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Both One Thing and Another

Notes on Pinchbeck & Smith's *The Ravel Trilogy*

Alexander Kelly

"I think there's some theatre in it."

I am standing in the queue for Michael Pinchbeck's show *Concerto*, in Sheffield's Firth Hall, in April 2019. The show has been programmed by the University of Sheffield's *Enable Us* programme, a biannual mini festival or season of theatre and performance work, taking place across the University's live performance venues. Firth Hall is probably best known as home of the University's classical music Concert Season, attracting audiences from across the city and beyond. The hall itself is beautiful: the raised stage means there are no poor seats, and the acoustics are great. Personally, I was most recently here for a remarkable concert by contemporary bluegrass phenomenon Sarah Jarosz. But I'm not a regular visitor to the space. Firth Hall clearly has a regular audience, though, who come to see, and hear, classical music concerts. I am here as a friend of Michael, and mentor to his current programme of work and artistic development, and as a regular attender of contemporary theatre and performance. I know what I'm here to see, because I've seen this show before, specifically, and have known Pinchbeck's work for almost 20 years.¹

"I think there's some theatre in it."

This sentence leaps out of the conversation happening in the queue behind me.

"Oh, is there? That's interesting."

I realise that a large portion of the audience are here for a different show to me. They are here for a recital of Maurice Ravel's *Piano Concerto for the Left Hand*, performed by world-renowned concert pianist, Nicholas McCarthy. I mean, it is the same show, but we have arrived for, or because of, different parts of it. Because *Concerto* is both of these things: a theatrical re-telling of Ravel's composition of the

¹ Full disclosure: Pinchbeck and I really do go back a long way, I realise in writing this. We got to know each other's work through encountering each other at festivals and seeing each other on tour. Michael interviewed both myself and my co-Artistic Director in Third Angel, Rachael Walton, for his *Outside Eye* project. He later served on Third Angel's Board of Directors, and helped organise *Where From Here*, a symposium to mark our 21st anniversary as a theatre company. More recently Walton has been guest performer in Pinchbeck's *The man who flew into space from his apartment* (2014) and acted as dramaturgy mentor on this show *Concerto*, and I have been mentor in a peer-support role, helping Pinchbeck develop his overall body of work, whilst balancing academic and family commitments.

piece for Paul Wittgenstein, combined with the story of world-war-initiating assassin Gavrilo Princip; and a performance of Ravel's concerto by McCarthy.

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Princip's appearance in *Concerto* is an echo of his earlier role in the first part of this trilogy, *Bolero*. Very many of us who grew up in the UK in the latter half of the 20th century will know Princip's story, and his role the start of the first world war. Even if we do not remember his name from history lessons, we will more than likely remember his act, the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, precipitating the war.

In *Bolero*, this part of Princip's story is combined with the stories of Maurice Ravel's composition of the music, Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean performing their world record breaking ice dance to *Bolero* in Sarajevo, the lives of the 11,541 people who died during the Siege of Sarajevo, and some of the people who survived it. Threaded through this is autobiographical material from Pinchbeck himself, performed by a principal cast of six (which includes Smith but not Pinchbeck), and a chorus of more than three times that number who create a movement score that frames and interweaves with the narratives.²

The performers – from Bosnia & Herzegovina, Germany and the UK – jump narratives and roles, a deliberate tactic of swapping material and stories across cultures, inviting the audience to keep up, keep track of who is who. They have limited means at their disposal: six red chairs, six red buckets, record players, ice skates, some paint and brushes. I enjoy this game very much. I am interested in theatre in which the audience get to watch the task of telling the story, of making the show, alongside the stories that are told. In *Bolero*, Pinchbeck and the cast use this game to shift quickly from one tone to another. The clown-like fun of four chairs becoming a car with an LP record for a steering wheel and buckets for wheels is cut short by the narrative impact of the driver sent scattering across the stage as the car crashes. In *Bolero*, Pinchbeck and Smith invite the audience into this game, too, as they will do in *Concerto*, casting them as the orchestra, the front rows spoken to as if they are in the pit, waiting to play.

The game I enjoy the most in *Bolero*, though, is the one it plays with time and geography. Narratively, *Bolero* takes us to many places and times at once, blending documentary, verbatim, historical and autobiographical theatre, with choreography, movement and ice dance (with skates, but without ice).

² Benjamin Bajramovic, Nicki Hobday, Vera Molitor, Jasenko Pasic, Ollie Smith and Amila Terzimehic. [we will check accents]

Vera: We are in 1914.

Nicki: We are in 1928.

Amila: We are in 1984.

Benjamin: We are in 1994.

Jasenko: We are in 2016.

Vera: We are in Sarajevo.

Nicki: We are in Paris.

Vera: We are at Appel Quay.

Nicki: We are at the Opera.

Amila: We are at Olympic Stadium.

Film, theatre and TV play this game all the time. But with *Bolero* the added dimension is that the cast is made up of artists and performers from the UK, Germany and from Bosnia & Herzegovina, who came together to make this project. To tell these different stories of European history and culture, having lived through some of the events they describe.

We are in a theatre.
We are in Sarajevo.
We are in Nottingham.

In the here and now of the devising process, they get to know each other, share stories of home, of the past, find out how their experiences are different, find things they have in common. They explore our shared cultural memory. Back in 1984, as kids, in England and in Bosnia, some of these artists were watching Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean on TV, dancing on ice to *Bolero*, and scoring an unprecedented, perfect, six 6.0s. At the same time, in different countries, they were making a memory of that sporting event.

In the show, the cast share Pinchbeck's memory of watching that piece of sporting televisual history, contrasted with the memory of a colleague from Sarajevo. Nicki tells Michael's story, watching on TV in Nottingham in England. Amila tells the colleague's story: he was in the Zetra stadium in Sarajevo, watching live. They

remember the cold of the ice. They remember fish and chips and Coca Cola. They remember the perfect scores. They didn't yet know that each other existed. But one day in the future they would tell each other this memory. The dance, the music, the cultural event, the sport, the TV programme, they transcend borders and begin to exist outside of time.

As I was (thinking about) writing this foreword, I came across an episode of the podcast *Radiolab*, about memory loss.³ In it, they point out that one of the remarkable things about Ravel's *Bolero* is that the melody doesn't develop. At all. It is the same refrain repeated over, and over, and over, and over. What changes is the orchestration.⁴ And I was surprised to realise that I had never actually recognised this before, or understood it. Always the same phrase. Slightly different with every repetition. And it struck me that this is partly what makes Ravel's work an interesting territory of exploration for this form of devised new writing. This formal approach, this restrictive conceit, the same thing over and over again but different each time, is exactly the sort of rule we would put in place to start to generate material in a devising process. Performers might be set the task of repeatedly answering the same prompt or question as a way of starting to generate material, or only be allowed a finite amount of physical actions; these restrictions allow for creativity – *what can you make out of these limited ingredients?* – much more than the total freedom to do or say anything does.⁵ In *Bolero*, Ravel uses the repetition of the same phrase, doing something different with it every time, to build something transcendent.

**

"I think there's some theatre in it."

In one of my notebooks, I have written the phrase 'a deconstructed concert' about *Concerto*. I do not remember if it is my phrase or if I have picked it up from a flyer or brochure entry, or through conversation with the team making the show.⁶ But either way, I am not sure that it is entirely correct. *Concerto* is more than a deconstructed concert. The central concert element – the performance by McCarthy – is presented uninterrupted, the headline act. Before that, the show includes a companion piece that draws on documentary research, history, the stories of people integral to the creation of the music we are about to hear, plus the grammar and

³ Shima Oliiae & Jad Abumrad, 2018.

⁴ The idea that Ravel's mental decline is mirrored in his music, most notably in *Bolero*, is explored further by Eva M. Cybulska (1997) and Pinchbeck's own writing (2018).

⁵ In Third Angel's rehearsal room we refer to them as 'text-generating exercises' and 'rule-based devising games'.

⁶ The show is described as 'a deconstructed and re-orchestrated exploration of the legacy of war and the healing power of music to overcome tragedy' on Pinchbeck's website.

conventions of the concert form, which serves to enhance and enrich the music when we experience it being performed. This story is deconstructed in the telling. The characters are assembled in front of us individually, before playing out the story they are part of, as if introducing us to the individual musical notes before letting us hear the music they are then used to create.

In the show we hear recordings of the concerto. We see silent film of the concerto being played. But we don't get to see *and* hear it together, until McCarthy plays it for us live.

*Breathe with your arms.
Let it happen.
Let the target take the arrow.*

'Concerto' means 'played together'. Ravel's *Piano Concerto for the Left Hand* is written to be performed with an orchestra. Some performances of the theatre show *Concerto* are performed with a whole orchestra. Pinchbeck thinks of that as the 'expanded version'.⁷ Here in Sheffield's Firth Hall, McCarthy will play solo, but in the first half of the show, as in all performances of *Concerto*, continuing the motif established in *Bolero*, the audience are invited to play an orchestra. They are equipped with objects to make sound with: sheet music (torn), pencils (tapped) and apples (bitten). We become both an orchestra and a group of live foley artists.

Michael himself cuts an interesting figure in the show. He doesn't play the conductor, that role is taken by Katt Perry.⁸ By the time the show reaches Sheffield he is no longer the narrator either, Mark Hawkhead has taken over that role. Pinchbeck has a slightly more off-stage role ('on-off', as many contemporary theatre makers think of it). Is he the *composer*? His job is more technical, mainly cueing sound and lights. Watching the show here in Firth Hall, Michael is on the raised stage, off to the side – stage right, still a 'strong position' according to some (Western) scenographic thinking.⁹ But I know that in other spaces, with a raked seating bank, he might sit in the front row of the audience, still stage right, but more hidden.

★★

There is a moment watching an early version of *Concerto* on video when I wonder to myself if the cast – all in their early 20s – are not too young to play this story? This

⁷ In conversation with the author.

⁸ The full cast in Firth Hall is Mark Hawkhead, Nicholas McCarthy, Ryan O'Shea, Katt Perry and Michael Pinchbeck.

⁹ It is certainly a debated idea, traceable back to Brown and Garwood's *General Principles of Play Direction* (1936). See Gil Lazier's (1968) 'Stage right vs. stage left' for more discussion and experimentation.

story of war. But then I remember, of course, that they are exactly the age to go to war. By no means the youngest. I remember that my grandad was shot down over the occupied Netherlands in WWII, at the age of 19, and only survived thanks to the help of multiple members of the Resistance. But my own family experience is overwritten by film and TV.

**

A bandage becomes a sash.
An apple becomes a bomb.
A performer becomes an actor.
An actor becomes a character.
An audience becomes an orchestra.
An audience is conscripted as an army.
Pinchbeck cues the stage action from the wings. A director becomes a conductor.

**

Tracking back through my notebooks for mention of Pinchbeck & Smith's *Ravel Trilogy*, I find a page of notes from April 2019. It reads:

Katt Nicholas Ryan Mark
CONCERTO
for the left hand

2 parts without a pause

Hearing images

TRILOGY
Theatres/concert spaces
Anywhere there's a grand piano

Projection/film

Travelogue
Biography

What next?

It strikes me that in these notes from a planning / mentoring conversation, there already seems to be an awareness that *Concerto* is fulfilling several functions, existing in several forms. Theatre, concert, biography, travelogue. What next?

**

Solo appears simpler in some ways, not least because of its length – it is just ten minutes. But what actually is it? I mean, it is not even performed or experienced solo. Two performers present two sides of one story to two individual audience members, who both become performers in each other's experience.

A solo is a virtuoso's moment in the spotlight,

write Pinchbeck & Smith in their programme note.

*All focus is on them. But in this piece, where there are two of us and two of you, no one's quite sure who's watching whom. So, the spotlight becomes focussed on us all. Throughout the process of devising *Solo*, back in 2017, we enjoyed the irony of two people making a piece together about performing alone – and then presenting it to pairs of other people.¹⁰*

Solo is more singularly documentary performance and/or historical drama than either *Concerto* or *Bolero*. As an audience member, depending on which track you choose, or are given, you experience one of two sides to the same story: Maurice Ravel's writing of *Tzigane*, for Hungarian violinist, Jelly D'Aranyi.

Pinchbeck & Smith refer to it as an 'intimate and interactive performance installation' in the publicity materials. Don't get me wrong, that is probably what I would call it, too – but what does it mean? Or rather, what does a prospective participant understand it to mean?

'You have an important part to play', you are told, as an audience member, once you are already in it. You are to play Ravel himself, or the violinist D'Aranyi. That makes it sound imperative, but actually it is an invitation. You are at once audience member, leading character in the story you hear, and guest-starring actor in the version of the story being told to the other audience member. Perhaps you are also friend, or relation, or lover, to the other audience member. Or maybe you are strangers.

How much you (inter)act is up to you. Video documentation of the show demonstrates that some people are more comfortable embracing their roles than

¹⁰ Pinchbeck & Smith, 2019.

others.¹¹ You are handed props – but you barely have the violin long enough to play a note, and the cocktail and champagne glasses remain empty of liquid.¹² But the red roses are strewn about the stage as you bow, and you get to take one home with you.¹³

Pinchbeck & Smith themselves present as butlers or *maitre d's*, but are in fact your stage managers, delivering and removing props, changing the scenographic images on the overhead projector, ensuring that you are on your mark at the right time. By the end of the show, they will have been your audience, then also joined you onstage for the (recorded) applause before ushering you out.

**

I think there's some music in it.

In creating these shows inspired by Maurice Ravel's work, Pinchbeck & Smith had three aims. The first two are achieved through the works themselves:

1. *To discover new ways of interpreting musical composition as dramaturgical score.*
2. *To develop multiple performance works using this dramaturgical methodology.*

The final aim of the Ravel project was:

3. *To articulate this methodology and its desired effect through critical and creative writing.*

This thread begins with programme notes and blog posts, and culminates with this volume you are holding (or reading on a screen), with contributions from a range of us associated, to a greater or lesser extent, with the making of the shows, alongside Pinchbeck and Smith themselves.

As this is a Foreword, I was about to type some advice on how to approach this collection of texts, but then I stopped myself, because I am not sure how helpful that is. You will approach it as you wish.

¹¹ Watching it, I wonder if it is easier if you do not know the other audience member? But perhaps what I am thinking is that I would find it easier to fully embrace the interactivity if I was with a stranger.

¹² Although there are olives on cocktail sticks which some audience members eat.

¹³ For completism: I have known Smith for about ten years, originally meeting through our association with Reckless Sleepers. Since then I have seen much of Ollie's solo work and have done a small amount of dramaturgy for LaPelle's Factory, his collaboration with Olwen Davies.

However, the publication of a script is an invitation to perform your own version of the show, isn't it? Well, yes and no. These collected texts and are here available for re-interpretation and performance. But what if you are not able, for example, to book Nicolas McCarthy to play, or bring in a whole orchestra for your own expanded version of *Concerto*? You might still draw material and ideas from *Concerto* for your own retelling of this story, in a different form. Or you might read it to understand the mechanisms and structuring devices used. For me a collection such as this is similar to a recipe book that I might read for inspiration as to what to do with what I have in the cupboard, rather than to find a recipe to shop for specifically and then cook. Understanding Pinchbeck & Smith and their collaborators' experiments with form gives me a greater appreciation of the works themselves, and inspires me in making my own performances, and thinking about what a show can be.

As an audience member, fellow theatre maker and part-time academic, I am particularly interested to read scripts and scores to devised work, as a way of understanding how and why the show was made. So I find a resonance in this publishing project. The combination of the texts and scores for these particular shows, alongside reflections on the themes and compositional processes, allows us to loop back and revisit, re-read, repeat. In gathering them together, we can see how the concerns of the three shows chime with, and echo within, each other. How Ravel's life and music loops through each piece individually, and the collection as a whole. The refrain of Pinchbeck and Smith's research questions is repeated, but the orchestration (by writers, musicologists, choreographers, dramaturgs etc.) changes.

Whatever your reason for exploring this edited collection, and however you approach it, we hope you find much here to reward your interest.

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