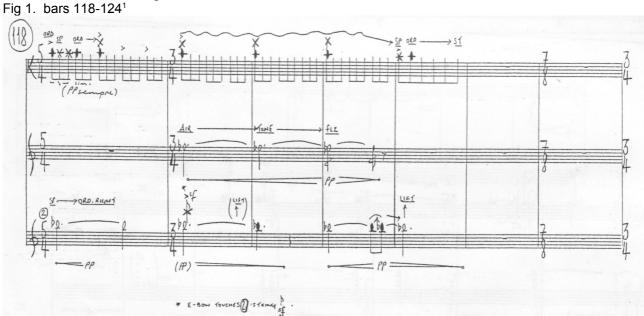
Analysis of Rebecca Saunders' *Molly's Song 3 – Shades Of Crimson* David Pocknee

Molly's Song 3 – Shades of Crimson is a piece for guitar, viola and alto flute with 4 radios and music boxes. The piece, like much of Saunders' work, is sparse and uses a plethora of instrumental techniques that sit on the boundaries between pitch, noise and silence. Saunders' approach to structure, use of pitch, instrumental sound, gesture and extramusical sound sources (in this case radios and a music box) are all very important to the effectiveness of the piece.

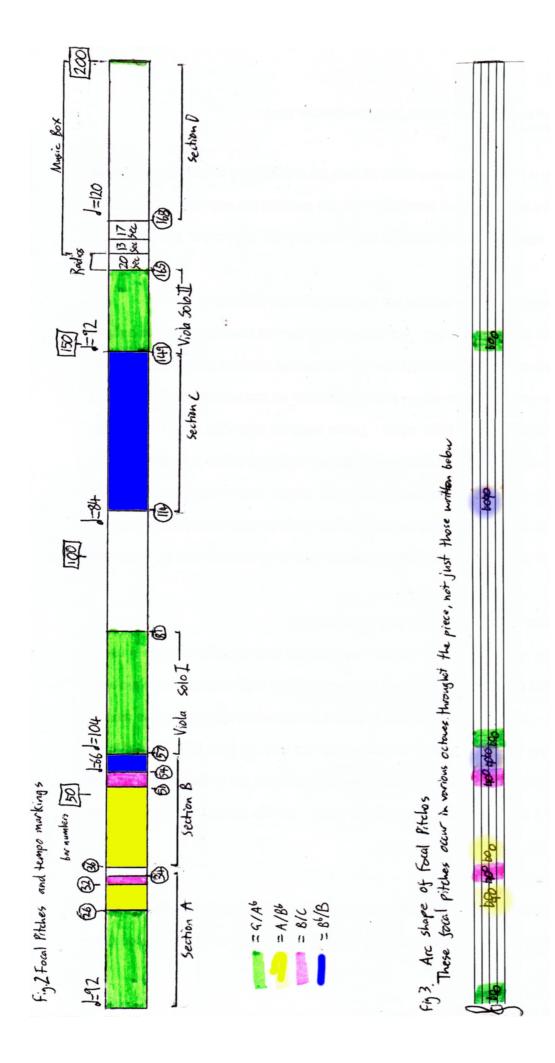
From an analysis only of the score it appears that pitch is a key factor in the structuring of *Molly's Song 3*, as there are recurring focal pitches throughout the piece (as can be seen in Figure 2 over the page). These pitches are always two notes a semitone apart, such as in the example below where the repeated Bs of the flute and viola are pitted against the sustained Bbs of the guitar:

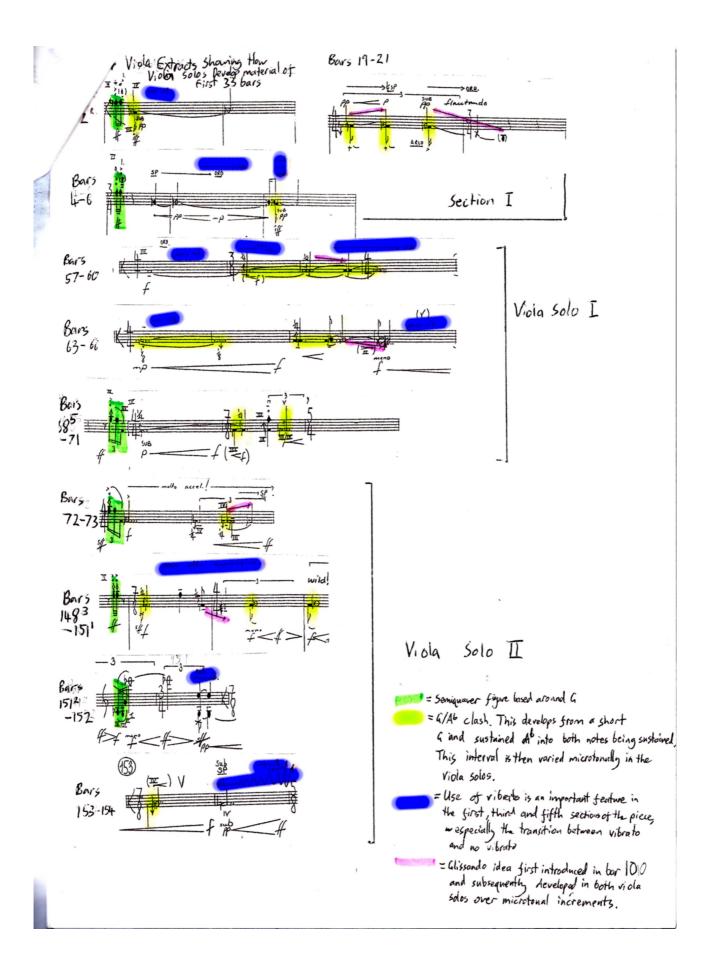


Over the page, Figures 2 and 3 show the focal pitches used in the piece, with Fig. 3 highlighting the arc-like movement of pitch in the first half of the piece from G/Ab to B/C and then back down again.

However, though pitch appears an important structural tool from an analysis of the score, upon listening to the piece, many of these relationships become inaudible because of the use of noise-based and pitchless extended techniques. For instance, although there should be a clear sense of a minor 2nd occurring at Figure 1 it is difficult to identify because of the *col legno battuto* effect used on the viola, the air tone in the flute and the extra noise generated by the e-bow's contact with the guitar string at the beginning of bar 119, all of which obscure the pitches with different amounts of 'noise'. It should also be noted that, though an arc shape can be clearly seen in Fig. 3, it is extremely unlikely that the average listener would be able to track this pitch progression through the piece. These factors lead to the conclusion that, although pitch plays an important role in the structure of the piece, it is only functioning at a background level.

¹ Saunders, Rebecca *Molly's Song 3 – Shades Of Crimson* (London, 1997), 8





Tempo also has a role to play in structuring the piece. Though the piece has little overall sense of pulse – an effect created by long sustained tones and the frequent alternating of bars of regular 3/4 and 4/4 with odd numbered 3/8, 5/8 and 7/8 bars (page 7 is a good example of this) - tempo markings appear to have clear structural significance, as can be seen in figure 2, by the way in which nearly all the changes in tempos match up to the start of sections based around new focal pitches. This shows that, although pulse is a minor feature of the piece, tempo is still used as a structural tool.

Instrumentation is also used to demarcate sections. The viola solos in bars 57 - 110 and 149 - 164 appear to have important structural significance as they share motivic material and many of the same characteristics (Ab/G pitch centre, long sustained notes, loud dynamics, descending triplet figure and use of vibrato), all of which give them the sense of having a clear relationship to each other. These sections also take nearly all of their material from the viola line in the first 34 bars of the piece, as can be seen in figure 4^2 . The fact that the second solo returns to the original tempo of crotchet=92 seems to support the idea that they are connected.

The G/Ab focal pitch in the first section's viola part and the viola solos, the similarities outlined in figure 4 and the above paragraph, and the fact that the viola solos are the only sections in which a single instrument plays by itself for a significant period of time, makes the bars 1-34, 57-114 and 149-165 very distinctive and appear clearly related. The alternation of these sections with other contrasting ones suggests that the piece is in a rough rondo form in which sections B,C and D are alternated with versions of section A:

Section A: Bars 1-35	Section B: Bars 36-56	<i>Section A:</i> Bars 57-113 Viola Solo 1	Section C: Bars 114-148	<i>Section A:</i> Bars 149-164 Viola Solo 2	Bars 165-167 Radios and music box	Section D: Bars 168-200
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In an interview Saunders stated that:

'Decisions involving large scale structure first take on significance when all material has been composed. In recent pieces, it has been the juxtaposition of separately written and strongly contrasting sound-surfaces ... that creates the structure, the large-scale organisation, of a work. Very few combinations, or collages, of the composed material, are possible. In a sense, the music decides for me how they can best be juxtaposed without losing their strength and individuality. It is this juxtaposition of sound worlds that provides the basis of much of my music.'³

The juxtaposition of different sound-surfaces seems to be a very important element of the piece, and one which is not immediately obvious from the score. However, in order to realise how these sound-surfaces operate it is important to understand the material Saunders is working with and her approach to and treatment of that material:

"In a chosen constellation of instruments lies a very reduced palette of sounds, which I am drawn to and try to push to the limits of their potential. I am interested in sounds that meet the borders of noise and of silence. Taking a sound to its edge has an extraordinary tension. A group of instruments can provide an infinite palette of sounds, so I initially seek to reduce or condense the material as far as possible, to find something like its "essence". ... The clearly differentiated sound worlds that then develop define the direction the form will take. ... I want

² Saunders, Rebecca *Molly's Song 3 – Shades Of Crimson* (London, 1997)

³ Saunders, James, 'Short Interview With Rebecca Saunders', *James Saunders' Website*. http://www.james-saunders.com/rsaunders.htm (31 March 2008)

to only hear what I can make of the very reduced selection of sounds, within each different palette I have found.⁴

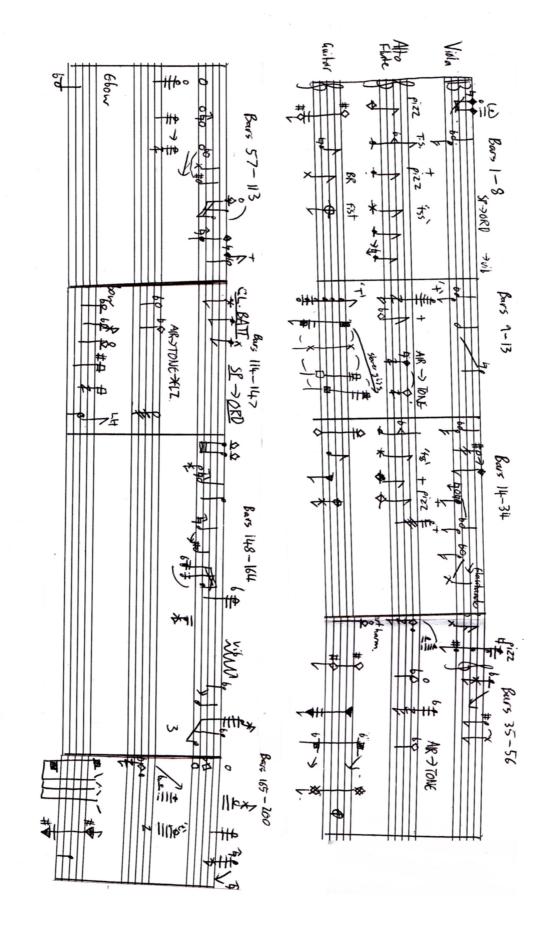
This 'condensing' of material is clearly in evidence in *Molly's Song 3*, the four pages of 'Explanatory notes' that preface the score not only advise on the technical aspects of sound production for particular symbols, but also outline nearly all of the musical material that is used in the piece. The 'Explanatory notes' list many examples of a sound being taken 'to it's edge' through a large number extended techniques that straddle the 'borders of noise and of silence'.

This condensed material is arranged into 'sound-surfaces', by which Saunders means sections with distinctive timbral qualities. These timbres are defined by the small number of sounds used, which are then combined and re-combined in different ways. Figure 5 is a chart of particular techniques used in each section of the piece which is intended to give an idea of the way in which different techniques in particular instruments contribute to the sound-surfaces heard and how the reduced palette of instrumental sounds is combined to make the piece, for example, the viola pizzicato is a very characteristic element of section B as it is not used any other sections. Over the page from this is another chart (fig. 6) in which these types of sound have been analysed and presented in words that describe the characteristics of each sound-surface, this should show the small amount of musical material that Saunders is using and the way in which she is recombining it to create different sound-surfaces – note the frequency of fluttertonguing, air-tones and glissandi, all of which are used in different ways in different sections.

In each section Saunders uses the same process to create sustained sound-surfaces which she can juxtapose. First, a gesture is created, sometimes surrounded by silence in order to differentiate it from the surrounding music. The four initial gestures for sections A, B, C and D are presented in Figure 8, over the page.

Each gesture consists of an amalgam of individual pieces of material in each instrument that then combine to create a single 'hyperinstrument'-type gesture, as can be heard in the recording. This combination of gestures is an important part of Saunders writing and can be seen throughout the piece (Fig. 9 shows two examples of this technique):

⁴ Saunders, James, 'Short Interview With Rebecca Saunders', *James Saunders' Website*. http://www.james-saunders.com/rsaunders.htm (31 March 2008)





	Section A	Section B	Viola Solo 1 - b114	Section C	Viola Solo 2
Viola	-G/Ab Focal pitches -Sustained Notes -Harmonics -Glissandi	-Rhythmic pizzicato -Glissandi -Bowing near bridge	-Microtonally changing sustained chords -G/Ab focal pitches	-Col legno battuto -Movement of bowing position -Pulsing material	-Microtonally changing sustained chords -G/Ab focal
	-Lots of change between <i>sul pont.</i> and <i>sul tasto</i> -Extremes of Vibrato	-loud	-Harmonics -Left hand pizz. -Gliddandi -Lots of change	-very quiet	pitches -Harmonics -Left hand pizz. -Gliddandi
	loud	·	between sul pont. and sul tasto -Extremes of	×	-Lots of change between sul pont.
			-loud		-Extremes of Vibrato -loud
	-Percussive -Breath Noises	-Fluttertonguing -Harmonics	-Harmonics -Sustained tones	-Sustained tones -Harmonics	
	-Key Slaps -Fluttertonguing	-Air tones -Transition between	-Fluttertonguing -Transition from	-Fluttertonguing -Transition	
	-Air noises ('tss') -loud	air and tone	sustained tone to fluttertonguing	between Air/tone/Flzg. -very quiet	
	-Percussive Barre chords -Hitting guitar (strings	-Barre chords -Metal slide glissandi	-Use of E-bow -Sustained notes	-Use of E-bow -Harmonics -Slide	
<u> </u>	and bridge) with fist and palm -loud	-Hitting strings with fist		-Sustained tones -very quiet	

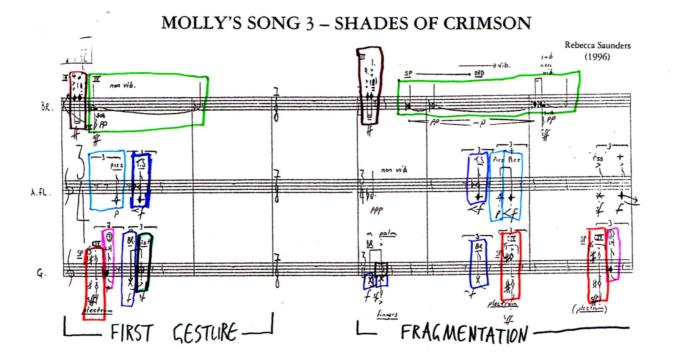
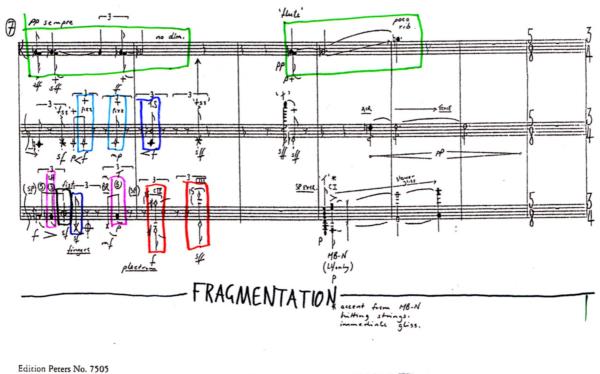
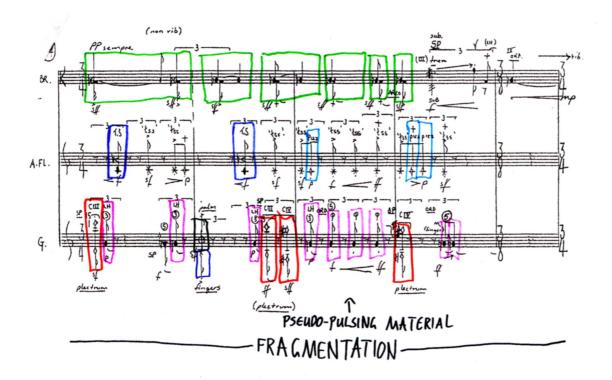
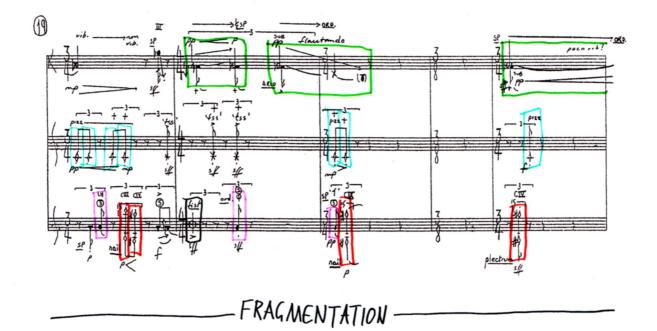


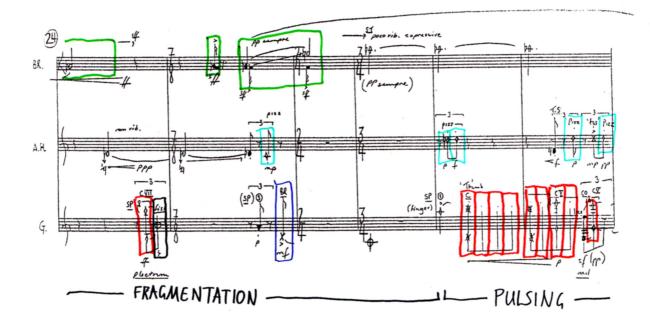
Fig. 9. Showing gestural development over first section. The elements of the first gesture have been individually colour-coded to show how they are fragmented and re-arranged

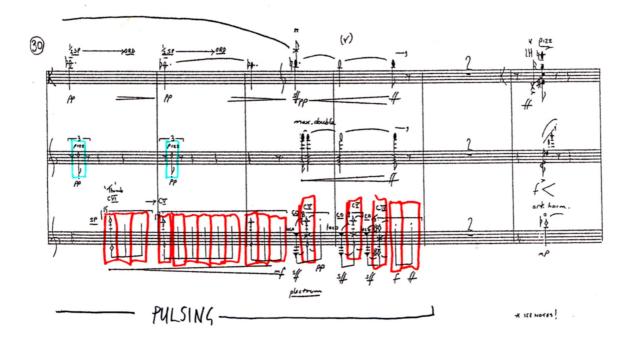


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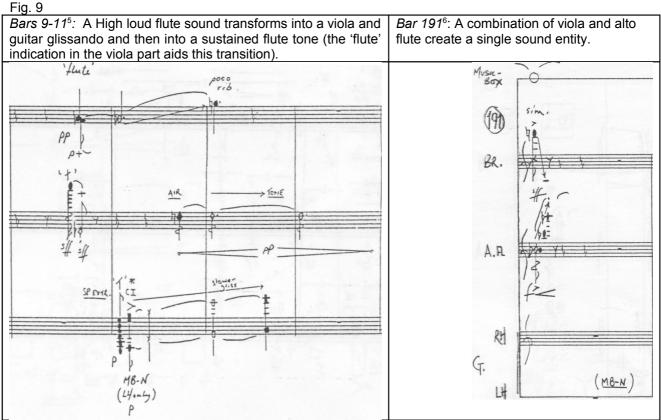






3.

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After the initial gesture of each sound surface, this gesture is then dismantled and fragmented into its component parts before being arranged into pulsing material. Over the page (Fig. 10) is an annotated copy of the first section of the piece (the whole piece can be heard on track 7 on the CD), showing the three stages of:

- 1. Gesture
- 2. Fragmentation
- 3. Pulsing

In Fig. 10 the colour-coding of each sound element of the first gesture shows the extent to which very few pieces of material are used (there are only 8 colour-coded elements) and how they are fragmented and re-arranged into pulsing material.

This gestural development is a key feature of the piece and one which ensures the continuity and consistency of each sound-surface and the effectiveness of the juxtaposition between each one.

⁵ Saunders, Rebecca Molly's Song 3 – Shades Of Crimson (London, 1997), 1

⁶ Saunders, Rebecca Molly's Song 3 – Shades Of Crimson (London, 1997), 14

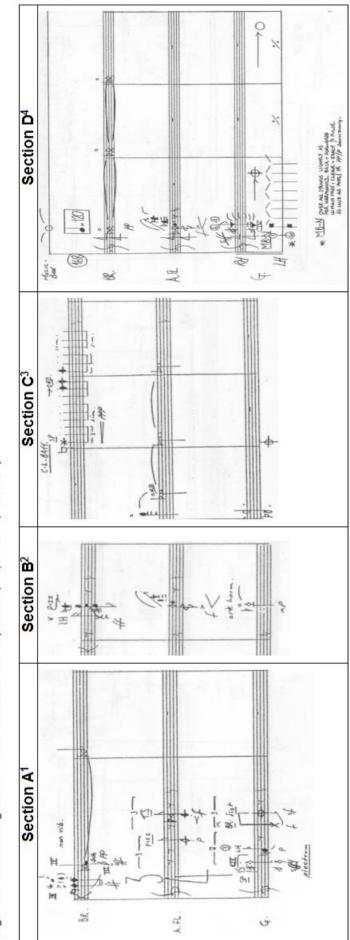


Fig. 8 The four initial gestures of each sound-surface (bars1-2, 35,114-115, 168-170)

The most puzzling element of *Molly's Song 3* are the radios and music box. They appear out of nowhere at bar 165, the radios disappearing 20 seconds later, never to return, and the music box gradually winding down from bar 167 until the piece reaches its conclusion – even the literary inspiration (Molly Bloom's monologue at the end of Joyce's *Ulysses*⁷) fails to shed any light on the matter, containing neither radios, nor music box⁸. The radios are the easiest to offer explanations for as it seems as if these are simply another of Saunders 'sound-surfaces', to juxtapose against the material around it. In the explanatory notes she indicates that the four radios should be set up as follows:

'<u>Radios</u>
performed by the flute and guitar players.
4 radios tuned differently:
1 and 3: white noise
2: white noise and indistinct speech
4: very high and moving frequencies
as diverse as possible. quality of radios not important.
loud but not painful. turn on (sub. F) and off together exactly.'9

These instructions, especially the use of four radios tuned to different frequencies rather than the use of a single radio and 'loud but not painful', seem to suggest that the radios are meant to act as an impenetrable wall of white noise that surprises the audience and acts as another sound-surface against which to juxtapose material. It acts not only as a musical gesture but also as a dramatic one - the music box functions in a similar way - as the performers are required to operate these objects rather than an external and unseen sound engineer. The dramatic element is also enforced by a stage layout in the score that clearly places the radios dramatically at the front of the stage.

Fig. 11. Stage layout from score¹⁰ Seating:

M	OLA	
MUSIC - BOX		
 ALTO FLUTE radio 1. radio 2.	radio3. radio4.	/

⁷ Saunders, Rebecca *Molly's Song 3 – Shades Of Crimson* (London, 1997), title page

⁸ Joyce, James, Ulysses – Annotated Students Edition (London, 1992)

⁹ Saunders, Rebecca Molly's Song 3 – Shades Of Crimson (London, 1997), Explanatory notes

¹⁰ Saunders, Rebecca Molly's Song 3 - Shades Of Crimson (London, 1997), Explanatory notes

The music box presents more problems to explain. Saunders is not averse to using music boxes and three can be found in her piece CRIMSON - Molly's Song 1 (1995), eleven in *cinnabar* (1999) and twenty-seven in *G* and *E* on *A* (1997)¹¹. A constant feature of her use of music boxes is that their introduction always occurs in the last section of the piece and they continue as a backdrop to the conventionally played instruments¹². This also occurs in this piece. Robert Adlington suggests their use is designed to "…encourage us to listen to the works' conventional instruments, too, as 'found objects', to be explored for their sound-making potential"¹³. Their use might also have something to do with the composer's comment on the context of sounds:

'... one can consider how an object is given body and context by shadow, and further, compare to how resonances, fields of sound or foreign sound worlds, which serve as an alternative backdrop to that of silence, can give the foreground context and substance.'¹⁴

So, perhaps the music boxes simply exist as a way of giving the foreground, in this case the other instruments, 'context and substance'.

However, the explanatory notes state that the box should play *Der Kaiserwalzer* by Johann Strauss II¹⁵ and, looking at the plucked guitar line in bars 171 – 188, the diatonic melody presented has many similarities to that of *Der Kaiserwalzer*, albeit distorted by irregular time signatures and smudged by the rhythmic, microtonal movement of the guitar slide. Over the page can be seen the relevant pages of the score of *Der Kaiserwalzer* (fig 12¹⁶) along with a comparison of the main violin melody used in the music box with that of the guitar (fig. 13¹⁷). An analysis of Strauss's piece and the guitar line seems to show that the harmonic progressions from the music boxes are used as a basis for the guitar line (albeit transposed – the orchestral work is in C, the music box is in D and the guitar line is in E). The shape of many of the gestures (especially the descending wave shape of the final one) seem to be directly related to each other. The fact that Saunders has specified a particular tune for the music box to play also hints that there is something about its musical material that is important as well as the 'quiet and magical!'¹⁸ sound; previous scores, such as *CRIMSON*, have only specified 'nothing too well known'¹⁹.

Rebecca Saunders' *Molly's Song 3 – Shades Of Crimson* is a work which prompts many questions and seems reluctant to answer any of them. Its effectiveness is due to its meticulous attention to detail in its explanatory notes and scoring as well as its finely distilled palette of sounds which are arranged to create musical gestures that form distinctive timbral sound-surfaces that are juxtaposed against each other. All of this is underpinned by minor second chords which create slowly shifting focal pitches upon which these surfaces exist.

¹¹ Adlington, Robert, 'The Music Of Rebeca Saunders: Into The Sensuous World' *The Musical Times,* Vol. 140, No. 1868. (Autumn 1999), 48 and 55

¹² Adlington, Robert, 'The Music Of Rebeca Saunders: Into The Sensuous World' *The Musical Times,* Vol. 140, No. 1868. (Autumn 1999), 55

¹³ Adlington, Robert, 'The Music Of Rebeca Saunders: Into The Sensuous World' *The Musical Times,* Vol. 140, No. 1868. (Autumn 1999), 56

¹⁴ Saunders, James, 'Short Interview With Rebecca Saunders', *James Saunders' Website*. http://www.james-saunders.com/rsaunders.htm (31 March 2008)

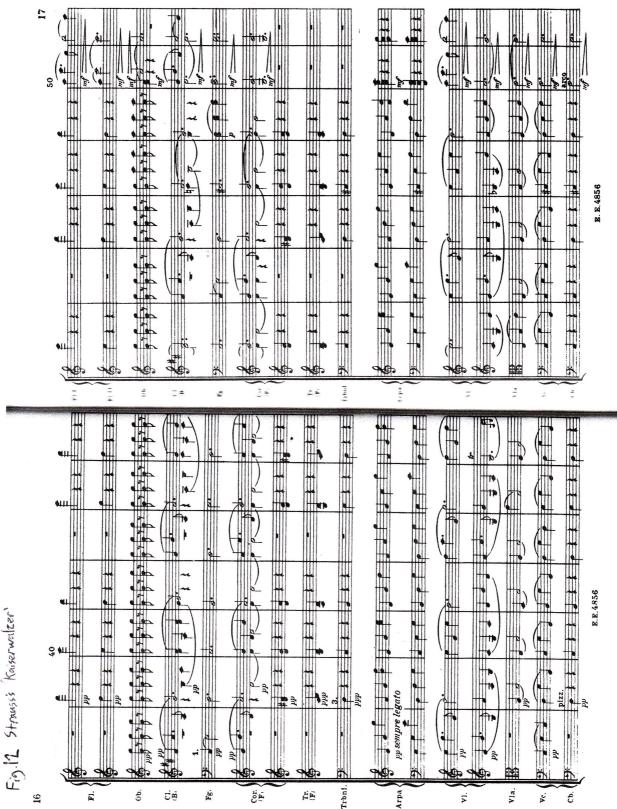
¹⁵ Saunders, Rebecca *Molly's Song 3 – Shades Of Crimson* (London, 1997)

¹⁶ Strauss, Johann 2nd, *Kaiser-Walzer* (London, nd), 16-19

¹⁷ Saunders, Rebecca *Molly's Song 3 – Shades Of Crimson* (London, 1997), 12-13 and Strauss, Johann 2nd, *Kaiser-Walzer* (London, nd), 16-19

¹⁸ Saunders, Rebecca *Molly's Song 3 – Shades Of Crimson* (London, 1997), 11

¹⁹ Adlington, Robert, 'The Music Of Rebeca Saunders: Into The Sensuous World' *The Musical Times,* Vol. 140, No. 1868. (Autumn 1999), 55



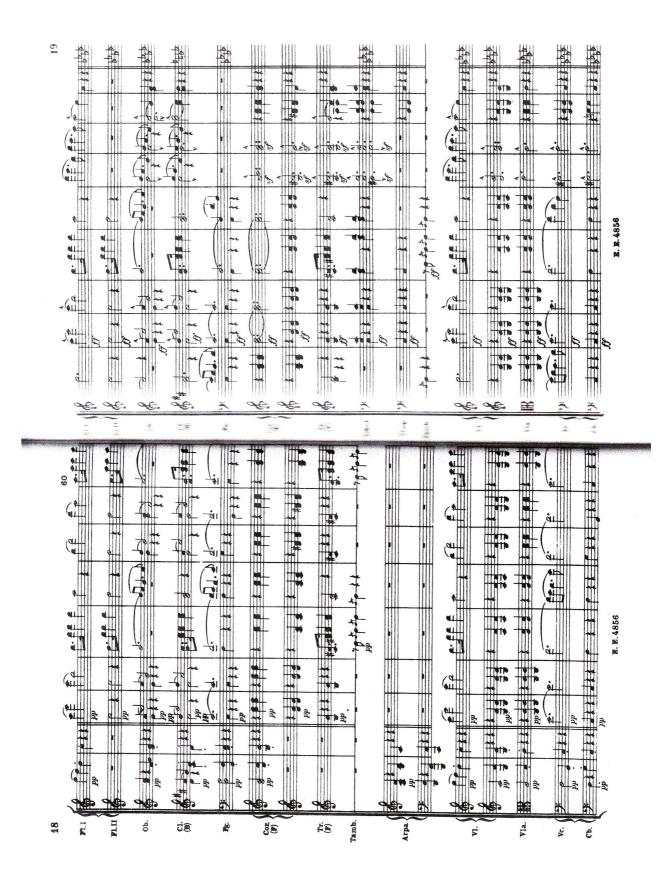
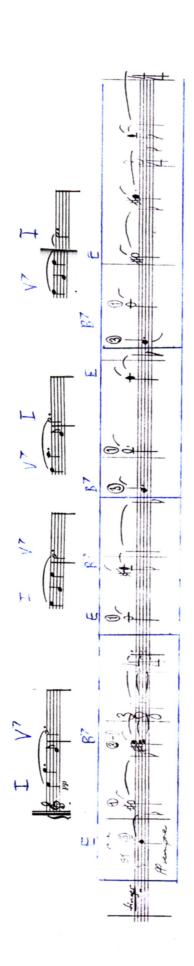
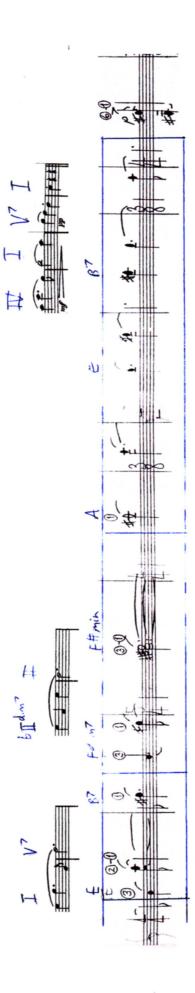


Fig.13.Analyzes of Ember Rurt (bour 168 - 188) with comparison to the Stranse's 'Kaiserwalter' (bour 38 - 53)





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