

JEREMY DALE ROBERTS (1934)

Having retired as Head of Composition at the Royal College of Music, London, in 1999, he was appointed Visiting Professor in Composition at the University of Iowa 2000-2001. His compositions have been performed and broadcast all over the world. They have featured at the Edinburgh and Aldburgh Festivals, at the Venice Biennale, the Diorama de Geneve, and the festivals of Avignon and Paris, as well as St. Petersburg and the Summer Festival of Tbilisi.

(Start with recording of Tombeau: trill study)

'I would guess I am a fairly typical British composer of my generation. My most formative influences - apart from the music to which I was attracted, and the spirit of the times in which I grew up (we are talking of 50 years ago!) - were the challenging disciplines and stimuli thrust upon me by my teachers at the Royal Academy of Music. They saw to it that I graduated with a resourceful technique - all the basics of orchestration, counterpoint, pastiche, etc. - as well as taking pains to feed my hungry intellect and imagination: told me what books to read, what films to see, what painters to explore. I was a country boy, and I needed a shove in the right direction.

I was lucky in that I emerged into a musical culture that was exceptionally vigorous and adventurous and varied, reaching out to a large and enthusiastic public. It was a kind of Golden Age, the 60's and 70's. This was the era when 'Early Music' was first promoted in concerts and recordings; when 'World Music' - especially the court music of India, players like Ravi Shankar - became a regular feature; and of course, when popular music really took off - the Beatles, Rolling Stones and all the rest. And in 'Classical' music, London was regarded as the capital of the world: the platform for all the world's great virtuosi: Rostropovitch, Vishnevskaya, the Oistrakhs, Richter, all launched themselves in the West via London.

As far contemporary music was concerned, the situation was equally healthy - and well supported by the state. The BBC at that time actively patronized New Music, frequently encouraging young composers through commissions. Even more importantly, with Pierre Boulez as chief conductor of the BBC symphony Orchestra, it regularly presented performances of the great classics of 20th century music, Stravinsky, Messiaen, Webern - a tremendous education in taste for us all.

But for me, quite as important as this *musical* background and context, which helped to condition my approach to musical language and aesthetics, was what I picked up in what we call 'the university of life'. I am, I suppose, a wanderer. A lifetime's compulsion to travel and explore other cultures and landscapes was instilled in adolescence by family 'Grand Tours' in a still war-torn Europe. Two years in Egypt and working on a broadcasting station in Cyprus confirmed an enduring attraction to the Middle East and the culture of Islam and the Levant, as well as the wilderness of the desert. Subsequently, following graduation, two years teaching in Cameroun, West Africa, in the highlands of Bamenda, although an escape from music and the

musical profession, proved similarly inexhaustibly rewarding. (I would counsel any young composer eventually to leave the metropolis and all his books and go into the desert). 'Inner' journeys have involved the close companionship of certain writers: notably Rilke, Lorca, and Saint John Perse - all of whose work appears reflected in my compositions. Indeed, the year I spent translating Perse's *Chronique* into English was one of the most rewarding creative periods of my life.

I have brought along three compositions for you to hear: the 'Capriccio for Violin and Piano' (1965); a selection of 'Croquis' for string trio (1976-80); and 'Winter Music' (1990).

I have always been stimulated by virtuosity, taking a performer to the limits, exploiting his wit and daring. As a counterbalance to this, I recognize that another predominant aspect of my temperament is reflective, dreaming. You have already encountered these two traits in the passage from 'Tombeau' heard at the beginning: And it will be no surprise to you to hear that from boyhood - and even today - my two saints were Ravel and Debussy! But both these tendencies need to be governed by intellect: and in the Capriccio a tight formal structure, and a close, organic connection between much of the thematic material, holds the fantasy in check.

(Examine structure and material of Capriccio).

For one reason or another, I have had very little opportunity to write on a large scale: so no operas or ballets, no symphonies. But I suspect that I would not have known what to do with them! I don't like shouting. I am more drawn to compact musical forms and restricted musical media, in which I can resort to illusion to suggest some kind of transcendence over the limitations. Again, the model here is Ravel: the Left Hand Concerto; and the miraculous Sonata for Violin and Cello, in which so many more than two people seem to be playing.

So I was very pleased to be commissioned by the BBC to write a string trio for members of the Arditti quartet, whom I had known long as friends - I had also written my Cello Concerto for their cellist, Rohan de Saram. (I find it genuinely inspiring to compose for people I am close to - drawing on their sound, their technique, and temperament - so that my music, as well as being a testament of friendship, presents a musical portrait or embodiment).

The 'Croquis' which I composed over a space of four years, is a collection of 27 short pieces - 'bagatelles', really - split up into three books. 'Croquis' means 'sketch', and in this collection, as in any sketch-book, there is to be found not only finished work, precisely organized and intricate, but also the odd scribble, dashed off - as it were, provisional - improvisatory.

Even tied down to a bare minimum of three strings, the potential seemed to me rich in possibilities. As far as virtuosity was concerned, I knew I could go to the very limits; and the range of colours and textures available - especially using the whole gamut of

registers - allowed me to suggest a much more resourceful and varied medium than might be expected. There are of course three highly individualized solos for these remarkable players; there are duets - all sorts of relationships and couplings; there is even a sextet, in which each player takes on two roles. And attracted as I am to all sorts of exotic music, there is even a minute item for a kind of Chinese orchestra.

(Selection of Croquis)

The last piece we are going to hear - 'Winter Music' of 1990 - is similarly restricted in the number and type of instruments employed. It was written for a group comprising flute, oboe, clarinet and trumpet - in other words, three wind instruments and one brass confined to the treble clef. It was actually fascinating to play with register, to exploit high and attenuated sounds, so that eventually the ear would perceive 'middle C' as low. And I took care to exact as much variety of timbre and character from the given instruments as possible: the flute doubles on piccolo and alto flute; the oboe on cor anglais; the trumpet uses a number of different mutes. Also, to provide a kind of 'aura' of resonance, I include metallic percussive sounds: tubular bells, crotales, celesta and wind chimes.

Much of the music suggests a frozen landscape - a scene out of Breughel - or perhaps an inner numbness. But as with the Capriccio and other pieces I seem to need to work towards some kind of positive conclusion: renewal, reconciliation, resolution, celebration or praise.

('Winter Music')

(Presentation given at Moscow Conservatoire, 2003)