

COMPOSER'S PORTRAIT

I am an extremely lazy composer. Nothing has ever come easily to me, and I've tended always to put off as long as I could the terrible encounters with silence and blank paper. Stravinsky's challenge 'Why?' always confronts me. I don't think I have too much difficulty conceiving ideas, or even musical structures; my real problem is finding meaningful notes, and there often I find not so much a block as a gaping void.

At forty-five I'm only just beginning to feel confident, and in command of a technique. I always composed, but for a long while my imaginative ideas tended to come off the peg, my musical style also. In the usual promiscuous way of adolescence I had many infatuations, and I suppose each one of them left its mark somehow. But only Ravel remains as a model: for his thoroughness and polish, and his rich ambiguity of expression. But almost more important to me than those formative musical experiences, were the encounters with the work of certain artists and writers: people like Denton Welch – whom I never read now – Ivor Gurney, Cavafy: all three casualties in one way or another, and so sympathetic to a rather confused young man, but magnificent and admirable in their courage and candour, even elegance. Grandier figures – like Beaudelaire, Rilke, Saint John Perse - came later and profoundly changed my perspective on life, enlarged my horizons. And the year I spent immersed in the translation of Perse's epic poetry was no more wasted as far as my growth as an artist was concerned than the year I spent travelling in the grasslands of Bamenda, high up in the Camerouns. You can see to what lengths I will go to avoid writing music...

I mention these things because they may be more interesting – and perhaps more pertinent – than when I first started using a 12-note row, or whatever. So, I'm an impressionable person, and most susceptible to the influence of people. My teachers, Priaulx Rainier and William Alwyn, taught me far more than technique. I know that my work is penetrated through and through by aspects of other people. Like those votive paintings of the renaissance, my portrait is crowded to the ceiling with 'donors' and friends of the artist.

The first music that we are going to hear comes from a piano piece I wrote for Stephen Bishop Kovacevich about ten years ago. He'd asked me to write him a set of etudes, and I obliged by providing him with a Wall of Death. As compensation, and to counterbalance what would otherwise have been simply pyrotechnics, I decided to insert between each study a set of variations on a theme, to give weight, repose, and continuity. I called the whole work *Tombeau*, as a tribute to earlier masters of the piano. Here is Part II of the work: the theme, then a study in trills linked to a horrendous study for the left hand alone, followed by the climactic central variation, entitled 'Tombeau'. It's played by Ronald Lumsden, one of the brave few who have dared to attempt it.

AUDIO: *Tombeau Part II*

That excerpt from *Tombeau* was played by Ronald Lumsden.

One of the delights of being a composer – only shared by a dramatist, I suppose – is the pleasure of hearing one’s lines spoken by very different artists: in other words, rediscovering one’s music – and one’s past – through the prism of another’s imagination. It’s impossible to describe the thrill an unlooked-for nuance can give to the creator.

I had this in abundance listening to Ralph Holmes and Ronald Lumsden prepare their performance of my *Capriccio* for violin and piano. The piece was written in 1965, quite soon after my return from Africa. Nothing ‘ethnic’ here, I’m afraid: I wanted simply something that would exploit what I felt was the irreconcilable nature of the two instruments. A virtuoso piece, but strictly unified, organic. And so almost all the music grows from the first few bars, especially the little fluttering arabesque figure on the violin; and the two players hardly ever trespass on each other’s material.

AUDIO: *Capriccio for Violin and Piano*

That performance of my *Capriccio* was given by Ralph Holmes and Ronald Lumsden.

Both *Tombeau* and *Capriccio* are old pieces. Since I wrote them, obviously I have developed a good deal, in step with my expressive needs. I try not to repeat myself, and so each new medium that I take up presents me with new challenges, and I’m obliged to reconsider the language I use. So in a way I am experimenting in each new work, and that can be very unsatisfactory. But I also need to sing in my music, and this helps to anchor my restlessness, and perhaps inhibits – certainly qualifies – what is experimental.

With my absorption in poetry, it’s not surprising that I’m attracted to the problem of setting words. These days I am very wary of the pitfalls, mannerisms, and so on. I tried to review some of the difficulties in a piece I called *Reconciliation for Speaker and Ensemble*, which I don’t think really came off; and again, more recently, in a song-cycle based on Cavafy’s poems. I like writing for chorus, especially working with amateurs. I had a lot of fun when our local choral society asked me to write a piece for them, an *Elegy for the Elm*. It was exhilarating to have to think simply, and tonic after the strain of four years’ hard labour on a much more complex enterprise.

This was the Cello Concerto to which I gave the subtitle ‘Deathwatch’. There is much that is traditional. It exploits in a dramatic way some of the usual relationships of concerto form: conflict and conciliation; domination and subjection. And these are expressed, acted out by the performers: a small group of seventeen strings divided into two, flanking the soloist on either side. There’s also a second cellist, hidden, whom I have called the ‘Doppelgänger’, a sometimes mocking, sometimes tyrannical or beguiling presence, the invisible familiar of the principal soloist. To underline the difference between them, he is amplified.

He is just one of the distorted mirror-images that penetrate the whole fabric of the work: the layout, structure, material, texture, everything. I’m not sure where I got the idea of mirrors from: possibly the famous scene in Jean Cocteau’s film *Orphée*.

I conceived the work as a composition in black and white, which comprises two Laments: the first desperate, unreconciled; the second – a transmutation of the first –

resigned, even ecstatic. Between them is a sequence of episodes called Capricchos, an allusion to the etchings of Goya, one of my companions during the long period of composition. Novalis, Lorca and Rilke were others: indeed at the heart of the work is Rilke's idea of Umkehr, the deep, sudden change that may occur at the moment of darkest confusion.

This is a recording of the first performance which was given in the studio by Rohan de Saram, with Christopher van Kampen as second cellist, and the London Sinfonietta conducted by Lionel Friend.

AUDIO: *Cello Concerto – 'Deathwatch'*