

“Everything in Its Right Place:” Christopher O’Riley and Arranging the Music of Radiohead

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The practice of arranging and transcribing music has been integral to keeping certain types of music alive, whether used for an archival purpose (i.e., the transcription of previously un-notated folk music), or as a way for composers to allow their music to reach wider audiences before recording technology was available. Some arrangers and transcribers, however, took this practice and transformed it into their own art form—a way to show their compositional and, especially, virtuosic prowess. From the arrangements for piano of Franz Liszt to the arrangements of the music of David Bowie by Phillip Glass for larger ensembles, these composers take the music of others and make it their own while managing to keep elements of the original music’s character intact. Pianist Christopher O’Riley builds on this tradition, creating modern piano arrangements of the music of Radiohead. Radiohead’s music, particularly in the album *Kid A*, presents a particular challenge: this music is predominately electronic, leading to the many problems encountered when adapting for an acoustic instrument music that was originally produced digitally. This paper focuses on O’Riley’s arrangement of the Radiohead songs “Bullet Proof... I Wish I Was” from *The Bends* (which is titled “Bulletproof” by O’Riley), “Subterranean Homesick Alien,” from *OK Computer* and, primarily, “Everything In Its Right Place” from *Kid A* for *True Love Waits - Christopher O’Riley Plays Radiohead*, elaborating on the complicated undertaking of preserving the musical identity of songs which range from predominately guitar-based to predominately electronic while accounting for the technical capacities of the acoustic piano as well as the physical limitations of a solo pianist.

O’Riley’s arrangements can be related to the familiar arrangements and transcriptions by Franz Liszt: large-scale works for large ensembles, performed on piano. In modern popular music, however, arrangements and transcriptions pose further complications that were not present during Liszt’s time. Arranging a classical work originally composed for orchestra, orchestra and voices, or voice and piano, for a solo instrument is a difficult task, but the instrumentation, electronic elements, and percussive sounds added in addition to the voice makes arranging popular music for piano particularly demanding. There are a multitude of ways that composers can go about doing this, such as using a larger ensemble to incorporate all aspects of the source music, adding the vocal line to a single instrument when arranging for an ensemble, focusing on the harmonic structure and timbre, and omitting certain elements (ambient noise, percussion, etc.). These methods can lead to an arrangement that is loosely based on and does not strictly “transcribe” to the song or album referenced in the arrangement, which

is often times unavoidable when considering the physical limitations of certain instruments.

O’Riley’s interpretation of the song “Bulletproof” from *The Bends*, in which a high vocal line floats on top of guitar arpeggios, is a relatively literal one. The texture of “Bulletproof” – a simple melody with accompaniment – when compared to Radiohead’s other, especially later, songs, allows for an easy transition to a single instrument like the piano. O’Riley places pulsing eighth-note chords in the right hand, following the pattern of the guitar at the beginning of the song, and adds a simple left-hand rhythm to replicate the rhythmic patterns found in the drums and bass. The melodic line holds the most importance in this song, which allows O’Riley to transcribe the song easily within the technical parameters of the piano. This is evident in measures 8-17 [Example 1], in which the melody is placed within the chords in the right hand: although it looks as though the melody is hidden in the accompaniment, it stays within the range of singer Thom Yorke’s voice and within a range that is possible to play with one hand on the piano. Overall, “Bulletproof” presents issues of condensing music to fit into one instrument, due to the standard guitar-based instrumentation of the original song.

“Subterranean Homesick Alien” is more complicated for the arranger, however, due to the use of pedal effects in the guitar, the prominence of the bass and drums, and the addition of keyboard on top of the already full instrumentation. Rather than incorporating characteristics from each element into his arrangement, O’Riley focuses on the arpeggiated nature of the original song, not always fully realizing the vocal line, but still following the harmonic and melodic direction set in motion by Thom Yorke and Jonny Greenwood [Example 2]. In this instance, the slides and pitch bending used by the guitar are realized on the piano by the use of rolled chords, legato articulation, and fast sixteenth-note arpeggios. The nearly-constant stream of sixteenth-notes and large range in the left hand emulates the fullness provided by the instruments that are present in Radiohead’s original song. This is a case in which O’Riley produces an idiomatic piano arrangement, because of the use of the piano’s range and the pianist’s ability to quickly arpeggiate chords. Here pianism becomes the main focus rather than the original performance practices of Radiohead.

Kid A, the album released in 2000 from which “Everything In Its Right Place” is taken, is one of Radiohead’s more experimental works, following a different trajectory than the band’s earlier primarily guitar-based records by significantly increasing the use of electronic instruments. *Kid A* also introduces the idea of a subject that lasts throughout the entirety of the record, creating a concept album—an idea described extensively in Marianne Tatom Letts’ analysis of *Kid A* and *Amnesiac*.¹ The “dramatic persona” created by the subject gives the album a coherence that is missing in the standard grouping of songs in rock and pop albums (two or three singles placed in the beginning and middle of the record, with other songs that may or may not relate to each other in between), partly due to the fact that there are no singles on *Kid A*.² Additionally, Letts describes the subject as experiencing “alienation amid technology,” making the use of technology

¹ Marianne Tatom Letts, *Radiohead and the Resistant Concept Album: How to Disappear Completely* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010)

² *Ibid.*, 12

(including modified and distorted voice) significant.³ The use of technology also places importance on the use of noise in the album: for instance, in “Everything In Its Right Place,” there is a murmuring present during the instrumental introduction and interludes, created by splicing and distorting Thom Yorke’s vocal tracks.⁴ This kind of noise is present in the rest of the record as well.

The inclusion of a story arc relating to *Kid A*’s subject and the importance of electronic mediums are all important factors to consider when discussing Radiohead’s music in the context of O’Riley’s arrangements. *True Love Waits* consists of a variety of songs from Radiohead’s output, including songs from *Kid A*, *OK Computer*, *The Bends*, and *Pablo Honey*. When considering “Everything In Its Right Place” in the context of *Kid A* as a whole, Letts argues that it acts as a prelude due to its long instrumental introduction, the purpose of which “is to merely hint at what is to come later rather than to present a clear statement of the album’s thesis.”⁵ There is a sense of anticipation that comes with the song, and in *True Love Waits*, it is followed by something different. The song is still placed at the beginning of O’Riley’s album, keeping its prelude-like quality intact, but it is in essence a prelude to the story of Radiohead’s subject.

Transferring an electronic piece of music to a single acoustic instrument is the most complicated issue raised in “Everything In Its Right Place.” O’Riley does have an advantage in that the main electronic element in this song is produced from a keyboard, making the transfer to piano easier. To compensate for the electronic noise so present throughout the song, O’Riley creates a very thick texture in the piano, adding clusters of chords in a relatively low register [Example 3]. The murmuring, however, is nearly impossible to replicate on a piano, and O’Riley hints at this through improvisation in both the score and the recording at the beginning of the arrangement. The physical limitations of performance on an acoustic instrument do not allow for all of the elements of the song to be included at all times, as was seen in the previous analyses of “Bulletproof” and “Subterranean Homesick Alien.” There is, however, no percussion present in the song, which allows for a more seamless transition to the piano.

O’Riley changes, or at least muddles, the verse-chorus structure of the song by placing repeats around small one- or two-measure groups, with “repeat ad libitum/with improv” instructions over mm. 3 and 23. This makes the score hard to follow, and in the recording of the arrangement, the improvisation makes that task even more difficult, as it seems to skew the trajectory of the song. In addition to improvisation instructions, O’Riley notates very little of the vocal line, which, in this song in particular, is the most prominent element of the music (in contrast to, for example, the song “Kid A,” in which the voice is distorted and the lyrics are unrecognizable). The harmonic structure does, however, stay intact, which makes this arrangement viable in the sense that it generally adheres to the original composition.

The loss of the album’s subject is significant in this arrangement. It is true that it is impossible for the lyrics to be included in an arrangement for solo piano (unless the lyrics are included in the score), but the subject is an essential part of this song and of the

³ Ibid., 37.

⁴ Ibid., 59.

⁵ Ibid., 57.

album as a whole. The music does not need the subject to stand alone as an instrumental work, but the subject is vital to a listener's understanding of *Kid A*. O'Riley faces a significant challenge when arranging a rock album for solo piano, and by choosing only specific songs from *Kid A* as well as other Radiohead albums, he avoids the need to deal with the subject. This makes choosing only specific songs an understandable decision, as arranging the entirety of *Kid A* would be quite an endeavor indeed, especially in the context of the more percussive songs such as "Idioteque" and the purely electronic "Treefingers."

O'Riley continues a long tradition of arranging music with a vocal element for a solo instrument. O'Riley's arrangements seem to fall somewhere in the middle of a loose arrangement inspired by another work and a strict transcription. "Everything In Its Right Place" is immediately recognizable in his arrangement of the song, and even though there are significant elements lost in his arrangement, that is expected when assigning complex non-acoustic music to a single acoustic instrument. Overall, O'Riley achieves what it seems he set out to do: to produce a viable arrangement of a pop song. This is a complicated undertaking, and one that O'Riley accomplishes by doing justice to Radiohead's original work while also adding his own artistic interpretation. So when is staying true to Radiohead's original composition no longer important? Does the fact that this music is recorded and not written in a score give arrangers like O'Riley license to interpret these works more freely? This idea poses a problem for determining if an arrangement accurately depicts the original work or not. In this case, the original work is a recording, which creates a different set of questions for arrangers and performers. As is common in live performances of popular music, Radiohead often does not completely replicate what was originally recorded in a song's "official" album release. "Everything in Its Right Place" is a good example of this: in this and other performances of this song, percussion is added, and the electronic elements are adjusted, although still present. With the electronics, especially, there is added improvisation. Their performance accounts for the physical limitations of live performance, as O'Riley's arrangements account for the physical limitations of the way that he plays the piano. The question of the importance of composition is one that can be further explored in the arrangements of Liszt, Phillip Glass's David Bowie symphonies, "Low" and "Heroes," or Steve Reich's *Radio Rewrite*. Each of these composers, like Christopher O'Riley, have their own methods of arranging music, some more literally than others, where the physical limitations of performing music and the importance of *composition* can all be questioned differently.