triangle of victim, persecutor and saviour', it is in *Broken Strings* that this triangular structure of relationships is used to unify all the levels of the work, from onstage action to the details of Vir's musical schema.

Broken Strings tells of two musicians auditioning for the post of Player to the King. The talented but arrogant Musil, confident of being chosen, is outraged to be rejected by the three Judges. An old man, Guttill, 'almost blind; stammering, out of practice, fumbling on his instrument ... but with a strange authority'¹⁰ begins playing, but quickly one of the strings on his instrument snaps – and yet he plays on. Another string breaks, and another, but Guttill plays on, producing ever more beautiful music. All are moved except the young Musil who interprets it as a trick which he seeks to imitate: he breaks all the strings on his own instrument, but in rising confusion is unable to produce any sound at all.

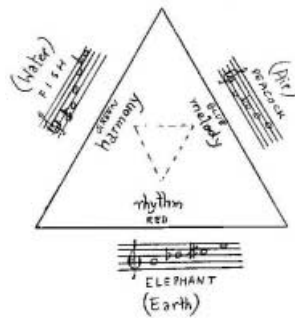
David Rudkin's account of the painstaking development of his libretto through eight versions, describes the three dramatic devices they used to transform the ancient legend into contemporary music theatre. In acknowledging that this was to be 'an opera *about music*'¹¹ it was essential to avoid postmodernism or satire, both of which are anathema to Param Vir. Firstly, they confronted the difficulty of realizing onstage 'playing'. This they decided to stylize completely, using an abstract design for the instrument itself. This freed the music from having to be representational, or imitate a particular timbre. Secondly, they set the story as a 'play within a play'; this alienated dramaturgy creates an extra audience-layer in the character of King, onstage spectator and later protagonist in the drama. Rudkin and Vir's third elaboration, springing from these previous two, is their invention of miraculous animals which appear and sing with each breaking string, in turn an elephant, a fish and a peacock, invisible to those onstage except the King. These supernatural beings, summoned by the power of Guttill's music, showering the piece with a magical otherness, are a quite breath-taking *coup de théâtre*.

⁹ William Radice essay 'Snatched by the Gods: writing the libretto'.

¹⁰ From the synopsis by David Rudkin.

¹¹ David Rudkin essay 'The Origins of *Broken Strings*'.

The composer, working with this libretto, is faced with several difficulties. How to create the 'glittering, impressive; but empty and cold'¹² playing of Musil without simply writing bad music? Vir rejected the idea of 'a reductionist battle of fashionable styles',¹³ such as using minimalism as shorthand for 'inferior' music. He opted instead for a musical metaphor: Musil's music has no bass-line; its Ligeti-like treble texture lacks a proper foundation. Then there is the problem of Guttli's music becoming more 'miraculous' as the strings break. Example 2 shows how Vir associates each breaking string with an animal, a physical element, a colour, a musical feature and a tetrachord.¹⁴



Example 2:
Detail from composers' working diagram of triangular relationships in *Broken Strings*

The Elephant has an aria built over an isorhythm in the orchestra. The Fish, appearing after the second string breaks, is accompanied by richly-voiced string chords and drums imitating tabla. The Peacock engages in a sinuous duet with the cor anglais playing an angular, improvisatory line which is an archetypal texture in Vir's later work (Example 3).

(Adagio piangevole ♩ = 63c.) *mf* *mf*

PEACOCK
I hear sing - ing... Oh - lis - ten

Cor Anglais
pp *p* *mp* *mp*

Ra - vi - shing sing - ing... *dolce* *mf*

Example 3:
Beginning of the Peacock's aria from *Broken Strings* (cor anglais at concert pitch)

The breaking of the fourth string posed the problem that was, for Rudkin, 'dramatically the most challenging': how to make this moment qualitatively different from the others, the point at which there are no strings left – and yet the music continues. In a nod to *Hamlet*, the King, who has watched with growing distraction, intervenes to stop the performance. The play starts again briefly and Musil

¹² Libretto stage direction.

¹³ Rudkin, 'The Origins of *Broken Strings*'

¹⁴ The three diminished-seventh tetrachords together complete the chromatic octave; combining any two tetrachords makes one of the octatonic collections (Messiaen's Mode 2).

destroys his instrument, but this is too much: the King abruptly dismisses the players and, in the coda to the opera, gropes for a meaning in what he has seen. If, in the creative process, Param Vir had to 'become a Guttill' on a journey of musical self-discovery, the King is revealed as Rudkin's *alter ego*. In writing the opera Rudkin felt he 'was confronting the possibility that my entire artistic life might prove to be a waste';¹⁵ he ends the opera with the King confronting a similar crisis: 'Is this... myself?... Must less sustain me too?... Till I must make whatever song is mine from nothing? The song I am: from nothing? Only then: I begin?' Here is more hope than *Snatched by the Gods* admitted – where that opera ends in death, *Broken Strings* offers a new beginning, and the upward inflection of a question.

'My music, my sound': compositional practice and technique

By the completion of *Broken Strings* all the elements of Vir's technique were in place. The 'energy-template' is a visual representation of the shape of the musical argument, the outline of the music in spontaneously drawn free-hand lines depicting levels and peaks of activity. This is not a graphic score, which gives information to performers – the energy-template is for the composer's use only – and different from composers who make sketches as an adjunct to the creative process, which have an independent existence as art-works in their own right.¹⁶ The initial template, in which the whole work is present on a single page, is magnified onto a progressively smaller-scale series of 'rhythm-templates', on which precise details of gesture and counterpoint are designed. It is this planning which enables Vir to control his large-scale works at both micro- and macrocosmic levels. It is only at the last stage that the actual pitch material is composed, according to the work's harmonic scheme. All the pitches are 'discovered' and tested at the piano, according to Vir's principle of letting 'the music talk to the body'. The physical dimension even extends to the act of writing: 'I compose with direct somatic energy, pencil on paper'.

In works with voice Vir composes the vocal lines for the entire work, sketching in accompaniments and only adding the orchestration at the end. His melodic writing is another 'gift of Indian music' in its raga-like modality and spun-out, improvisatory quality. Some moments also betray his background in musical theatre, when soaring 'Broadway melodies' emerge, as in the 'Final Chorale' from *The Comfort of Angels* (Example 4) or 'Hanne's Aria' from *Ultimate Words: Infinite Song*. The latter in particular, stripped of its decorative percussion parts, has an almost-tonal harmony operating over a functional bass (e.g. fig.41). There is no irony in these passages, though, and their sincerity never tips over into kitsch.

Param Vir's harmonic procedure in works from *Broken Strings* on borrows from the system of modes codified by Olivier Messiaen.¹⁷ Vir's use of them is highly individual, and derives from an analysis of their properties in terms of trichord content, symmetry and limited transposition. This rigorous interrogation of his material reveals a debt to Elliott Carter, although Vir now rejects much of Carter's music as 'sounding ugly'.¹⁸ Vir is most interested in Messiaen's Mode 2

¹⁵ Rudkin, 'The Origins of *Broken Strings*'

¹⁶ For example, the composer and painter Edward Cowie.

¹⁷ Olivier Messiaen, *Technique of my Musical Language*, trans. J. Satterfeld (London, 1957); Vir also shares Messiaen's sensitivity to colour in music

¹⁸ In conversation with the author. Vir taught courses in the techniques of Carter and Messiaen at Oberlin.

(the octatonic mode used widely by Rimsky-Korsakov and Stravinsky) and Mode 3. These are central to the musical narrative of *Broken Strings*: Musil's music is in Mode 3 and Guttil's from the harmonically more restrictive Mode 2; but as the magic animals appear, Guttil's music accommodates progressively more properties of Mode 3. In Example 3 the Peacock's vocal line is in Mode 3 (second transposition) around which the cor anglais circles freely.

(♩ = 88c.)

Piano 1

Peacock...

Piano 2

(mp) sub.p

triple bar line

Piano 1

tranquil

p espress.

Piano 2

triple bar line

Piano 1

(8)

Piano 2

mp

Example 4:
From the 'Final Chorale'
of *The Comfort of Angels*

Vir's use of modes is more subtle and varied than can be discussed here, but it is clearly fundamental to his harmonic practice. More recently, following studies with Jonathan Harvey, Vir has expanded his modal perspective to embrace 'harmonic fields' – larger, usually symmetrical fixed-pitch grids which support whole movements, such as 'Uroborus' from *The Theatre of Magical Beings*.

Three textural archetypes predominate in Vir's orchestral music, which can be equated with Musil's three styles of playing in *Broken Strings*. Musil begins with a *scherzando* in his 'brilliant style' (fig.14): a hectic, multi-layered orchestral melange of flickering, virtuosic instrumental lines and bold melodic gestures: in Musil's words 'a dance of dazzling, blinding light'. This texture dominates the opening of *Horse Tooth White Rock* and the 'Elephant' movement of *The Theatre of Magical Beings*. Musil next switches to 'something more melodic' in 'my lyrical mode' (fig.22); this is revisited in the cello and cor anglais duet in *Horse Tooth White Rock*, and the touching aria from *Ultimate Words*:

Infinite Song (fig.43, 'Lift up your head...'). Last is Musil's 'tragic vein' – which he is prevented from illustrating; this is the tone of the final scene of *Ion*, or the 'Final Chorale' from *The Comfort of Angels* (Example 4).

'The presence of colour': *Horse Tooth White Rock and Ion*

Param Vir taught at Oberlin College in the United States between 1992 and 1996, in which time he wrote *Clear Light, Magic Body* (1993) for solo guitar, *Gift* (1996) for solo flute and *The Comfort of Angels* (1996) for two pianos.¹⁹ By far the most substantial work written in the US was the 'extended tone-poem' for orchestra *Horse Tooth White Rock*.

Vir's music, even when ostensibly non-theatrical, always has an extra-musical – narrative or dramatic – inspiration. In this case the work was prompted by an exhibition of Tibetan art at the Royal Academy in London in 1992, and in particular a series of biographical paintings of the 11th-century mystic Milarepa.²⁰ In these, Milarepa sits in meditation surrounded by depictions of key events from his life, including a fiery revenge on his wicked uncle and aunt, and his spiritual education and eventual enlightenment under the guidance of his guru, Marpa.

Horse Tooth White Rock is as striking and colourful as these early 19th-century pictures on which it is based; not strictly programmatic, the music 'reflects upon important themes' in Milarepa's extraordinary life. The music has a similar boldness of line and proportion: a series of sharply-defined musical sections unfolds around the ubiquitous presence of the character of Milarepa at the music's heart. The discourse is at times dense – such as the 'orchestral thunderbolt' which starts the piece – and deploys the characteristic Vir battery of percussion; but the strings also play a more important role, especially at moments of repose, supplying sumptuous harmonies not heard in the double-bill, with its single strings.

In the second movement a series of solos emerge from the ensemble. First an impassioned and dissonant viola solo over sustained string chords, in Vir's characteristic disjunct melodic style. This evolves into a stratospheric violin tune before the tranquil dialogue for cor anglais and cello which ends the piece and evokes the Peacock from *Broken Strings*, over fragile string chords depicting Milarepa's farewell from his family, as he begins his journey towards enlightenment.

Compared with the success and productivity of Param Vir's first years in Britain, the period following his return to London marked something of a hiatus, largely due to the protracted genesis of the opera *Ion*. This was originally commissioned for the 1997 Aldeburgh Festival, where it was performed as a work-in-progress, semi-staged with linking narration. It received its first complete staged performance in a production by Music Theatre Wales in Autumn 2003.

Where the double-bill operas were the product of a successful and committed collaboration between composer and librettists, *Ion* was much less blessed throughout its gestation. Vir was strongly drawn to David Lan's version of Euripides' play when searching for a new subject – 'I immediately felt the presence of colour' – and the composition of the work coincided with Vir's first encounter with the work of the sculptor Anish Kapoor,²¹ which affected him profoundly. However the libretto was not sufficiently re-worked and transformed, being

¹⁹ Written in memory of an Oberlin student of Vir's who died suddenly in January 1996.

²⁰ In the book accompanying the exhibition, Rhie and Thurman, *Wisdom and Compassion* (New York: Tibet House, 1991, 1996) the Milarepa illustrations are on pp.242-5.

²¹ Exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in September 1998

essentially just a cut version of the play; *Ion* consequently suffers from being prolix, static in its stage action, and lacking the spark of originality which distinguished Vir's earlier operas.

There is nevertheless some superb music in the piece - notably, as in the earlier operas, the striking, emotive writing for chorus. If the return to single strings limits their importance compared with *Horse Tooth White Rock*, there is a greater role for the brass, at the forefront of the orchestration from the opera's brisk opening fanfare. Vir uses his most evolved pattern of leitmotifs, within a pitch structure based on the interval of the perfect fifth: 'the engine that would drive the harmony'. The final scene contains some of his most exquisitely beautiful music, touchingly direct in its exploration of the mother-son relationship, before Athene, the *deus ex machina*, imposes a resolution in a mock-heroic coloratura aria.

'It coruscates, it scintillates': instrumental sounds and textures

Vir's instrumental writing is highly coloured and distinctive, technically demanding but idiomatic. His close knowledge of instruments' playing techniques is a legacy of Knussen's teaching. Vir delights in colourful sounds and effects - most scores call for celesta and harp as well as an array of percussion (orchestral players are regularly called into action as additional percussionists). He makes use of very delicate sounds - bowed crotales, water gongs, vibraphone - as well as crashing timpani, roto-toms, anvil and thundersheet.

He likes a piano in his ensembles and writes successful - if extremely demanding - parts for the instrument: glittering *moto perpetuo* accompaniment figures (*Ultimate Words: Infinite Song*) or monumental, heavily-voiced chords in somewhat Messiaen-like textures.²² Also characteristic is the use of low instrumental tessituras: the ensemble for *Ion* has both a bass clarinet and the almost sub-sonic contrabass clarinet (associated with the character of the Pythia), and an important part for bass flute; *Horse Tooth White Rock* and the double-bill operas all use the contrabassoon.

'Glittering silvery music': *The Theatre of Magical Beings*

Overlapping with the completion of *Ion* was a commission for the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group. *The Theatre of Magical Beings* is a 25-minute orchestral fantasy in four movements, each taking as its subject a different mythical animal: 'Garuda', 'Uroborus', 'Elephant' and 'The Simurgh'. *The Theatre of Magical Beings* is, like *Horse Tooth White Rock*, essentially a semi-dramatized tone-poem creating an 'internal theatrical space' inhabited by creatures from different traditions, but the same magical universe as the animals in *Broken Strings*. It also has the dimensions and structure of a symphony; with an assertive opening, scherzo, slow movement, and a summational and revelatory finale.

Vir here calls for an expanded string section, having become frustrated with writing for single strings again in *Ion*. For much of the work the twelve string players are assigned individual lines, enabling complex and finely-spun counterpoint. The opening movement, 'Garuda', depicts the half-man, half-bird who carries the god Shiva in Hindu legend. Its bustling string ritornellos gather rhetorical

²² Vir has expressed the intention to write a piano concerto.

²³ Paul Conway, *Tempo* Vol.57 no.226 (October 2003).

momentum with each appearance. 'Uroborus', the symbol of the snake swallowing its own tail, is illustrated by slithering glissandos, the absence of harmonic evolution mirroring the circularity of the image. The 'Elephant' is the magical creature who sang a prophecy of the birth of the Buddha; this is a return to the character of *Broken Strings*, and Vir again avoids easy humour at the animal's expense, instilling it rather with an unsteady grace. 'The Simurgh', the most fantastic and revelatory of the movements, is in a ternary form. Based on a Sufi legend – the first time Vir has engaged with Islamic culture – it is an allegory of self-discovery, in which mortal birds travel to see the Simurgh, but on arrival find only a mirror in which they see their own reflections. The outer sections are dialogues between the percussionists – 'exultant, antiphonal poundings, the pianist acting as arbiter'²³ – while between them is the mirror, a section overtly influenced by the art of Anish Kapoor.

In *The Theatre of Magical Beings* Param Vir engages with the issue of repetition. Within his modernist grammar of surface discontinuity and 'developing-variation' procedures, repetition is scarce, and reserved mostly for specific moments of ritualized drama. In the new piece Vir embraces repetition without compromising his aesthetic. Vir describes himself as 'an anti-minimalist composer'²⁴ in that he abjures strict processes or verbatim repetition, as with, for example, the ritornello in 'Garuda', which is varied and embellished as it repeats.

'Uroborus' and 'The Simurgh' have the strictest pre-compositional processes in all Vir's mature music. In 'Uroborus', a gigantic polyrhythm unfolds, its climax a coincidence of the patterns at the movement's golden section. However, the contrary motion glissandos which characterize the movement are each separately and differently composed.

The central panel of 'The Simurgh' has an even more rigidly planned process into which Vir composes intuitive and spontaneous gestures. Vir's admiration of Anish Kapoor's work centres on 'the radiance of his conception... the colour, shape and vibration', and led him to ask: 'is there a way of writing music that could have the same quality?' 'The Simurgh' is an attempt to do so. In the central section of 'The Simurgh' (Example 5) Vir plays with controlling overall structure while leaving small scale details to chance, whim or the consequence of the planned design. Vir created a 'time-screen' of rhythms in close canon throughout the ensemble, in which complex divisions of each beat contain 'attack-points' constructed so that in its basic form these attacks do not coincide in any two parts. As this cycle rotates, fast repeated notes are added onto this basic skeleton, as are sustained chords which swell and recede – and sections where the screen is briefly suspended. The aural effect, representing the birds staring into the glittering mirror, is of an elusive flickering, repetitive but unpredictable. This section is one of the finest in the piece, and opens up exciting possibilities for future expansion in Vir's technique.



Music is good when it is marvellously made... We want to hear amazing melodies, extraordinary harmonies, stunning orchestral and instrumental sonorities... All of these must reach our ears, not just appeal to our intellects or our politics. Each of these sensuous objects gets even better when the consciousness of the composer plumbs an emotive depth arising from a natural sensibility. But who is to be the judge of that? And who can teach that?

²⁴ In conversation with the author.

Example 5: Extract from the 'time-screen' section of 'The Simurgh' movement of *The Theatre of Magical Beings*

Example 5:
Extract from the 'time-screen'
section of 'The Simurgh'
movement
of *The Theatre of Magical Beings*

Although Param Vir sees music as 'a powerful force for political and social comment', especially in his favoured medium of music theatre, he also wants to create a body of art-work with resonance beyond his own time and place. His music has an integrity and a philosophical depth, but, for Vir, music is, and must be, primarily a sensual, physical experience. At his best – *Broken Strings* and *The Theatre of Magical Beings* – Vir has created some of the finest music of recent years, and seems poised to embark on a new phase of discovery and aesthetic enrichment. Future projects include, most importantly, a full-length opera *Awakening* on 'the essential life of the Buddha', which has been in development for several years with David Rudkin. This has the pedigree and potential to be a crowning achievement in his career, and a major addition to the contemporary opera canon.

All music examples reproduced by kind permission of Novello & Company Ltd.

The complete text of interviews with Param Vir (mainly from opera and festival programmes), selected reviews, programme notes by the composer and other essays are available on Param Vir's official website: www.dreamsong.freeserve.co.uk. Quotations from essays, librettos and synopses by William Radice and David Rudkin, and from Param Vir are used by kind permission of the authors.