

Tim Reynish

# Derek Bourgeois

## An Assessment Of His Music In Two Parts

### Trivia Quiz Question:

Name the composer recently retired from Gustav Holst's old job as director of music of St Paul's Girls School who has written over thirty-five works for wind orchestra?

You probably all guessed the answer from the title of this piece, though maybe not. On a TV quiz show recently, a girl of some 25 years was asked what was the capital of Iran. She answered quite promptly "Iraq", and then after a pause for thought, "Afghanistan". *Nul points!*

But how many readers of *Winds* could name the thirty-five or more (by now) wind works of Bourgeois. I could have a pretty good shot, after spending a week with Derek, listening to his music for symphony and chamber orchestra, quartet, brass ensembles, organ, choir and especially the works for wind and for brass band, which are central to his output.

Bourgeois is a composer known mainly by a slight *jeu d'esprit* in 11/8 and 13/8, originally written for his wife to dance down the aisle at their wedding, now in the repertoire of every organist and most wind bands worldwide. The *Serenade* op 22 was arranged for orchestra, brass band and finally for wind band (1965, G&M Brand) and has pleased audiences and teased players and conductors for years. It can now be exchanged in concerts and conducting courses for *Metro Gnome* (1999, HaFaBra), equally devilish in its metrical twists but also equally charming and simple.

You get an idea of the speed and fluency of the man when you read in his catalogue his account of its composition:

'*Metro Gnome* was written at the request of Louis Martinus. He asked if I could write another piece like *Serenade* with unusual time signatures, because it was good practice for young players to encounter complex rhythms within an essentially popular style. Louis was staying with me at the time in Mallorca during July 1999, and when he got up the next morning, I had the piece ready for him to inspect. It exists in three formats: wind band, brass band, and fanfare band.'

### First Commissions

It is now twenty-five years since I first commissioned a wind band piece. Planning in the late seventies for the 1981 International Conference for Wind Band Composers, Conductors and Publishers, we included a major commission from a British composer. From the list of possibilities, I selected Derek Bourgeois who had already written for me a very successful overture for orchestra called *Green Dragon*, now arranged for wind band as op. 32a and published by Derek's main publisher, Louis Martinus of HaFaBra.

*Green Dragon* was written for the Warwickshire Symphony Orchestra in 1969 and arranged by Derek for wind orchestra in 1999. It is a good introduction to Bourgeois music with its quirky clarinet main theme, sudden twists and wrenches of harmonies and

changes of metre. His themes slide through a wide variety of keys, the bass lines stride with an energy reminiscent of Shostakovich, there are little jazz inflections (*West Side Story?*) in trumpets and high woodwind. Ostinato figures build slowly to a climax and finally a big tune dominating everything. Derek shows off his academic record with an ingenious *fugato*, all too short, dissolving on to an oom pah section with wind solos right off key but somehow always recovering. There is wit and humour in abundance, think Shostakovich and Prokofiev, this is contemporary music with a huge grin, and a very useful addition to the repertoire of contemporary overtures.

Later the composer added two more overtures. He writes:

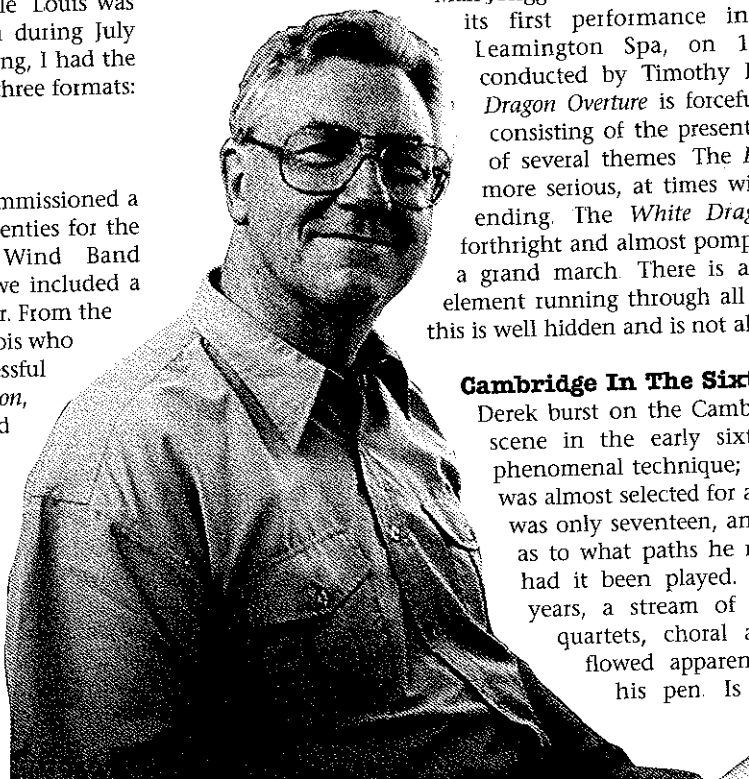
'The Three "Dragon" Overtures were inspired by the composer's love of the Chinese game "Mah-Jongg", which is played with a series of 144 decorative tiles originally made out of ivory and sandalwood. The game has three suits of tiles, Bamboos, Circles and Characters. It also has extra tiles representing the four winds, four flower tiles, four season tiles and three dragons, green, red and white. These last three tiles were always the composer's favourites not only because they looked impressive, but also they were worth a lot of points and automatically doubled your score.'

During the 1960s the composer played regularly twice a week with his wife and two schoolmaster friends when he was a teacher at Cranleigh School in Surrey. Each member of the group of players took it in turn to host the evening and provide the meal, which was prepared and cooked during the short gap between each hand whilst the square wall of tiles was rebuilt.

When the Warwickshire Symphony Orchestra commissioned an overture from Derek in 1969 he could not resist the temptation to use the Green Dragon Mah-Jongg tile as a name for the piece. It was given its first performance in the Town Hall, Leamington Spa, on 15th March 1970, conducted by Timothy Reynish. The *Green Dragon Overture* is forceful, yet light-hearted consisting of the presentation and interplay of several themes. The *Red Dragon* is much more serious, at times wistful and has a sad ending. The *White Dragon* by contrast is forthright and almost pompous, culminating in a grand march. There is a common thematic element running through all three overtures, but this is well hidden and is not all that obvious.

### Cambridge In The Sixties

Derek burst on the Cambridge undergraduate scene in the early sixties already with a phenomenal technique; his Symphony no. 1 was almost selected for a BBC Prom when he was only seventeen, and we can only guess as to what paths he might have followed had it been played. In the next twenty years, a stream of works, symphonies, quartets, choral and chamber music flowed apparently effortlessly from his pen. Is it



# Bourgeois

## Part 1 1965 - 1987

this very fluency and ease that has contributed to his early promise, his lack of consolidating achievement and now our comparative neglect of his "serious" music?

The brilliance of Bourgeois was already clear in his Symphony no 1 op 10 of 1960. The first movement is immediately striking, astringent and quirky by turns, the second movement is a brilliant scherzo derived partially from the material from the opening movement, with a main theme cast in the worlds of Shostakovich or Prokofiev but typical of Derek.

The slow movement has an Elgarian breadth and stillness, one of the most beautiful passages of contemporary music. However he never takes himself seriously for long. There are sudden eruptions from timpani and a brief passionate middle section before violin and cello solos emerge as counterpoint to the main tune; the idyll is rudely broken into with one of his devilish passages, demonic whoops and glissandi and virtuosic passage work – it is as if already he dare not give full rein to his natural lyrical traditional side, though of course the tranquillity returns ultimately. The Finale is all breathless energy, a theme which appears immediately and is then inverted and developed. Bourgeois is at his mature best already at age of 17, with all of the energy, wit and brilliance, and unexpected twists of metres and harmonies of the later works but without the lapses of taste (in my view) of some of the most recent. When I said how marvellous the early music is he said:

"I can write like that now of course – it didn't do me any good then so why write it now"

### The Joneses Of Darmstadt

Both the Symphony of Winds (HaFaBra, 1981) and Sinfonietta (G&M Brand 1982) were written towards the end of what one might call Derek's 'Angry Young Man' period when he made some attempt to keep up with the Joneses of Darmstadt; the music of Stockhausen and Boulez, Maxwell Davies and Birtwistle. He and I both studied at Cambridge in what Alexander Goehr once referred to at a party as 'the agricultural days'; our musical Gods were Sibelius, Vaughan Williams, Delius and Finzi, or slightly more daringly early Stravinsky, with Honegger, Walton, Britten and Les Six adding spice. A distinguished contemporary of Derek's recently described his technical achievements in awe, but dismissed his style as pastiche Walton. This is a little unfair, as I will try to show in this assessment of his music.

### Symphony & Sinfonietta

His Symphony of Winds written for that first international Conference is a virtuosic exploration of the wealth of luxurious sound that is the wind orchestra. The Symphony and the subsequent Sinfonietta, commissioned by Harry Legge for what is now the National Youth Wind Orchestra, are both difficult technically but not musically. In a way I think that many of us were embarrassed at having music that

was enjoyable, challenging the players but not the audiences. As Frank Battisti suggested, the intellectual demands just did not match the technical requirements; now, in a post-modern era, when composers once again dare to write real tunes and traditional harmonies, it is high time that we revisited both of these pieces. The great virtuoso trombonist Christian Lindberg, for whom Derek wrote his Trombone Concerto, puts the case more positively:

'Bourgeois has not worried about the historical necessities and rules, which dictate the novelty of style regarded as so important by some compositional schools; he keeps instead to traditional musical patterns.'

### Rachmaninov Meets Delius And Richard Strauss

If there is a problem, the slow movement of the Symphony probably represents it most clearly; against an almost Ravelian swathe of woodwind shifting chords and birdsong, the horns play a melody with typical Bourgeois chromatic harmonies and key shifts. Martin Ellerby describes the second movement of his *Paris Sketches* as being 'Prokofiev meets Stravinsky'; this is a kind of Down a Country Lane Rachmaninov meets Delius and Richard Strauss. The first and third movements have all of the energy of Walton, faultlessly sliding through totally unrelated keys but always returning home safely, and in the finale there is an Elgarian *nobilmente* tune of great sweep and originality, given full chromatic treatment – what a Master of the Queen's Music Derek would make!

There is a Straussian opulence about the slow movement of the Sinfonietta, as sequence after sequence pile up and move elliptically through key after key before twisting back. There is the energy of Tchaikovsky in the Finale, (think *Francesca da Rimini*) Ravel you hear again in some of the wind scoring, swirls of colour, which often accompany a *nobilmente* theme, again with all of the sweep and majesty of Elgar and Walton at their best.

There is a Clarinet Sonata that inhabits the sound world of Alban Berg or early Schoenberg, and an early quartet which might have been written by Shostakovich, but all of these works also bear unmistakable Bourgeois fingerprints. What happened to this "Angry Young Man"?

### The House At Pseud's Corner

After a period teaching at Cranleigh School his subsequent professional career as Lecturer in Music at Bristol University, Director of the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain and Director of Music at St Paul's Girls' School, (in succession to Gustav Holst), gave him a comfortable income and time to write a series of small and large scale works. For many years, he and his beautiful wife Jean lived in a wonderful house overlooking the Wye Valley. They were great gardeners, wine connoisseurs, food buffs, great hosts, and I wondered whether starving in a garret in East London

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might have led to hunger to join the musical rat race and to a greater self-criticism.

What actually happened to his composition was that when he took up a teaching post at the University of Bristol, he began working with Sun Life Band, and discovered the world of the brass band. Here he came across men (not many women in brass bands in those days) who played music for fun at an amazingly high level of proficiency, who loved virtuosity, loved a good tune, but had no time for the poseur.

And poseur Derek certainly is not, hating any kind of cant, hypocrisy, pseudo attitudes, and as a result he rarely, unfortunately in my view, takes himself seriously for more than a few minutes. What 'serious' composer would put together a compilation of Organ Concerto, Organ Symphony, Sonata for Two Pianos and *Downfall of Lucifer* with a Cathedral on the front of the CD and on the back a tea party of Derek and friends wearing 'Eyreore' heads. Thus a lyrical traditional theme of considerable beauty and elegance will be rudely interrupted by Stravinsky-like discords and swept into a jokey TV sitcom theme. Derek would certainly have made a fortune writing snippets for radio or TV shows, for films, for musicals, for any artistic medium where his grotesque sense of parody and his innate feel for melody, albeit sometimes for me too sentimental, could be given full rein.

### Concerto For Three Trombones, Strings & Percussion

One typical work of this period is the superb Concerto for Three Trombones, Strings and Percussion (1977), now available in a wind version for wind orchestra. There is a hint of Bartók in the gritty cross rhythms in dialogue between soloists and orchestra, but also the sustained themes and the post-Walton harmonies, the intense lyricism of the slow movement (a hint of jazz harmonic procedures here), the gentle glissandi (Ravel?), the stentorian Wagnerian chords and an utterly gorgeous violin solo (*Lark Ascending*), erupting into a finale full of typical Bourgeois energy. This is the Bourgeois that I

love, witty, lyrical, entertaining and unpredictable.

It is significant that in twenty-two years, Bourgeois wrote only seven works for wind, *Green Dragon* not being arranged until 1999. At this time he was in my opinion at the height of his powers, writing a series of major works in the best British tradition, and getting a fair number of performances, especially on the BBC by the BBC Welsh, BBC Concert Orchestras, Bournemouth Symphony and Sinfonietta.

*Calypto* op. 60g has a gentle predictable charm and would certainly make a useful three-minute filler in a light programme. In these days of politically correct programming of Christmas music without any nod towards Christianity, the *Two Christmas Pieces* might be more than useful as genre pieces, the one a cheerful bouncy sleigh-ride, the other a salon piece with gestures which would not be out of place if written by Elgar.

Many of Bourgeois's wind works after the Symphony and Sinfonietta were written originally for brass band and then re-scored for wind. Perhaps in transcription there is a resultant opaqueness and heaviness about the scoring. The wind band has similar textures only in the brass family with its groupings of conical and cylindrical instruments, while in the woodwind there are widely contrasting primary colours which cry out for a chamber treatment. This was the joy of the brass band, with its emphasis on conical instruments and a cohesive sound. The excitement of the latter is in brilliant writing and massed sound, of the former in detail and colour.

One of his most successful works for me is the *Diversions* op. 47a (Vanderbeek & Imrie 1987), arranged from the brass band original of 1985. In three movements, the first and third bright and breezy with syncopation and mixed metres, the middle slow and lyrical, this thirteen minute work shows Derek's music perhaps at its best, very approachable, a challenge but eminently playable, deserving of more performances than it gets at present.

I shall write in the next issue about his more recent music of the last two decades; after establishing a reputation as an *enfant terrible* of brass band music, he turned more and more to the wind orchestra, arranging many of the very successful brass works for wind, and recently writing several large-scale original works for the medium.

To get a flavour of more of his lighter works, go to the excellent Website for his present publisher, [www.hafabramusic.com](http://www.hafabramusic.com). There you will find Derek in company with a host of continental composers who believe in writing tunes and understandable harmonies, and by navigating through to his catalogue you can hear extracts from first rate recordings of many of his works.

### The Unanswered Question

One work, which I would include in this earlier catalogue, would be *Northern Lament* op. 154 (G&M Brand 1997) which Derek wrote for my 60th birthday. This is a re-working of the slow movement of an early Sonata for Brass Quintet op. 21, commissioned by the Hallé Brass Quintet but never performed by them. There are two main thematic ideas, a typically wistful lyrical theme that contrasts with a fanfare motif; think Britten or Shostakovich. It is aimed at a school band, but would need excellent players to really bring off to perfection the incredible pathos of the *codetta*, dying away to nothing with so many questions left unanswered.

*Serenade* for Concert Band Arranged 1980 Concert Band pub G & M Brand 1965

*Green Dragon* for Concert Band pub Hafabra Music 1999

*Calypto* for Concert Band arr 1984 Concert Band pub G & M Brand 1978

*Symphony of Winds* for Concert Band pub Hafabra 1980

*Perchance to Dream* for Symphonic Wind Orchestra Concert Band pub G & M Brand 1998

*Sinfonietta* for Concert Band Concert Band pub G & M Brand 1983

*Two Christmas Pieces* for Concert Band 1: Sleighbells 2: Shepherds Carol Concert Band pub G & M Brand 1984

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