

False relationships: Nicola Lefanu, *I am Bread*

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Bread is a familiar metaphor for both bodily and spiritual sustenance. It can be found in numerous secular and liturgical texts, poetic, and literary works. Bread is a common experience for a majority of people, and rituals which produce or employ it are common to many cultures. Music which deals with bread has the potential to subvert or reinforce these associations: such music may deal with ideas of life, community, or religious devotion. More rarely do poems and music deal with bread itself, as a physical object, and this direct connection with bread separates the song *I am Bread* from other references to bread in music. *I am Bread* was written by British composer Nicola Lefanu in April 1987. The work is dedicated to soprano Tracey Chadwell, who commissioned the work and gave its first performance on the 21st May 1987 at the Brighton Festival. This specific relationship between the composer and performer (collaboration and dedication), and the careful setting of its text—the poem, *Bread* by Irish poet Brendan Kennelly, indicate that all three ingredients—the singer, the music, and the text—are integral to an understanding of this song.

Tracey Chadwell, who died in 1996, is described as having, '[a] strikingly beautiful, agile voice, effortless musicianship and gift for communication';¹ all three are needed to perform the music written for her by Lefanu. Chadwell is well known for her collaborative relationships with many composers including Lefanu's mother Elizabeth Maconchy, and her husband David Lumsdaine. As a result one can assume that the composer and soprano knew each other well; in a musical sense—Lefanu undoubtedly was aware of Chadwell's range and agility—but also in a personal sense: Lefanu's re-writing and re-reading of Kennelly's poem relies on sensitive communication by the performer for its interpretation by the audience.

A survey of the surface details of the score of *I Am Bread* might belie the subtle nature of its composition. It is an assured late-modernist work; this might suggest that constructed aspects of composition are the more important details of the piece. The very large vocal range required (from b to c"²) and successions of technically difficult intervals, often accompanied by confounding dynamics (for example, the soprano part is frequently marked *piano* in the high register), might create the impression that the purpose of the

¹ Jane Manning, 'Obituary:Tracey Chadwell', *The Independent* (Thursday 01 February 2001) Accessed 01 August 2014 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-tracey-chadwell-1316700.html>

² Helmholtz notation: from the B below middle C to the C two octaves above it.

piece is to test and display the skill of its dedicatee. And very sparing use of melisma and a predominantly syllabic setting of the text, often with sparse accompaniment, may also lead to the conclusion that communication of the original poem is the intention of the work. However, Lefanu's is a sophisticated approach to intertwining these three aspects.

Bread was written after the poet's memory of watching his grandmother baking.³ Kennelly describes how, in this period of his work, he was dealing with the struggle to 'become' someone else in his writing.⁴ In this poem Kennelly draws on the metaphor of bread as life: his grandmother is sustained by her work just as others are. But the poem also contains bread as a metaphor for life. In particular, the final lines:

I came to life at her fingerends.
I will go back into her again.

hint at the cycle of life: although bread is sustenance, both Kennelly and the bread require his grandmother to make it and to provide it for his family, and the family as a metaphor for one's continued existence after death conflates Kennelly and his grandmother at the end of the poem. *Bread* is undoubtedly a love poem, although not an expression of sexual love: Kennelly describes transformation through a relationship with a woman, something that he first observed as a child through the baking of bread. It is a very much less than patriarchal view: women are both the beginning and ending of life, and during it they are responsible for re-birth, for re-shaping, for re-making.

Nicola Lefanu's setting can be contrasted with this interpretation of Kennelly's original text: she alters the text, flow and tone of the poem. In addition, she has changed the voice of the poem from male to female; Kennelly's close link of the bread with his own experience gives it a male voice. When the voice of the poem is re-gendered in this setting the change in meaning by such an inversion has the potential to be both subtle and powerful, which cannot have escaped the composer's attention. The way that Lefanu chooses to set the text can be also be considered: few words and lines are subject to repetition or emphasis and, in a setting which is often syllabic and direct, those which are have all the more impact. The changes made by the composer contribute to the subtle re-imagining of the

³ Tom Brace, 'A Poet's Space—An Interview with Brendan Kennelly', *Three Monkeys Online Magazine* (2005) Accessed 30th July 2014 <http://www.threemonkeysonline.com/a-poets-space-an-interview-with-brendan-kennelly/>

⁴ CNNfyi, 'Ask an expert: Brendan Kennelly on Poetry and Education', *CNNfyi.com Teaching Tools* (2nd January 2001) Accessed 30th July 2014 <http://edition.cnn.com/2000/fyi/teachers.tools/12/29/brendan.kennelly/index.html>

meaning or inference of the poem: there are nine identifiable sections of the piece which might be expected to correlate with the nine stanzas of the poem, but this is not the case (Table 1, below, shows the distribution of the text within the structure of the piece). The word 'I' is frequently elongated, and the lines, 'Someone else cut off my head', 'even at my weakest', 'I am finer than anything' and 'I came to life' are those most repeated. Moreover, their rearrangement causes Lefanu to invent new lines of the poem, in particular:

I am finer than anything
even at my weakest

and

I came to life
again.

It is perhaps these invented lines which can shed light on her interpretation of the poem.

Table 1 shows the structure of the piece in terms of its sections, use of text, and the texture (the relationship between the soprano and piano) of the work. This gives an overview of the rate of change in the work and the way that the two parts relate to each other.

Section	Length	Text	Texture
Introduction	c. 1'; unmetered rubato	v4: end of line 1 v4: lines 2+3 v1: line 2 (adapted)	Independent parts
1	2 short phrases	v1: lines 1+2	Free time but dependent
2	18 bars	v1: line 3 v2: line 1 v2: lines 1+2 (part)	Homophonic; Piano monophonic. Polyphony in the last 6 bars
3	15 bars	vv2-3 (first word 'by' changed to 'now')	Two-part counterpoint Piano monophonic
4	c. 10"; unmetered	v4: end of line 1 v4: lines 2 v4: lines 1+2+3	Call and response/dialogue
5	12 bars	v5 v6: lines 1+2	Call and response, with sustained chords in the piano

Section	Length	Text	Texture
6	7 bars	v6: line 3 v7 v8: line 1	Homophony Melody with accompaniment
7	14 bars	v8: line 2	Homophony
	c. 10"; unmetered	v8: line 2 (part)	Call and response
8	21 bars	v8: line 3 v9	Two-part counterpoint
	9 bars	v9: line 1 v9: line 4 (beginning) v9: line 5	Solo voice

Table 1: *I am Bread*: structural divisions, durations, text and texture.⁵

Table 1 shows that the structure of the piece can be understood as an arc. The climax of the work, in one set of terms, is in section 6: the length of the sections decreases up until this point, the setting of the text becomes more syllabic and less repetitious, and the texture tends towards the more straight-forward. This might be where one would expect to find the highest and loudest part of the piece but in fact this can be found in section 7. On a structural level, then, it is possible to see a disjoint between listener expectations and the composition of the music. In fact, such disjoints which continually subvert the expectations of listeners can be found at every level of the music. In this way Lefanu embraces an idea of 'dissonance'—often a word used with negative connotations with respect to modernist works—in many compositional aspects of the work.

An analysis of the fundamental nature of these disjoints to the music might begin usefully with the introduction as this section is, in a very real sense, the introduction to all of the ideas of the work: it contains the seeds of everything that can be found in the rest of *I am Bread*. As a result, this section is an exemplar of the compositional style of the piece. It is perhaps in the introduction that a traditional idea of opposition between singer and accompaniment is most clear and this is, as will be later explored, in opposition with the rest of the work; a disjoint. The texture is simultaneously homogeneous and varied: the piano and soprano are independent in both their musical material and even their notation. There is constant sound from piano, an almost-even and continuous flow of notes, whilst

⁵ Homophony: the two parts move together in harmony; monophony: one part; polyphony: simultaneous parts of different melody.

the soprano part is fragmented by pauses of varying lengths, all of which are longer than to simply allow for breathing. There is also a contrast in timbre: the piano part sounds more as a distant rumble due to the extreme low register and the performance directions; Lefanu has marked the part *pianissimo, con pedale*, and 'part-clear occasionally'. However, the large range of the soprano part, coupled with the dynamic indication of *piano*, means that the singer must choose to sacrifice either some adherence to the dynamic marking or some vocal strength and control in the upper register; either way the part will inevitably become timbrally varied and coloured as the singer moves through the phrases and her range. A third contrast can be found in the construction of phrases of the two parts. The composition of the soprano part in the introduction foreshadows the overall arc of the piece, whilst the more subtle phrase structure in the piano part is almost its opposite: these phrases become first longer and then shorter again.

The organisation of pitch in the introduction is also worth exploration. Each phrase is individually composed around pitch class sets (groups of pitches which do not have a specific order or imply a tonal centre) which make up clusters. It is these clusters which allow Lefanu to both avoid repeating patterns in the music—since, despite some overlap from one phrase to another, the pitch class sets give each phrase a unique identity—and to create the impression of quasi-repetition or of a pitch centre during each phrase. She limits each phrase to 9 individual pitches at most, narrowing the sound-world to an insular and unique environment. Several of the pitch class sets contain notes that do not fit into one of the clusters by way of a tone or semitone relationship. These 'extra notes', outside of the cluster chords, leave a diminished 5th chord of A - C# - Eb in the piano and a pedal note of D moving to a minor triad of A - C - E in the soprano part. Although subtle, this could be read as a move from a pitch class centre of D to one of A over the course of the introduction; this mirrors a tonal progression from the tonic to the dominant which might be structurally expected at this point in a tonal work. This is also another disjoint between the soprano and piano: both parts almost reveal the same chord but it is changed by way of 'false relations' (notes which are chromatically altered on their repetition). Piano and voice end the introduction on the same held pitch, but have arrived at this point by divergent means.

This disjointed aspect of the composition of pitch is also evident within the construction of the individual phrases. Almost all of the phrases in both parts contain 'false relations'. The idea of the 'false relation', something which is similar and yet different, can be observed in other compositional aspects of the work. Table 1 shows how texturally the music uses many quasi-unison relationships (homophony, call and response, concurrent but

independent lines) throughout the setting. Within the introduction these can be found in the intervallic construction of the piece. An intervallic 'false relation' can be seen where major, minor, augmented, or diminished versions of the same interval are found within the same phrase. For example, the opening of the fourth phrase of the soprano part typifies this: the phrase opens with a descending minor second, a rising major second, a descending augmented second, and a rising major second. These intervals are all closely related and, when written down, look almost to be the same.

The 'spelling' of the phrase is important: this draws attention to the similarities and closenesses between these intervals, otherwise a more practical solution would be to notate $F\# - E\flat$ as $F\# - D\#$: the minor third interval is more immediately easy to pitch than the augmented second (even though they sound the same). Here the notation reveals the importance of the idea of similarity even in the smallest detail of the work. These intervallic 'false relations' can be found in the majority of the phrases of both the piano and soprano parts of the introduction. This, then, gives a clue as to the identity of the music: it is built upon an idea of similarity and difference. The idea of 'false relations' is emphasised in the piano accompaniment which, while frequently monophonic, often mixes single pitches with semitone or tone dyads. In these cases it is impossible to say which note might be part of the melodic line and which part of the harmony: both melodic options are presented simultaneously, causing the accompaniment to seem 'different' even from itself; a further disjoint. Throughout the work, shifting pitch and intervallic relationships underpin an idea of similarity that is never quite the same within the construction of the individual phases.

There are also temporal differences: the phrase speed in the piano and voice parts differ, often contrasting regular phrases in the piano with variation in the voice; the structural arc shape reveals 'climaxes' in both structurally expected and slightly deferred places. Not all sections are strictly metered, but those that are employ varying bar lengths which often are diminished or augmented compared with their neighbours by lengths of a single quaver. This creates the impression of a quasi-regular but constantly shifting pulse. By the final section of the piece the alternation between metered and unmetered time is resolved by the introduction of different bar lengths in each part: a steady 4/8 in the soprano part against a shifting pulse in the piano part, which resolves into a single shifting pulse in the solo soprano line at the end of the work. Repetition of phrases is also avoided except at specific points such as section 4, which contains the repetition of the text found in the introduction. The overall impression of the piece, therefore, is of something which is both through-composed and yet extremely carefully constructed. All possibilities of the

perception of 'construction' are guarded against whilst at the same time these highly composed elements are subsumed into a seamlessly flowing line and texture.

What remains is to discuss how Lefanu's re-reading of Kennelly's poem might be understood in the context of this careful composition. The key might even be found in her re-wording of the title. Whilst the original title, *Bread*, for Kennelly describes something observed, Lefanu's title, *I am Bread*, hints at something experienced. The change of gender in the narrative voice becomes a sign of female strength; the idea of the 'false relation', or disjoint, not one of dissonance but of defiance: it is expressed not through the idea of a two-part relationship with an 'other', or through opposition, but through integration. Lefanu's textural approach also supports this. There is a disjoint in her presentation of the poem since the narrative voice, 'I' is contrasted with the third person, 'she', later in the piece. Here, then, is another 'false relation': the narrative voice views herself from two competing points of view. Returning to Kennelly's theme of empathy, this might even give rise to the idea of self-empathy: in particular Lefanu's lines of focus, 'even at my weakest, I am finer than anything', suggest a defiant self-love. Here the competing registers and dynamics begin to take on a further significance: even the most skilled performer will compromise at these moments and it is these compromises themselves that will express the composer's reading of the text.

What is most intriguing about this work is the way that all of its elements come together. At the outset of this discussion I suggested two tripartite relationships; one relating to bread, of life, community, and ritual and one of composition, voice, and text. In bringing together the latter three Lefanu also re-imagines the former. It is not possible to separate Lefanu's compositional voice from the necessarily agile and virtuosic voice of the performer of the piece, from the narrative voice of Kennelly's re-imagined poem; all three support each other in the creation of a single, integrated, musical voice which itself is the work. In so doing, this voice is transformed from an object which relies on intervention by another to an individual capable of self-expression, and bread is transformed from a metaphor of life and sustenance for others to something which is life and sustenance in and of itself. It is this understanding and presentation of bread which is so unique to this work and which is so carefully and cleverly composed by Lefanu in this piece.