

## *Time's Harvest* by Edwin Roxburgh Geoff Reed is interviewed by Carol Condliffe

### **Why did you commission the work?**

*Time's Harvest* is the fourth new work which I have commissioned for Sefton Youth Wind Orchestra in recent years. Supporting the creation of new artistic work is one of the things which motivates me most strongly, both as a musician and as a music educator. As musicians living at the turn of the millennium we can be grateful for the wonderful repertoire which we have inherited but we must also take responsibility for ensuring that our own generation adds its contribution to the list of great works of art. Each generation must speak with its own artistic voice, without resort to pastiche or cliché.

### **How did you make the choice of composer?**

I was privileged to receive some harmony and theory lessons from Edwin Roxburgh and to play in the Twentieth Century Ensemble under his direction whilst I was a student at the Royal College of Music in the mid 1970s. More recently I heard a performance of his piece *Nebula I*, a beautiful piece which exploits the sonorities and textures of the clarinet choir, and I knew at once that I must ask him to write a piece for Sefton Youth Wind Orchestra. I was delighted when he accepted the commission.

### **Funds?**

#### **How much did it cost?**

The main costs were the composer's fee and the copying costs, in this case £4,000 and £2,000 respectively. From the outset I was determined to pay Edwin a professional fee if I possibly could. All too often we try to create new art, or deal with artistic matters in general, as cheaply as possible. I knew that I was asking a very significant composer to write a piece of music for the Wind Orchestra and I knew that the fee should reflect that. As it was, Edwin based his fee at the lower end of the professional scale of charges for composing, for which I am extremely grateful.

Other costs included the hire of the venue, printing the programme, transport for percussion etc to and from the concert and general administration costs.

### **How was the money raised?**

I was very well supported by the Friends of Sefton Youth Wind Orchestra who were successful in securing £3,000 from the Millennium Festival Awards for All scheme. Other contributions came from Sefton Music Support Service, Timothy Reynish, parents and members of Sefton Youth Wind Orchestra, Cargill plc and The Rushworth Trust. Rushworth's of Liverpool, John Myatt and LMS Music Supplies bought advertising space in the programme and the printer, Pre Print of Southport, who I use for all my printing, gave me a very competitive price for the job. The Music Support Service absorbed the general administrative costs and we would have hired the venue for a summer concert anyway. We raised some money from ticket and programme sales.

### **Do you have any tips for commissioning?**

I presume you mean from a funding point of view. Fund-raising is hard work and can be demoralising but I have always been spurred on by the excitement of the new music which is being created. I have always been fortunate in that I have secured a substantial sum for each of my commissions from one particular source, in this case the Millennium Festival Awards for All. I think it helps if you can be seen to be contributing yourself. I am sure that the financial commitment from Sefton Music Support Service and the band members and parents showed other sponsors that we were helping ourselves and not waiting for £6,000 to come from other people and organisations.

### **Did you give the composer any brief as to content, form, development, style, flexibility of instrumentation?**

There was no brief at all for content, form, development or style. I feel very strongly that the artistic decisions should be the composer's own. From what I know of Edwin's music I was sure that I wanted him to write a piece of music for us. I did not feel it was right to influence his artistic decisions. He is the composer, not me.

We discussed instrumentation/flexibility of instrumentation and the technical abilities of the players in some detail. I asked him to



*Edwin Roxburgh*

write a piece of music which is musically demanding but which takes account of the developing technical skills of young musicians. I wanted to challenge the players musically but there seems to be little point in having a work which is so difficult that they can't begin to think about it musically. That's not to say that the piece isn't technically difficult, because it is. But it was possible to see beyond the technical problems to the music and to communicate that music to the audience.

It might be helpful to list here my broad aims for each piece which I have commissioned:

- ✂ to add to the serious contemporary repertoire for youth wind orchestra
- ✂ to provide opportunities for young musicians to:
- ✂ work alongside a professional composer
- ✂ study a serious musical score written in a contemporary idiom
- ✂ share in the artistic process of bringing a new work from first rehearsal to first performance.

## **Had he or you an existing link up with publishers?**

Maecenas Music published *A Passion For Our Times* by Philip Wilby which I commissioned and which was first performed in 1997. Giles Easterbrook from Maecenas knows Edwin Roxburgh and expressed interest in the work from the very beginning

## **What was the time span from conception to birth; did you give an artificial deadline or use any pressure?**

I heard a performance of his piece *Nebula I* at the BASBWE Conference, Easter 1999 and contacted Edwin by telephone early in the summer term. We met during the summer holiday and agreed all the details. Edwin wrote the piece at the end of 1999 and the beginning of 2000. It was finished by the beginning of April 2000 and I was able to send out parts to the band during the Easter holiday ready for rehearsals in the summer term. The first performance went ahead as planned on 4 July 2000, about 15 months after I first had the idea for the commission. There was no need for any sort of artificial deadline or pressure; Edwin was thoroughly professional from start to finish

## **What problems did you encounter?**

I don't think there were any problems which I had not anticipated. The piece was very technically challenging for some members, but experience of previous commissions had taught me to expect that! Edwin wrote for crotales, which we didn't have, but I was able to convince colleagues, without too much difficulty, that it would be a good investment for the Music Support Service to buy a set. I think experience of previous commissions was useful. It can be quite terrifying when the music first arrives and the world première gets ever closer but the musical and artistic satisfaction of

bringing the piece from first rehearsal to first performance is immense

## **What have been the reactions to the work, from performers, professional musicians, critics - and yourself?**

The piece is very challenging, musically and technically. The young members of Sefton Youth Wind Orchestra are used to studying 'serious' repertoire but this challenged even the most experienced among them at first. The great motivator for them was the fact that *Time's Harvest* is their piece; it was written for them. A turning point came when Edwin attended one of our rehearsals a few weeks before the first performance. He spoke to them with great integrity and conviction, and was genuine and generous in his praise for their efforts. Ultimately there was a mixed reaction from the performers. Some could see after a very short time that they were taking part in a very special project indeed. Others travelled that musical journey more slowly but were excited and delighted by the end of the first performance. A few found the piece challenging to the very end, but even they knew that they had shared in a special event. They were all very proud of their efforts at the first performance.

The parents had a journey to travel too. They knew of my enthusiasm for the piece but week by week could hear only fragments being practised at home by their children. Again, the turning point was Edwin's visit. I invited the parents to an informal play-through and to meet Edwin at the end of our rehearsal and from that point onwards they felt a greater sense of ownership of the piece.

Reaction from colleagues who attended the first performance has been very positive. We gave a second performance on 10 December as part of a joint day for Sefton Youth Wind Orchestra and the Royal Northern College of Music Wind Orchestra, which was very successful. It will be interesting to see how it is received at BASBWE in April 2001.

I think it is a wonderful piece of music, intense and powerful. Edwin Roxburgh has a

unique musical voice and approaches everything he does with tremendous artistic and musical integrity. It has been a great privilege to have worked with him on this project

## **Could you give me a description of the work; style, programme if there is one, development etc.?**

Edwin's programme note is as follows:

The end of the 20th Century closes a book on conflicts which outstrip any other in history for the inhumanity of man towards man (the gender used is not an oversight). It is remarkable that great achievements have taken place alongside slaughter and brutality.

The title of the work has been chosen as a millennium statement of hope at the outset of 2000. The first section laments what has happened, the second is an affirmation of faith in the younger generation who have the opportunity to foster the creative rather than the destructive aspect of life in the bright new age which space exploration promises. *A Fanfare for the Future* heralds this hope.

The opening is sustained with intense harmonies and an angular solo for the soprano saxophone. Rhythmic passage work alternates with sustained sections of heavily accented forte-piano chords and gentle passages of free grace notes. The *Fanfare for the Future* interrupts the music twice before leading into the second, quicker section which is characterised by complex rhythms and sustained melodies.

The harmonies, melodies and rhythms are intense, complex and challenging for a youth band work, which is exactly what I asked the composer to do. It is a powerful and moving piece of music which requires time and effort from the performers to be appreciated fully. It certainly extended the young players in Sefton Youth Wind Orchestra.

## **What grade would you reckon it to be?**

Grade 4.5 plus. The solo trumpet part is difficult and everyone has to deal with complex rhythms. But other youth bands should not be put off! We really wanted to succeed with *Time's Harvest* and so we did. I never cease to be amazed at the way young musicians will rise to musical and technical challenges if you tackle them with enthusiasm and determination.

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