

## Kenneth Hesketh at 50



Kenneth Hesketh (photo: E.Thornto)

**You crowned 2017 with a British Composer Award for your wind ensemble piece *In Ictu Oculi*. Now that work will form part of the programme for a new CD with the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, to be released around your fiftieth birthday. Tell us about this new version of the work and the CD.**

*In Ictu Oculi – Three Meditations* was originally commissioned and premiered by the National Youth Wind Ensemble, conducted by the marvellous Phillip Scott in April 2016. I've worked with Phillip for over ten years, but with this commission I really felt it was the first time I had the chance to write something authentic to myself in this medium.

It's a special piece for me (dedicated to the memory of my grandmother) and of course, being awarded a British Composer Award not only felt good, it felt right that it should be this piece that precipitated it. I'd been shortlisted twice before in this category with lighter pieces and felt that if I wasn't getting anywhere with them I didn't have a chance with this. It's good that one can still be surprised!

As this piece fits into an ever-enlarging cycle of works that cluster around ideas of *memento mori*, *vanitas* and *memorial*, I felt it should be more widely available and so prepared the orchestral version. From the moment I knew the disc would be recorded I felt the orchestral version should be present, but it was only until much later that I decided to make it the title work for the disc. In approaching the work in orchestral terms, certain other aspects had to be addressed as well. In order to allow the strings an equal part and not simply be an additional gloss, the structure of the work had to be adapted; for ex-

ample, the orchestral introduction is notably longer than the wind version as are other transitional sections. Keeping the 4 saxes in the orchestral context, rather than rescore or absorb them, was a first for me and certainly added a colour I had never utilised before. The superimposition of new material not only added density and detail it also appealed to my love of the labyrinthine. The result is not a bifurcation into two different works, but rather a single work that occasionally phases in and out of perspective with itself.

The CD will also include world premiere recordings of two other recent orchestral works: *Knotted Tongues* (commissioned and premiered by the Seattle Symphony Orchestra in 2012, conducted by the wonderful Ludovic Morlot, who I've known since RCM days) and *Of Time and Disillusionment* (2016). *Knotted Tongues* in many ways is the compliment to *In Ictu Oculi*, though it was written five years earlier. In *Knotted Tongues* I consciously pushed myself to break out of a rather safe orchestral-compositional manner that I had fallen into, and I feel that in hindsight I succeeded in that task.

The last piece on the disc, *Of Time and Disillusionment*, is for chamber orchestra and provides a colouristic shift to the rest of the programme, not just because of the reduced forces, but in the more soloistic treatment of lines. For some reason I found myself writing more extended and demanding material for bassoons in this piece (especially in the fifth movement); bass register instruments have become more animated in all of my work over the last 8 or so years, emanating from a need to free up activity at all tessitural levels.

It is also the longest piece on the disc, in the three actual sections (built out of five more discreet sections with the central movement formed from a three-part arch palindrome). There is a macaronic aspect to the titles of movements (some based on clockwork reference – see my earlier work *Wunderkammer(konzert)* for the first titular instance of this) emanating from my enjoyment of textural and referential layering that also indicates a description of form in one way or another. Over the course of its length the work becomes more bellicose (for want of a better word), more erratic and fragmented. At the time of composition, I was reading *Illusion and Disillusionment: Core Issues in Psychotherapy* by Stanley H. Teitelbaum, a book that charts in clinical terms the loss of core illusions and coping with the impact of disillusionment. Much of my non-music theory reading these days is scientific, especially with regard to pathology (and this chimes with an idea I've spoken about many times, namely the concept of the 'Unreliable Machine' in my work). Such reading feeds directly into my thoughts on systems degradation, pathways, and perception amongst others, and these concepts find outlet and expression in technical ways; however, actively sharing these with listeners (beyond the odd interested or cornered composition student that such discussion might assist) is of little interest to me.

### **What was it like working with Christoph-Mathias Mueller and the BBC National Orchestra of Wales?**

I've known Maestro Mueller since our Tanglewood days, and we've been good friends and collaborators from that time onward. Christoph has a fabulous ear for detail and an excellent sense of structure and pacing, not to mention orchestral colour. One can easily hear this in his many other recordings of repertoire of all periods and schools. I feel priv-

ileged every time I work with him and he always brings out the best in my work. The disc was recorded over 4 sessions and if he hadn't been conducting, or if the BBCNOW were not the excellent orchestra they are, we would never have completed it in the time we had (we actually finished the last session with only ten seconds to spare! Nerve wracking to say the least). I'm thrilled with the results particularly as each work on the disc is important to me for many reasons.

**Your music has always been strongly informed by other artistic disciplines, whether it be architecture, medieval iconography, poetry or certain types of children's literature. Would you agree that the works on this album reflect newer, perhaps darker, preoccupations?**

In many ways, the extra-musical interests that previously surfaced in my work have been refracted, concentrated and blackened. The general interest in architecture has focused into a specific obsession with pathways and formal organisation through the metaphors of labyrinth and maze (the difference between the unicursal path and path network, one a cathartic, transformative journey, the other a path that actively seeks to impede progress and confound). The idea of the unreliable machine has morphed into a wider concept concerning the inevitable failure of the somatic self, as well as the progression of that failure. We all reach that stage in life when there is a greater sense of loss than of gain, however incremental, but often those losses spike and become more pronounced. This loss of the original self or condition led me to an exploration of the idea of entropy (nothing new in art in general of course – see Rudolf Arnheim's book for one amongst many), failure in physical systems (see *Models of Systems Failure in Ageing* – Gavrilov/Gavrilova, 2006), ideas of impermanence and unicursal pathways and how they might be traversed. Concepts of mutation, drift and low-fidelity copying also feature in my praxis and are derived specifically from system degradation leading to death. Many may think this morose, but I find these concepts sources of strength and direction, and they have certainly given rise to a darker and more dramatic aspect in my work.

**Might these themes also relate to a sense of one's mortality? Not that 50 is very old!**

If you're asking about a mid-life crisis of sorts, then I've been dealing with and considering that for about the last 25 years! However, there comes a time for us all when one realises there is more behind than ahead, and with the death of my grandmother (who had an enormous impact on my life) and the birth of my son, I feel my life in a particular context. However, the constants in my work arise out of a need to face my own existential crisis and define it rather than be defined by it; the emotions and questions that have arisen through a consideration of death have led me to more artistically fertile and imaginative stimuli in my work.

**And is there any sense in which the themes are also a reflection of our times?**

Social entropy has certainly been posited (by sociologist Kenneth Bailey amongst others) and the degree of disorder could be seen a manifestation of the social dissatisfaction within the limits of the system. I touch on this in my work, *In Ictu Oculi*, itself an extended meditation upon the simple fact that all things come to an end, be they cultures, indi-

viduals or civilisations. One of the movement titles, *Ozymandian Fallacy*, after the sentiment expressed in the P. B. Shelley poem, arose out of the contemplation of the passing of eras and cycles that are cut down before fruition or that seem to be never-ending but that through an unforeseen confluence of ways terminate suddenly. In the current geopolitical environment in which we find ourselves I consider this a great deal.

**Looking back over forty years of composing activity, what would you recognise as the highlights?**

This is a tough one! I would say as many of the most important moments have been to do with friendships forged as much as professional success. The friendships that have gone on to be important have been so both personally and professionally.

My years in Liverpool as a fledgling composer were critical, and the support and knowledge I received from people such as Ian Tracey, Ed Warren, Sandra Parr and Stephen Pratt I value still to this day. Later musical figures have also been of great importance, namely Edwin Roxburgh, Joseph Horowitz, theorist Andrew Mead and in particular Henri Dutilleux, all of whom in one way or another moulded my approach to the art, craft and exacting nature of composition.

I have more than one reason to be grateful to Dutilleux, for if he had not chosen me as one of the student composers at Tanglewood, my life would be very different from how it is today (from meeting dear and lasting friends and important champions of my work to the most important person of all, my wife and composer Arlene Sierra who I met during the contemporary music week in 1995).

As I get older I become more aware of important buildings that influenced my aesthetic and to a great extent formed my sound world, the most long-lasting influence being that of the Anglican Cathedral in Liverpool through its acoustic space, its ritual, its architecture and hidden dark spaces. As to work, there have been pieces that were consciously risky in some way, in that they made me challenge myself, provoking a new response and that became stepping stones to another compositional level, from early pieces for large orchestra, now withdrawn, to more recent work. I would say that working with Simon Rattle, however briefly, was incredibly important in that it allowed me both the time to work in Berlin (as the Toepfer Stiftung Shakespeare Stipendiat) and the chance to work with a group such BCMG; that they could play the tricky stuff I was experimenting with certainly encouraged the direction my work took at the time. My years of writing for and working with Philip Headlam and the Continuum ensemble allowed me to explore chamber composition in a way that would have been difficult otherwise. My artistic discussions with Headlam have also been of great value. Other people who have proved important performer collaborators (and friends) include Christoph-Mathias Mueller, Clare Hammond, John Wilson, Lisa Nelsen, Clark Rundell and Janet Sung. As to individual works of mine that were highlights, there are a few with Schott (*Wunderkammer(konzert)* and *Forms Entangled, Shapes Collided* being two). However, I feel that much of my work from this period I could happily do without. Since becoming self-published (in 2014), I purposefully sought to strike out and build a catalogue of work that I would feel happy with as a whole and to write compositions that challenged me each and every time; I'm happy to say that is turning out to be true.

**Given your personal association with Oliver Knussen, the news of his death this week must have been quite a blow?**

Oliver Knussen's kindness personally and support for my work at a critical moment will always remain important, even though I never studied with him. A piece such as *The Circling Canopy of Night*, which is dedicated to both Rattle and Knussen, led to other things thanks to Olly's multiple performances (one of which was my first BBC Prom performance). The shock of Olly's passing – which has hit literally everyone in contemporary music – leaves me feeling numb and not just because it is still so raw. I curse myself for not having seen or spoken to him more in later years, but in reviewing emails from him these last few days I hear the contour of his voice, the cadence and mischievous aside and the enormous but lightly-worn erudition that was typical. He could be blunt (“stop expounding – is it louder or quieter?”) or playful, as those who knew him are aware! One memory comes to mind that during a visit with Arlene Sierra to Olly's home in Snape, we were all playing with a airplane built from a kit. Said plane landed on the roof of the house and Olly had the bizarrely practical idea of rescuing it with a mop – Jennie's mop not withstanding! – stuck inside a wonderfully ornate didgeridoo. Did the trick, and we have a wonderful pictorial memento of the rescue, with Olly looking every inch the great warrior having vanquished a particularly tiny dragon). The first modern operas we played to our son were the Sendak operas and so his music and friendship still forms a part of our lives.

**And looking back over the forty years, are there any pieces or experiences you would rather forget?**

Yes, and I'd rather not have to think about them to know I should forget them.

**Does age bring mastery? Or does the craft of composition, as Britten once observed, get harder as one gets older?**

I suppose that depends on your end goal; perhaps wide experience, which one hopes one gains with age, can lead to an understanding of and solutions to problems encountered. But, in my opinion, interesting composers constantly seek to broaden and enrich their vision and output, and so the goal of mastery always remains something just out of reach. Perhaps that is what Britten refers to in his comment. I certainly feel there are things, technically, I can do now (does that mean mastered?), but as I seek to enrich the content of my work (the means and expression) it never gets easier. One only hopes that the collation of knowledge gained leads to a more profound synthesis, leading to new abilities and perspectives which keeps pushing one ever forward. Move sideways and one stagnates, atrophies.

**We often ask on C:T what advice you would give a composer starting out. To turn this around, what advice do you wish you had been given at the beginning, that perhaps you have had to learn the hard way?**

I would certainly tell myself the following, some of which comes under the ‘everything that glitters is not gold’ category:

- Do not compromise on your aesthetic, style or intensity, whatever you think the short-term benefits might be
- Beware versatility and facile expression
- Being able to speak doesn't mean you have anything to say
- Spend time outside of what you perceive to be your safe artistic space
- Read widely as well as listen widely
- Make as many performer friends as possible
- Compositional scaffolding is not the same as clear notation
- A good technique and craft is due diligence for a composer, you get no bonus points for knowing the basics of your trade or for rediscovering the wheel.

**You enjoy a distinguished academic career, currently as honorary professor of composition at the University of Liverpool and professor of composition and orchestration at the Royal College of Music. How would you say that your work in education has influenced your life as a composer?**

As a composer one has to be aware of context and to be aware of your place in the wider scene, to be informed. To look one's influences squarely in the face and know them is the beginning of being released from them. In this regard, my role as professor over the years has taught me many things, one being of particular importance; it's to be aware of various compositional tropes that take root and proliferate, and, as I am a contrarian, to distance myself from them or at least treat them sceptically – newness is a concept only entertained by the uninformed. Teaching has helped me stay informed and to also be aware of clichés. The theoretical physicist Richard Feynman said, "If you can't explain something in simple terms, you don't understand it" – good cautionary advice for teachers. In formal and architectural terms, I often employ analogies and metaphors to illuminate new concepts (musical forms are one of my obsessions) and this constant drive to be able to find a successful way to communicate to students or interlocutors is something both teacher and composers in general need as a prerequisite.

**What is on your composition desk right now?**

A coffee, a completed concerto and the slowly accumulating vapours of a new one (concerto, not coffee) ...

## **And are there any other events we should look out for in your birthday year?**

The release of the 4 new discs, the premiere of my piano concerto in particular, some orchestrations of Ravel and Debussy and a new violin and piano duo.

There are a few projects including another film with chamber ensemble and a few solo pieces. I'd love a chance at a chamber opera and another work for dance before I'm much older. Even though I approach the 'midway along the journey of life'(Dante), 'Life is long enough if you know how to use it'(Seneca).

More information about Kenneth Hesketh:

<https://Kennethhesketh.co.uk/>

<https://cecilianmusic.com/>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kenneth\\_Hesketh](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kenneth_Hesketh)

<https://en.schott-music.com/shop/autoren/kenneth-hesketh>

<http://www.fabermusic.com/composers/kenneth-hesketh>

Extract from Seattle Symphony Orchestra performance of *Knotted Tongues* (full performance by BBC National Orchestra of Wales available soon on [Paladino Music](#))

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