

## Forty Years of Commissions

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Clearing up the house after over a quarter of a century of hoarding papers and programmes and over forty years of letters, tax demands and bills, I have come across a wealth of information which had entirely slipped my memory. I suppose my first encounter with wind commissions was through a former music-master who, while I was at Cambridge, founded the St Bees Festival, and very early on in its short-lived history, we commissioned and premiered *Old Wine in New Bottles* by Gordon Jacob, who thirty years later would accept my invitation to be the first President of BASBWE (My second horn in that première was Guy Woolfenden!)

In 2003, I shall celebrate forty years of commissioning, and over fifty works created in that time. It all began with the music club which I started in Minehead, Somerset, while teaching music there for four years. I had the feeling that the Mozart *Clarinet Quintet* and *Oboe Quartet* both needed a contemporary work to provide balance in programmes. In 1963 I commissioned Elizabeth Maconchy to write a *Clarinet Quintet*, and this was premiered by Gervase de Peyer and the Dartington Quartet. This was followed three years later by a *Quintet for Oboe and Strings* by Elizabeth Lutyens called *The Fall of a Leaf*, played by the Dartington Quartet with Leon Goossens.

A move back to playing with the CBSO meant a pause in the commissioning process, though I did try unsuccessfully to get Duncan Druce to write a *Hello Symphony* to start a concert that ended with Haydn's *Farewell*.

However, in 1981 BASBWE and WASBE were founded, and for the first International Conference in 1981 I commissioned Derek Bourgeois to write his *Symphony of Winds*, a gorgeous luxuriant piece with terrific tunes; at the time it seemed difficult, "too difficult for the intellectual content" one American colleague said, but it would be interesting to revisit it again now that standards of performance have risen so much. In 1982 I spent five weeks researching American wind band music at some of the major universities. I came back with a suitcase of recordings and exciting manuscripts, some of which I have managed to publish. I adore the wind octet *Five Impressions* (published Novello) by

Willard Elliott, the Principal Bassoon for many years of the Chicago Symphony; this is a major work for the genre and should be played far more frequently. I found too the *Five Folk Songs* by Bernard Gilmore (Maecenas), and this year nearly two decades later have managed to get those published. I discovered, too, that my good friend Elizabeth Maconchy had written a wonderful work for orchestral forces for the Thaxted Festival, *Music for Wind and Brass* (Chester/MusicSales) and I managed to get the score of this published by prompting several friends to approach the publisher at a BASBWE conference asking about its availability.

What I discovered in the United States of America was a vast amount of music which was written specifically for band by band composers either for school use, ceremonial use or concert use. The first two categories gave rise to a repertoire written to tried and tested formulas, with a lot of note-spinning that added up to nothing of any emotional consequence. The concert repertoire tended to follow these patternings, but more virtuosically, and the whole genre tended to emphasise the hard-hitting percussive nature of the wind band.

The result of this experience was a determination on my part to try to create a British repertoire, and for the second conference held at Manchester in 1983, I commissioned two works for the RNCM Wind Orchestra, Guy Woolfenden's *Gallimaufry* and Philip Wilby's *Firestar*. Since then I have been involved in at least a further forty-six commissions, making my total over the forty years something over a half century.

For Guy's *Gallimaufry* and its sequel *Illyrian Dances* I have a special affection. Both works have a refreshing Englishness about them, they are written in a populist style, audience and player friendly, but yet they invariably turn a melodic, harmonic or rhythmic corner in an unexpected way, and both are easy enough to be played by a competent school or amateur band, but yet have enough problems to tease a more expert group.

Philip Wilby, like Michael Ball, writes wonderfully for the wind orchestra, treating it as an energetic palette of colour, bursting to escape. *Firestar* started life in my concept as a seven minute



gentle lyrical work, but the excitement of that vast chamber ensemble which we call the wind band led to a fleet scherzo with scarcely a pause for breath. The same is true of Michael Ball's *Omaggio*, a Homage to Italy, to Verdi with a brief quotation from "Falstaff", and an incredible slow movement which is for me on a par with the funeral march in Elgar's *Second Symphony*.

Adam Gorb and Martin Ellerby emerged at much the same time: Martin, with the wonderfully filmic score of *Paris Sketches* commissioned by Richard Jones for Huddersfield, Adam with his virtuosic *Metropolis* which Edward Gregson conducted at the Royal Academy of Music. They both celebrated my 60th birthday with splendidly individual scores, Martin with his *Venetian Spells* - fancy introducing a harpsichord to the wind orchestra - and Adam with the heartfelt *Yiddish Dances*.

It was good to see that the old BASBWE rows have still not subsided, and that the critics of 'elitist' music are still writing. I am not repentant in the slightest - some of the scores I have commissioned could well be called elitist, Judith Bingham's *Three American Icons*, John Casken's *Distant Variations*, Tony Gilbert's *Dream Carousels*.

But I wonder whether band directors complaining about elitism have ever looked at Adam Gorb's *Bridgewater Breeze*, five stunning little movements at about Grade 3, with a Merry-go-round, a Hoe Down, fun for all, or have they explored Michael Ball's *Three Processionals*, Derek Bourgeois' *Northern Lament*, Malcolm Binney's *Timpanaglia* or Guy

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Woolfenden's *Birthday Treat*, all at about Grade 3/4, written for school and community bands to celebrate my 60th birthday.

Have they tried through Stephen McNeff's *Ghosts*, a piece almost 20 minutes long, but with license for the conductor to choose which movements(s) he wants to play, dependant on the difficulty and the calibre of the ensemble. Then there is Philip Wilby's powerful *Passion for our Time*, written for school band with choir and dancers and narrator.

Paul Patterson's great setting of Roald Dahl's *Little Red Riding Hood* is harder to play, but certainly not elitist, nor is Gorb's *Yiddish Dances* or *Awayday*. If being non-elitist means conducting endless performances of *Pink Panther meets the Wizard of Oz* or *Phantom of the Opera*, then give me elitism any day, as long as it entertains, it packs an emotional punch, it makes us laugh, weep, scared, whatever! Do readers remember David Bedford's 'tingle factor,' the hairs standing up on your spine in a Hitchcock thriller, a Spielberg horror, the last act of *Don Giovanni*, the production of the head of John the Baptist in *Salome*, the climax of a Mahler Symphony, those fortissimo chords in Bedford's *Sun Paints Rainbows over the Vast Waves* which dissolve onto a molto pianissimo. For that effect you need the Royal Albert Hall or a similar acoustic, and really that is what BASBWE, its big brother WASBE, and the commissions are all about, creating a repertoire at all levels of good music.

OK, I am unrepentant. A two week tour of New Zealand hearing *Pink Panther meets . . .* and *Phantom* from band after band resulted in my commissioning *Aue* from Christopher Marshall, the closest work to Charles Ives in our repertoire, a collage of snippets of Samoan folk and church melodies. I remember conducting Grainger's

*Marching Song of Democracy* with an honours band in North Carolina. We took a vote on day one, probably 90% in favour of dropping it, 10% liked it. On the day of the concert, we took another vote, 95% wanted to play it. What if we had said on day one "Shucks, you all hate the Grainger, lets take a vote on whether we play either *South Pacific*, *West Side Story* or *Cats* instead? OK, we'll get the Phantom out."

I suppose I get the most satisfaction out of the works of Richard Rodney Bennett, I love the organisation, the colours with harp, piano and percussion punctuating muted brass, ripples of woodwind, I absolutely adore the "Tribute to Miles Davis" in the *Trumpet Concerto*, and I find his *Reflections* for double wind quintet absolutely compulsive. I just cannot wait to hear his new *Trombone Concerto*.

Now I don't have a band to conduct any more and no position, its harder to get commissions placed and performed, so its probably time to call it a day and hand on to others. In 2003 I am running the WASBE Conference with several commissions that I either instigated or paid for, including a piece for school/community band by the Luxembourg composer, Marco Putz, a piece by David Del Tredici, and a piece by Chris Marshall from New Zealand.

On Friday 7th February I shall be conducting the Royal College of Music Wind Orchestra in a concert at the Royal College in a programme which will have a first half of some of my commissions, while the second introduces one of the great neglected works by Percy Grainger and a wonderful Mahlerian piece by Robin Holloway, scarcely played in the past ten years, here celebrating Robin's 60th birthday and my 65th.

## ROYAL COLLEGE OF MUSIC – Friday 7th February at 7 00 pm

Awayday (1996)	Adam Gorb
Distant Variations (1997)	John Casken
Bright Spirit (2002 (London première))	Judith Bingham
Samurai (1995)	Nigel Clark
Power of Rome and the Christian Heart (1953)	Percy Grainger
Entrance; Carousing; Embarcation (1991)	Robin Holloway

## Wind Orchestra Commissions

2003 Richard Rodney Bennett	Trombone Concerto
2003 Christopher Marshall	New Work
2003 Marco Putz	Dance Sequences
2002 Judith Bingham	Bright Spirit
2001 Stephen McNeff	Ghosts
2001 Stephen McNeff	Wasteland Wind Music 2
2001 Christopher Marshall	Aue
2001 Samuel Zyman	Concertino for Piano, Violin & Wind
2000/01 Matthew Taylor	Blasket Islands
2001 Philip Grange	Clarinet Concerto
2001 Michael Colgrass	Saxophone Concerto
1999/00 Paul Patterson	Little Red Riding Hood
2000/01 Edwin Roxburgh	Time's Harvest
1999/00 Elena Firsova	Captivity
2000 Stephen McNeff	Wasteland Wind Music
1998 Longstaff, Edward	Changing Scenes
1998 Martin Ellerby	Venetian Spells
1998 Ellerby, Martin	New England Dances
1998 Gorb, Adam	Percussion Concerto
1998 Malcolm Binney	Timpanaglia
1998 Ball, Michael	Three Processionals
1998 Guy Woolfenden	Birthday Treat
1998 Derek Bourgeois	A Northern Lament
1998 Ewers, Timothy	Concerto Grosso
1998 Ellis, David	Dance Rhapsody
1998 Gorb, Adam	Yiddish Dances
1998 Fitkin, Graham	Game Show
1997 Bingham, Judith	Three American Icons
1997 Sallinen, Aulis	The Palace Rhapsody
1997 Wilby, Philip	A Passion for Our Time
1997 Casken, John	Distant Variations
1996 Gorb, Adam	Awayday
1996 Gorb, Adam	Bridgewater Breeze
1996 Marsh, Roger	Heathcote's Inferno
1995 Clarke, Nigel	Samurai
1995 Abe, Keiko	Prism Rhapsody
1994 Musgrave, Thea	Journey through a Japanese Landscape
1993 Butler, Martin	Still Breathing
1993 Bennett, Richard Rodney	Trumpet Concerto
1993 Matthews, Colin	Toccata Meccanica
1992 Poole, Geoff	Tides Turning
1992 Poole, Geoff	Sailing with Archangels
1992 Bazelon, Irwin	Midnight Music
1991 Bennett, Richard Rodney	The Four Seasons
1989 Harper, Edward	Double Variations
1989 Gilbert, Anthony	Dream Carousels
1987 Bennett, Richard Rodney	Morning Music
1987 Ball, Michael	Omaggio
1985 Wilby, Philip	and I walk around the cross
1983 Wilby, Philip	Frestar
1983 Woolfenden, Guy	Gallimaufry

## Chamber Commissions

1966 Elizabeth Lutyens	The Fall of a Leaf
1963 Elizabeth Maconchy	Clarinet Quintet