

## GETTING OUT OF THE LABYRINTH: GERALD BARRY'S WIENER BLUT AND THE PATH TO PETRA VON KANT

Mark Fitzgerald

---

**Abstract:** Gerald Barry's approach to composition has undergone a number of changes. Frequently these developments coincide with the composition of a large-scale opera. One of these points of transition in his output occurs in the period before he commenced work on *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*. Between 1999 and 2000 Barry composed three works – 1998, *The Eternal Recurrence* and *Wiener Blut* – in which he attempted to find a new compositional direction after a period in which canonic proliferation dominated his musical material. This article examines some of the main traits of these works, and *Wiener Blut* in particular, since it contains a greater variety of approaches than the other two compositions. The article also considers how Barry's shift in approach may have been linked to his decision to set Rainer Werner Fassbinder's play. Its quite plain, realistic prose was a contrast to the sort of text Barry had previously chosen to set, requiring a different musical response, and the article draws out some possible connections between Barry's three 'pointillistic' compositions and the opera.

---

Gerald Barry's output has been punctuated by a series of large-scale operas, *The Intelligence Park* (1982–87), *The Triumph of Beauty and Deceit* (1991–92), *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (2002–05) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (2009–10), which act like gravitational forces around which orbit a series of smaller compositions that explore material in a similar fashion.<sup>1</sup> By chronological coincidence each of these new compositional worlds can be roughly aligned with a different decade, although each decade also includes pieces that form 'transitional' pathways between these different approaches. One of these points of transition occurs before Barry began work on *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*.

From the late 1980s onwards Barry's music had been fashioned predominantly from juxtaposed blocks of highly contrasted material,

<sup>1</sup> His other operas do not have this sense of exploring completely different territory: *La Plus Forte* (2006) continues to mine techniques used in *Petra von Kant* (albeit from a more subdued standpoint), while *Alice's Adventures Underground* (2014–15) retreads ground covered in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

frequently using a variety of canonic techniques to generate the texture and harmony within a melodically driven structure. By the mid-90s, however, the need to find a new direction for his work began to exert itself. A motivating factor seems to have been the problem of creating large-scale structures which did not rely on this constant juxtaposition of highly individualised blocks. In the last of the large-scale works from this period, *The Road*, an orchestral work premiered by the Frankfurt Radio Symphony Orchestra in 1998 but subsequently withdrawn, the form stems from the origins of the work. It consists of a series of expansions, in terms of both orchestration and time span, of 11 fragments lasting between 15 and 53 seconds, originally composed as incidental music scored for four clarinets for a radio play by Meredith Oakes entitled *Glide*.<sup>2</sup> Discussing *The Road* in a 1999 interview Barry said:

It's quite a strange piece. It is the last piece I think I'm going to write like that in the sense that the musical worlds move... you move very quickly from one musical world to another and they change very quickly and... my New Year's resolution is to stay longer in the same place musically.<sup>3</sup>

By contrast, when describing his work 1998 (composed in 1999) he was quick to draw attention to the idea of prolonging the moment:

It is a strange piece for me and strange in the sense that it is a departure from my mixing of musical worlds, something that I've been involved in, in music, in the last ten years, in the sense that it stays in the same place for 20 minutes, 21 minutes.<sup>4</sup>

The change of direction may also have been triggered by Barry's wish to set Rainer Werner Fassbinder's play *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*. Although he did not begin working on this until 2002, Barry had been considering the play for several years and mentioned his intention to set it in a 1995 interview. Discussing his preference for highly artificial texts which could be set with no regard for spoken convention and would not result in 'the operatic equivalent of *Neighbours*', Barry noted that this next opera would have straightforward, unrhymed text.<sup>5</sup> Fassbinder's text was full of mundane and banal language which necessitated a complete reconsideration of the relationship between music and language. After completing one act of the opera Barry noted that:

I set every comma, semi-colon, colon, whatever, observed it completely. It's a new departure for me in setting text. I noticed that when I didn't obey Fassbinder's punctuation a false note immediately crept into the music, and I had to go back and re-write it... It's different from the other two operas, where the text is first of all more artificially wrought and fantastic, and the setting is fantastic. This is more like a sung play... The most deadening thing about most modern opera is hearing ordinary lines, like 'Will you have a cup of tea?' sung. Usually they're risible. There's absolutely no reason for them to be set at all. You'd rather go to the theatre and see a normal play. That was a very difficult challenge, a real challenge to meet that head on, to set ordinary, everyday speech... With Fassbinder, I was very aware of

<sup>2</sup> *Glide* was first broadcast by BBC Radio 3 on 17 January 1998. The incidental music in its original form has been recorded and published under the title *Before the Road*.

<sup>3</sup> Gerald Barry, interview with John Hughes, RTÉ radio broadcast, undated 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Gerald Barry, interview with Sarah Walker, BBC Radio 3, *Hear and Now*, 16 June 2000. The programme included the premiere of 1998, played by Barry in a performance that lasts 18 and a half minutes.

<sup>5</sup> Jocelyn Clarke, 'Pleasantly Alienating and Strangely Seductive', *New Music News*, February 1995 (Dublin: Contemporary Music Centre), p. 10. *Neighbours* was a long-running Australian television soap opera.

somebody singing and being immediately understandable, that one would hear the text. It's a different kind of thing. I suppose it's more mainstream in a way.<sup>6</sup>

The search for a musical language that would create larger units of music and would also be responsive to more prosaic texts set in a relatively naturalistic fashion led to three works: *1998* (1999),<sup>7</sup> *The Eternal Recurrence* (1999) and *Wiener Blut* (2000), each about 15–20 minutes long, in which Barry approached his goal from different angles.<sup>8</sup> Barry drew a connection between the three pieces on the basis that they shared 'a concern with memory'. By drawing on sounds from both his own past compositions and the wider historical repertoire they formed 'a web or fan of resonances which add another dimension to the flow of the music'.<sup>9</sup> This, however, remains a purely personal and private dimension, like a diary or, as he described *Wiener Blut* and *1998*, a 'harmonic autobiography'.<sup>10</sup> The extraction of pitches or sounds from source works was just the first stage in a process of amassing potential material from which sound combinations may be selected. After further manipulation, this can be used in the construction of a new piece. Barry has given a particularly clear description of this technique in relation to the fourth act of his opera *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*:

I may decide purely arbitrarily that I am going to write down twenty A3 pages of sounds, maybe from the first three acts by using some kind of childish system. I might take the first sound from Act I, the second sound from Act II, the third sound from Act III, the fourth sound from Act I, the fifth sound from Act II, the sixth sound from Act III... I'll go back and forth. It's no guarantee of anything – it could be complete rubbish. But I do it for twenty pages, like automatic writing. And I never check to see the quality. Because if you check too early and it's rubbish, you get very disheartened and you think, 'I haven't the energy to go on for fifteen more pages. I can't do this'. So I never look, I never check. While listening to the radio, or during breakfast, I do it. And when the twenty pages are full, I then look. And then that's where your whole life comes into play. These arbitrarily-made, found sounds are a springboard for your imagination. And you'd be amazed. And that's the point where you then enter the fray.<sup>11</sup>

This technique of generating a large mass of material, from which perhaps only a small amount of chords or progressions might be used while the rest is discarded, removes any contextual resonance from the material, while the fact that only sporadic fragments make their

<sup>6</sup> Michael Dervan, 'A Fight at the Opera', *Irish Times*, 26 September 2002. In the event, the use of a large orchestra playing at a high volume ensures that most of the text is not clearly heard in live performance.

<sup>7</sup> *1998* exists in three different instrumentations, for solo piano, violin and piano or string quartet respectively.

<sup>8</sup> In the recent recording of *The Eternal Recurrence* there is a substantial cut of over 170 bars, which brings the duration down to under 12 minutes. Britten Sinfonia, Thomas Adès, *Ludwig van Beethoven: Symphonies 7–9, Gerald Barry: The Eternal Recurrence*. 2021, Signum Classics, (CD) SIGCD659.

<sup>9</sup> Barry, interview with Sarah Walker. It is notable that since this period the idea of memory, and in particular childhood memories, either real or fictional, has become an important trope in Barry's descriptions of his work. For example, the programme note for *The Road* states that it 'refers to an image from childhood of sun with high wind on a remote road'. However, as with all descriptions from Barry, these are not to be taken literally; the note for *The Road* continues: 'The music is not programmatic; the title and the note came after the music was completed.' Discussing *The Road* with Jean Martin he added, 'I did say in the programme that it was inspired by a memory from childhood of sun with high wind on a remote road. Often those are memories that one invents after writing the piece.' Gerald Barry, interview with Jean Martin, 24 June 2000, [www.soundbasis.eu/writing/Barry.html](http://www.soundbasis.eu/writing/Barry.html) (accessed 16 April 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Barry, interview with Jean Martin.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Dungan, 'An Interview with Gerald Barry', Contemporary Music Centre Dublin, 27 February 2004, formerly available at [www.cmc.ie/features/interview-gerald-barry](http://www.cmc.ie/features/interview-gerald-barry) (accessed 21 March 2005).

way into the composition removes any sense of the generative system for the material having any clear relationship to or impact on the finished work. There is therefore often a paradoxical tension between the unsystematic, sometimes anarchic way in which the material is put together and the positioning of this material in larger structures notable for their clarity or simplicity.

In relation to the three works from the late 1990s, Barry compared the technical process of using these isolated 'chords from Mozart, Bruckner, Schumann, whoever' to the points in Seurat's work, suggesting that as the chords 'coalesce and they come together and a picture is formed'.<sup>12</sup> The same comparison with Seurat and pointillism was used by Barry to highlight an aesthetic connection between 1998 and *The Eternal Recurrence*, although the more atomised sound-world of 1998 might initially seem to be quite distinct from the somewhat more conventional, even neo-classical *Eternal Recurrence*.<sup>13</sup> Barry also drew on the visual arts to explicate the decision to use basic and recognisable musical gestures, noting of *The Eternal Recurrence*:

I was determined to write it in C major and it's mostly in C major and keys which hover around it. And I wanted to use what you might call everyday musical gestures. You know, like, for instance, in good paintings, still lifes. For instance, the recent Chardin exhibition at the Royal Academy, where he uses everyday objects such as a half-filled glass of wine or a plate or whatever and these are utterly familiar and yet he invests them with an ecstasy and that is what I wanted to do. So I wanted to use the ordinary grammar of music, arpeggios, ordinary triads, simple progressions and to make them extraordinary.<sup>14</sup>

While the use of such basic materials runs the risk of sounding somewhat threadbare or even banal, Barry feels the comparison with visual art demonstrates both the viability of the approach and the latent possibilities in such material.

I don't think of that material as banal at all. It functions in the same way as everyday objects in painting. You wouldn't think of a glass or bowl of fruit banal in Vermeer. They have a heightened quality; they're everyday but revelatory.<sup>15</sup>

*The Eternal Recurrence* and 1998 are single-minded compositions, sticking obsessively to a prevailing mode of presentation for their entire duration, as though illustrative of an absolute determination not to move away from the one place. Both works are built up from the unpredictable amalgamation and repetition of fragments. In *The Eternal Recurrence* the focus on C, established not through any functional harmonic movement but by constant repetition of arpeggios, triads and c''s in the vocal line and moves from G to C in the bass, gives the work a distinctly different sound from 1998, whose gestures suggest less harmonic clarity; when major or minor triads do occur they are less grounded and are fleeting visions. In this context the third work, *Wiener Blut*, is the most interesting of the three as it combines two radically different types of texture and structural approach. On the one hand it looks back to earlier work with its juxtaposed sharply delineated sections; on the other it contains a large section of densely scored contrapuntal lines which contrasts starkly with the typical Barry soundworld.

<sup>12</sup> Barry, interview with Jean Martin.

<sup>13</sup> Barry, interview with Sarah Walker.

<sup>14</sup> Barry, interview with Sarah Walker.

<sup>15</sup> Gerald Barry, interview with Ivan Hewett, BBC Radio 3, *Hear and Now*, 2 June 2007.

*Wiener Blut* was originally composed for the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group and Thomas Adès, who premiered the work on 17 June 2000 at Aldeburgh, and is scored for single winds, two horns, trumpet, two violins, viola, cello and double bass. On 14 May 2002 an orchestral version was premiered by the National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland conducted by Rumon Gamba. Apart from a few small adjustments, this is essentially the same score with the winds doubled, the horns increased to four and a larger complement of strings, but the alteration in balance and the extra weight of a full orchestra has implications for how one hears the material, particularly in the second half of the composition. Barry's programme note for *Wiener Blut* again focuses on the idea of memory:

I once thought half seriously of mass producing a Poignancy Grid which, because of the harmonies chosen to fill it (all would contain a distilled poignant essence), could be read in any direction with any rhythms superimposed and always be poignantly foolproof. They would hit the mark and draw blood, be all things to all situations, work at all speeds and dynamics – cancons and dead marches from the same pool. This idea provided the impetus for *Wiener Blut*. Much of it includes sounds remembered from the time when I discovered music until now. They act as a diary in which each entry is a jolt to memory.<sup>16</sup>

In conversation with Jean Martin in 2000 Barry added further detail:

So this is a harmonic Baedeker made for – I said humorously for Viennese travellers, and it is a harmonic journey as if I was drawing the essence or blood of all the harmonies I used... all of the sounds in it, most of the sounds are taken from musical history. So you will have a sound from *Wozzeck* or Schoenberg or Ives or Mozart and they all come together like in a Seurat painting. All these points come together in a horizontal string.<sup>17</sup>

Subsequent Barry interviews regarding *Wiener Blut* continued to emphasise the conceit of memory of sounds heard since childhood, while constructing a sort of Barryesque canon of music from which sounds may have been drawn, adding Bach's *Art of Fugue* to the works he had already mentioned:<sup>18</sup> Bruckner's Ninth Symphony, Mozart's Piano Sonata K310, the opening of Schubert's *Winterreise*, Berg's *Lulu*<sup>19</sup> and Johann Strauss' *Die Fledermaus*.<sup>20</sup> There is, however, a certain ambiguity between those interviews in which Barry seems to emphasise the 'Viennese' nature of the material, or the sense that it provides a path into an Austro-German forest of references, and other comments that place the emphasis on the 'ordinary' nature of the gestures. Before a 2004 performance, for example, he claimed that he 'wrote down all of the sounds and then arranged them in an order that I liked, but the main thing is the ordinary everyday nature of the material and the fact there is, as well as that, a kind of sadness'.<sup>21</sup> Barry gave a further hint that the Austro-Germanic Baedeker is in any case an abstract conceit when he pointed out that the material from *The Art of Fugue* is actually not Bach's music but rather his own misplaying of a passage from the work.<sup>22</sup> In reality, in the case of *The Art of Fugue*, *Die Fledermaus* and, quite possibly, other

<sup>16</sup> Gerald Barry, *Wiener Blut* programme note (Dublin: Gerald Barry Festival, 21–25 June 2000).

<sup>17</sup> Barry, interview with Jean Martin.

<sup>18</sup> Barry, interview with Jean Martin.

<sup>19</sup> Barry, interview with Ivan Hewett; Gerald Barry, introductory comments before a performance of *Wiener Blut* by the Northern Sinfonia conducted by Thomas Zehetmaier, BBC Radio 3, 9 January 2004.

<sup>20</sup> Gerald Barry, pre-concert talk, National Concert Hall Dublin, 14 May 2002.

<sup>21</sup> Barry, introductory comments before a performance of *Wiener Blut*.

<sup>22</sup> Barry, interview with Jean Martin.

pieces, too, Barry only takes the rhythm of the source piece into his composition, combining it with new pitches. In other places he superimposes new rhythms on to his bank of pitches to give them a different form.<sup>23</sup> Even when the emphasis seems to be on the Austro-German origins of the material, Barry dismisses the idea that the source material might be recognised or add a semantic layer to the work:

I use only very tiny sounds, so they are not recognisable in this piece. And the challenge is to somehow draw the blood from these harmonies to make them my own. It is not a commentary, it is not something about something. They become something completely and utterly different.<sup>24</sup>

Lasting around 15 minutes, *Wiener Blut* falls into two parts. The first half of the work is closest in spirit to Barry's earlier music, consisting of three sections, the third of which recurs at the close of the entire composition. Apart from this transposed repetition, the second half of *Wiener Blut* consists of a single long block of material. The two halves of the work are further differentiated by their use of harmony and the methods used to prolong the individual moment.

The opening of the piece consists of a typical Barry gesture: a single line, made up of constant accented semiquavers, punctuated at irregular intervals by silences, is played very loud at high speed and marked 'furiously'. After 54 bars there is a repeat, marked 'raging'; the repetition is almost exact but horn parts are added to bars 78–79 that did not occur at the corresponding point in bars 24–25. Harmonically the section suggests a preference for flat keys, with an emphasis on B♭, E♭, A♭ and D♭, but this is not achieved via traditional functional harmony. Instead we are presented with what seems like the skeleton of traditional harmony or the half-remembered signals of a forgotten system, where isolated chords or the stresses caused by rests stand in for a fully functioning system. In addition, a sense of key centre is created by circling around notes of particular scales or triads, the half-remembered grammar of tonal music or, in other terms, ordinary gestures that are equivalent to the humble utensils in a Chardin painting. The speed at which the music unfolds reduces the impact of some of the passing 'rogue' notes while giving aural emphasis to those pitches which are repeated. By encouraging the ear to defer to the instantly categorisable major or minor triads and other tonal gestures within more ambiguous contexts, the fast tempo helps create the illusion of a functional if irrational harmonic progression.

In the opening bars, for example, the sense of A♭ as a pitch centre is created through the use of notes from the scale of A♭, the use of an A♭ chord as the second (and first easily definable) chord of the work and the repeated, quasi-dominant, E♭ in the bass at the close of the first melodic phrase in bars 2–3. The addition of further flattened pitches, the prominent chords of E♭ minor and D♭ minor and the 3/8 rest bar after repeated A♭s which is followed by a 'resolving' D♭ major chord gives the sense of a shift in this pitch centre (see [Example 1](#)).

A further example of this illusion of functional harmony can be seen in bars 15–17, where D♭ is dislodged by a rising E♭ figure leading to an E♭ chord (with rogue chords on F intervening) (see [Example 2](#)).

The sense that these tonal islands are illusory is reinforced by Barry's decision to obscure the quasi-triadic harmony at the beginning

<sup>23</sup> Barry, interview with Ivan Hewitt.

<sup>24</sup> Barry, interview with Jean Martin.



## Example 1:

Gerald Barry, *Wiener Blut*, bars 1–9  
© Schott Music Ltd. Reproduced by permission. All rights reserved.



## Example 2:

Gerald Barry, *Wiener Blut*, bars 15–18  
© Schott Music Ltd. Reproduced by permission. All rights reserved.



and end of the section, the points at which one might expect harmonic clarity. In bar 1, the second chord is an  $A\flat$  major triad but the first chord distorts this triad through the addition of an  $E\flat$  and  $D\flat$  (see [Example 1](#)). At the end of the section (bars 107–108) we suddenly move to 9ths and 7ths with the dyads  $B\flat$ – $B\sharp$ ,  $G$ – $F\sharp$ ,  $E$ – $F\sharp$  and  $E\flat$ – $E\sharp$ . In other places there is a subversive dethroning of triadic fragments. For example, at bar 31 a rising dominant to tonic melodic fragment –  $B\flat$ ,  $C$ ,  $D$ ,  $E\flat$  – heavily doubled across four octaves by the ensemble, sheers off into a meandering chromatic line which deftly removes all the harmonic certainty the initial gesture had suggested before landing on a chord of  $B\flat$  minor at the end of bar 36 (see [Example 3](#)).

This careful balancing of the harmonic content throughout the passage not only assists with the sense of forward propulsion but also gives the listener enough of a sense of an identifiable harmonic field from which Barry can then unexpectedly break out, investing the simple repeated triads with a sense of the ecstatic. At bars 39–40 there is a prolonged  $E$  minor tutti triad marked 'blazing', its power coming not just from the tutti scoring and jump in register but more importantly from the unexpected sound of this chord within a predominantly flat-oriented context.

By contrast with the harmonic instability of the opening, the second section is quite static, consisting of an idea just over 13 bars long that is 'extended' by being repeated eight times. It circles emphatically around chords of  $A\flat$  in its opening bars and is punctuated with an almost unambiguous cadence in  $A\flat$  in its tenth bar, giving the section a more grounded harmonic feel. While the pitches that make up the idea are repeated in sequence, each repetition is subtly different due to the shifting rhythmic structure of the passage (see [Example 4](#)).

The passage is made up of a series of different rhythmic units, the repetition of which is out of phase with the repetition of the melodic

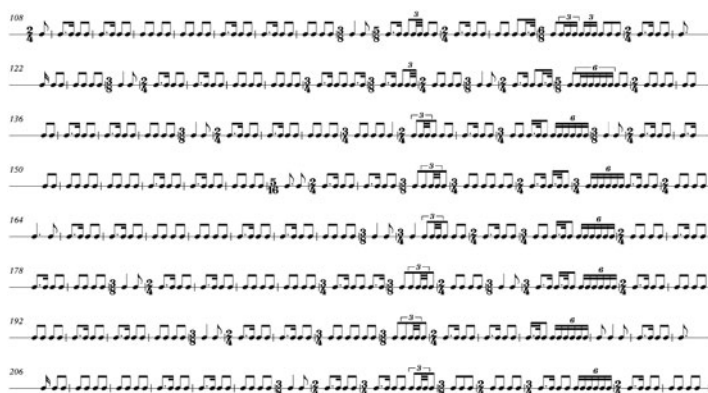
## Example 3:

Gerald Barry, *Wiener Blut*, bars 31–37  
© Schott Music Ltd. Reproduced by permission. All rights reserved.



## Example 4:

Gerald Barry, *Wiener Blut*, rhythmic structure bars 108–219 © Schott Music Ltd. Reproduced by permission. All rights reserved.



component; for example, the second iteration of the rhythmic chain begins before the pitches have been exhausted. However, this is not a simple case of a long rhythmic sentence that shifts by the same degree with each repeat; instead the order of the individual rhythmic blocks within the chain changes. For example, the initial statement at bars 109–22 begins with four bars of quavers, dotted quavers and semiquavers, followed by a further three bars of the same durations. The rhythmic idea (but not the pitches) is derived from the refrain ‘Oje Oje wie rührt mich dies!’ in the Act 1 terzet ‘So muß allein ich bleiben’, from *Die Fledermaus*. These rhythms never repeat in exactly the same place: sometimes they begin at the end of a melodic statement, sometimes shortly after the beginning of one. A 3/8 bar with a crotchet and quaver moves about as a free agent, sometimes appearing after the two groups of the dotted *Fledermaus* rhythm and sometimes falling between them. By contrast, at other points the relationship between the rhythmic and melodic component is fixed. A descending D, A, F♯, D, A♭ figure, that first appears on clarinet in bar 117, is constantly paired with a quaver/two demisemiquaver triplet, no matter where in a bar it appears. Similarly, an E♭ major arpeggio figure is always coupled with triplet semiquavers and is almost always preceded by a dotted semiquaver/demisemiquaver/quaver figure; in all but the last iteration the preceding pitches are matched to the dotted semiquaver/demisemiquaver/quaver idea (see [Example 5](#)).

This constant juggling of the rhythmic components, the non-systematic way in which the arrangement of rhythms is aligned with each iteration of the pitches, the somewhat lopsided positioning of the ‘cadence’ figure before either rhythm or pitch chain has completed and, at a surface level, the changes in orchestration in each repetition all help to counterbalance the harmonic/melodic stasis of the section while achieving Barry’s aim of doggedly examining a single idea over a protracted period of time.

The first dyad (E and A) of a potential ninth iteration of the passage is unexpectedly sustained for 12 crotchet beats; this hiatus leads to the third section, in which we hear a short six-beat idea repeated 17 times, sometimes in its prime form and sometimes in a retrograde version at a slightly faster speed (with a few minor adjustments). Starting on A, the upper note of the dyad, the melody falls to D♯ and continues to circle around this pitch, the perpetual repetition of both fast and slow variants only being forced to a halt by a pause on a sustained



Example 5:

Gerald Barry, *Wiener Blut*, bars 109–23 © Schott Music Ltd. Reproduced by permission. All rights reserved.

The image displays a musical score for Example 5, consisting of two systems of staves. The first system, labeled 'Complete pitch sequence' and '109', shows a complex melodic line in the treble clef and a more rhythmic accompaniment in the bass clef. The second system, labeled 'Rhythmic chain' and '117', features a 'Cadence' section with a melodic line in the treble clef and a rhythmic line in the bass clef. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

E $\flat$  (its enharmonic). The section removes the relative harmonic stability of the previous section with its melodic emphasis on the tritone and its lack of tonal rootedness in the accompanying lines, both of which create a tension between the need to resolve and the inability of the individual circling lines to actually move anywhere. When this section returns at bar 445 to conclude the work, it emerges from a long B played by almost the full ensemble. This time the melodic line starts a tritone above the B (rather than falling a tritone from the held note), which ensures that the piece concludes on the same pitch, giving it a stronger presence as an aural gravitational point, if not, in any traditional sense, a point of resolution.

In these various sections the methods of extending the time spent on each piece of material have been repetitions of different levels of complexity. For the penultimate section from bar 276–444, Barry abandons his customary linear clarity and the result is a dense texture he has described as a ‘Viennese labyrinth. It is very difficult to disentangle, it is like a swamp.’<sup>25</sup> Originally all the instrumental parts were simply marked *fortissimo*, but after initial rehearsals in which the performers described the music as ‘crazy and surreal’, Barry added a series of *Hauptstimme* markings.<sup>26</sup> Their use is highly idiosyncratic, however. In some places one idea and all its doublings are marked as the *Hauptstimme* when little else is happening; elsewhere unrelated ideas happening simultaneously are all marked as the principal voice; sometimes nothing is marked for long stretches. Most of the marked passages are only two or three beats in duration; occasionally they stretch to a bar or longer. There is no sense that one fragment links directly to a following fragment.

While the rhythm of the unfinished quadruple fugue from *The Art of Fugue* gives the passage its skeletal structure, any sense of clarity this might provide is undermined by the elimination of its recognisable structural elements (the successive entries of voices at the opening of each section) and the superimposition of a set of alien pitches. All the instruments are playing at uniform dynamics for most of the section, and the orchestration, with its uncompromising assignment of material to instruments without particular concern for either ease of performance or transparency of texture, helps to negate any

<sup>25</sup> Barry, interview with Jean Martin.

<sup>26</sup> It is clear from comparison of the score of the original and orchestral versions that Barry increased the amount of these markings after the experience of hearing it in performance.

clarification that might be added by vigorous presentation of the Hauptstimmen. This adds to the general murkiness of the harmonic texture, in which any sense of consonance and dissonance as dynamic elements is eliminated. Indeed, the lack of textural clarity is probably the most unusual thing about the section, in striking contrast with the Stravinskian lucidity that Barry usually favours.<sup>27</sup>

The individual elements of this pitch labyrinth are hard to identify at a surface level because of their fragmentary and frequently undistinctive melodic profile. The preformed nature of the underlying derived rhythm allows one to detect repetitions of certain rhythmic configurations, and some of the melodic shards reappear coupled with different rhythms. However, these ideas are frequently so fragmentary, generic or similar that it is hard to know whether they are intended to be heard as repetitions.<sup>28</sup> The one clearly identifiable repetition occurs at bar 396, when the music falters momentarily before relaunching with a repeat of the first bar and a half of the section (that is, bars 276–77 are repeated at bars 397–98). This is set apart by a moment of silence before it begins; the retention of the original orchestration, coupled with the distinctive shape of the trumpet melody, ensures that it stands out from the prevailing texture. This is not the signal for any recognisable large-scale repeat, however; instead it is akin to someone in a labyrinth searching for the centre yet suddenly finding themselves at the entry point again and forced to try a different pathway in their attempt.<sup>29</sup>

In his analysis of 1998 Daniel March notes that

The continual remoulding, recontextualisation and re-presentation of gestures militates against hearing any clear forward motion; instead, the music continually refers back to itself. Or, viewed another way, it presents a kind of 'all over' patterning in which it is hard to orientate oneself... the music becomes so resistant to the act of memory (the ability to recall whether it is the same or not) that it effectively starts to work 'out of time', disorientating any sense of progression, of passing straightforwardly in one direction.<sup>30</sup>

The penultimate section of *Wiener Blut* (which accounts for half of its duration), with its opaque textures and absence of distinctive melodic or harmonic patterns, creates a similar sense of harmonic stasis, made more striking in this piece by the sharp contrast with the illusion of propulsive directional harmony found at the composition's opening, whereas the other two works determinedly pursue a single mode of presentation for their material throughout. In *The Eternal Recurrence* the lack of forward momentum caused by the rapid shuffling through a series of similar gestures is reinforced by an obsessive focus on the pitch C. Arguably for most of the work's duration, the only element lending the piece any element of narrative progression is the text, though this is so pulverised in the setting that this is a somewhat tenuous argument.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> The difference between the original and orchestral versions is naturally most striking in this section, where the extra weight of the strings alters the balance between parts considerably, though this does not result in clarity but a more heavily weighted density.

<sup>28</sup> For example, one can identify larger repetitions, such as bars 326–29, which are repeated at bars 341–44, but with considerable re-voicing of the various parts which disguise the recurrence.

<sup>29</sup> In more practical terms this repetition is one of the passages which disguises the underlying Bach rhythmic template.

<sup>30</sup> Daniel March, 'Speed and Slowness in the Music of Gerald Barry', *Contemporary Music Review*, 33, no. 4 (2014), pp. 383–84.

<sup>31</sup> This may be the reason for the lengthy cut of the purely orchestral music from the piece, noted in footnote 8.

When one considers their static nature it is easy to see why March would conclude that these three works now 'seem rather less forward-looking in terms of developing Barry's musical language than the composer appears to have thought at the time'.<sup>32</sup> Barry evidently felt that a more dynamic and flexible language would be necessary for an opera as long as *Petra von Kant*. Yet apart from the obvious idea that it was necessary for Barry to work through the implications of his different concepts for prolonging the moment in shorter works, if only to eliminate these approaches, a closer examination of *Petra von Kant* suggests that it is not as unrelated to the three transitional compositions as might at first seem the case. The connections are particularly noticeable in the second act of the opera since this was the first to be composed.<sup>33</sup>

To begin with the superficial similarities, the brass-heavy scoring and the alternation between sung passages and explosive interjections from the orchestra seem to recall the world of *The Eternal Recurrence*, although these might also be seen as typical of Barry's writing throughout his career. The orchestral introduction to Act 2, for example, with its two-part writing (interspersed with occasional chords) in repeated semiquavers, is a more or less exact match of the material found in the opening bars of *Wiener Blut*. Other connections, however, are more significant. The first connection is the move in 1998, *The Eternal Recurrence* and the second half of *Wiener Blut* away from a structure defined primarily by melody to one in which passages are constructed from short gestures or phrases. In *The Eternal Recurrence* the familiarity of some of these fragments – musical objects such as C major arpeggios<sup>34</sup> – makes them stand out from the undifferentiated surface of the piece and enables their repetition to be readily perceived.<sup>35</sup> This type of aid to comprehension is not necessary in *Petra*, where the music is more variegated, and the use of stock gestures remains a feature, most obviously in the careering diminished tetrachords that can be heard at two points in the second act and at several other points throughout the opera, most dramatically when Karen leaves Petra at the close of Act 3.

Where such gestures are not used it is clear that melodic distinctiveness is generally not a priority. Most of Act 2 is made up of short, gesturally distinct passages that form individual blocks but can also be intercut with each other. The individual ideas are not as contrasted in character as the blocks in Barry's earlier work, giving listeners the impression of a greater degree of continuity. The result in *Petra* is a mosaic of short ideas that are constantly reshuffled, reacting to or sparking off the rapidly processed text; the text provides the structural scaffolding of the act. The move away from longer, juxtaposed melodic units, of equal importance and intensity, to a structure made from fragments leads to a greater sense of peaks and troughs in the structure, the impact of the troughs to some extent counteracted by the forceful dynamics and heavy orchestration.

The second connection lies in the exploitation of the possibilities of repetition. In the first half of *Wiener Blut* Barry explored the

<sup>32</sup> March, 'Speed and Slowness', p. 380.

<sup>33</sup> Act 2 was premiered in Dublin on 27 September 2002 by the National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland under Gerhard Markson. The rest of the opera was written after this performance.

<sup>34</sup> For example, see the rapid sung C major arpeggios at bars 118 and 515 in the original uncut score.

<sup>35</sup> The other technique used to aid recognition of repetitions is to score fragments in a distinctive manner and retain this scoring in any repetition.

## Example 6:

Gerald Barry, *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, bar 910 © Schott Music Ltd. Reproduced by permission. All rights reserved.



possibilities inherent in supercharged repetition as a means of extending sections; the prelude to *Petra* immediately adopts a similar tactic of extension through simple repetition. The opening eight bars for orchestra are followed by a series of silent pauses interspersed with three sets of repeated Eb's on horns. The material for the first eight bars is repeated, then followed by three 'doorbell' sounds, created by clarinet, vibraphone and piano tremolo. The opening idea is repeated unaltered for a third time before this initial paragraph concludes with a mix of the horn and 'doorbell' sounds.

The dramatic possibilities of this type of repetition are heard in two passages where the music breaks away from the grasp of the text; Barry presses his musical material further and the force of childhood memory seems momentarily to open up a dimension beyond the text. These pauses in the relentless delivery of the text are not a feature of the other acts of the opera. The first such passage occurs when Karen describes how her father would force the family to go on bike trips (bar 554ff.). This is underpinned by a block of material in which a nine-bar figure in the bass is combined with a treble part in which a two-bar figure is repeated three times, followed by a three-bar variant. The end of Karen's narrative is marked by a single unrelated bar of music after which the nine-bar block of material is repeated by the orchestra, then repeated two more times with heavier scoring. The second no-text passage follows Karen's account of how her father murdered her mother before killing himself. Her vocal line is made entirely from a quite banal four-note figure that rises a semitone with each iteration; after 18 sung iterations<sup>36</sup> the orchestra continues to repeat the figure a further 26 times.

This last example also highlights Barry's use of repetition to create climactic moments or underscore key points in the action. For example, in the final moments of the act after Petra has invited Karen to stay in her house, ostensibly to help her save money, she suddenly blurts out a declaration of love (bar 910). This is accompanied by a two-crotchet-beat oscillating figure repeated 15 times (see [Example 6](#)).

Karen's slightly panicked response is amusingly set to five iterations of the same chromatically rising figure (see [Example 7](#)) she used when describing her parents' death.

Petra, unable to sense the reality of the situation, delivers an ecstatic response that Barry pairs with a repeated two-bar figure (see [Example 8](#)), the melodic line of which is primarily made from oscillations between two adjacent notes.

Repetitions of this figure are cut short to mark the end of each of Petra's sentences and intercut with contrasting repeated single-bar gestures. After a shortened fifth repetition that marks the end of the first sentence, a single-bar contrasting idea is repeated five times. The music returns to that shown in [Example 8](#), but the fourth repetition is cut short to match the sung sentence and a different contrasting

<sup>36</sup> When performed in German a further vocal statement is required to fit the words.

## Example 7:

Gerald Barry, *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, bar 918 © Schott Music Ltd. Reproduced by permission. All rights reserved.



## Example 8:

Gerald Barry, *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, bars 922–23 © Schott Music Ltd. Reproduced by permission. All rights reserved.



one-bar idea is repeated four times. A further four statements of [Example 8](#) lead into the timpani roll with which the act ends. None of the three figures used is new; they have all been heard at various earlier points in the act.<sup>37</sup> The two longer ideas also contain within them considerable pitch repetition, even before they are repeated as a unit. Also, they are not particularly melodically distinctive; this reflects the type of basic material favoured in the opera.

As Barry became more engrossed in the opera and the possibilities of the material he had devised for it, he clearly moved further away from the world of the three pointillist transition pieces. This move to a mosaic structure held together through a strategy of ecstatic appropriation of the mundane was reflected in the shift of emphasis in his narrative regarding *Wiener Blut* away from the idea of the Viennese travelogue to the ordinary nature of the material. However, the harmonic context within which his material is placed in the opera is far removed from the opaque harmonic textures found in the second part of *Wiener Blut* and the other transition works, with Barry noting, 'I would say every single bar in this opera can be related to a key centre.'<sup>38</sup> It was this restoration of harmonic clarity, combined with scales, diminished tetrachords and fragmented scraps of musical language, that enabled Barry to put aside the Viennese labyrinth and create a language that could embrace the fearsome ordinariness of Fassbinder's text.

<sup>37</sup> Apart from the use of [Example 7](#) for the murder sequence mentioned above, see, for example, the use of [Example 6](#) at bar 325 and the use of [Example 8](#) at bar 115.

<sup>38</sup> Gerald Barry, interview with Ivan Hewett, *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* programme (London: English National Opera, 2005).