

## Richard Gordon-Smith The Bacchae

(After Euripides)  
Op 32



*Seikilos Song from The Bacchae by Richard Gordon-Smith*

The commissioning of new works for wind band is happily becoming a common occurrence but for a wind band to work with a dance company in a specially written work, if not unique, is decidedly unusual and adds yet another dimension to the repertoire. The World Premier of *The Bacchae* was given by Chiasmus (Bette Spencer — Co-ordinator of Expressive Arts and Head of Dance, Chesterfield High School) and the Sefton Youth Wind Orchestra (Geoffrey Reed — Director and Head of Music Support Service) at the 12th Annual BASBWE Conference in Manchester on 17 September 1993. Here the composer, writing in the Preview Programme, gives his thoughts on his own music.

No project has ever excited me more than *The Bacchae* — for me a double first, being both my first Wind Band piece and also my first ballet — and I found the challenge inspiring. The extraordinary, timeless quality of Euripides' last play, written when he was over seventy years old, gripped me from first reading with its boundless joyful energy, its pagan violence, and its heartrending grief. It is a story that cries out to be danced to — to be made manifest in the dramatic ecstasy of physical movement. In this story, centred on the ancient cult of Dionysus, the thin veneer of civilisation is stripped away, revealing the barely controlled chaos of our inner motivations, and unleashing the beast within.

I had first come across 'Seikilos' Song' in my school library at the age of seventeen, and it had a powerful effect on me even then, haunting me for weeks with its strange lilting melody. The song is an epitaph to Seikilos' wife, found on a two thousand year old tomb at Aidin in Turkey, and it is in fact one of the oldest pieces of music still extant.

When I was asked by Geoff Reed and Bette Spencer to write *The Bacchae*, this melody which had waited twenty four years (or two thousand!) immediately clamoured in my brain. It had to be Dionysus' 'theme tune' — to dominate the ballet score as Dionysus does the story. Thus everything in the music, from the frenzied celebration of the opening to the disaster and grief of the conclusion, flows from this rich melodic source, as Euripides and Seikilos join hands to speak to us across the millennia.

Further insight into the music emerged in an interview between the composer and Peter Spaul of BBC Radio Merseyside:

*Richard, this is not the first time you have had a commission for educational purposes, is it?*

No, this project actually came out of a previous educational work *Soundcastle*,

which was commissioned by the RLPO. That was an orchestral piece in which school children played an important part both musically and dramatically. Geoffrey Reed, the director of the Sefton Youth Wind Orchestra, and Timothy Reynish, head of the School of Wind and Percussion at the Royal Northern College of Music, were both present at the first performance and in conversation that day decided to ask me to write a piece for a wind band.

*How did it turn out to be a ballet then?*

Geoff had worked previously with Bette Spencer, Head of Dance at Chesterfield High School in Crosby, and he introduced me to her saying that they would like to make it a joint project with dance. The subject was in fact Bette's idea.

*You were of course familiar with the Euripides story.*

No, as it happened I didn't know it; I was woefully ignorant of the Greek classics. Bette suggested three possible storylines she would like to dance to, but *The Bacchae* had been a bee in her bonnet for

years and was the clear favourite. So I read it with great interest and realised immediately that it had enormous dance potential. Not only does it have the wild Bacchae women performing strange rites on the hillside and eastern worshippers paying homage to Dionysus but also a cast of strongly defined characters and unambiguous action. It seemed absolutely made for ballet.

*So is it a story of love, lust, war or what?*

It's more a story of divine vengeance. It centres on the cult of the god Dionysus who was born of the union of Zeus with a mortal woman, Semele. Semele's sisters dispute that Zeus had anything to do with it thus denying the Godhead of Dionysus and effectively reducing him to the status of a mere mortal. The god therefore engineers the destruction of the family in a rather horrible way.

*Now this was the first time you had written for ballet. Presumably you had to find out what the capabilities of the dance company were — whether they do modern dance, classical ballet.*



*Chiasmus dancers with the Sefton Youth Wind Orchestra*

Well, I decided that there was a clear story to tell and that the choreographer should have a fairly free hand as to how she tackled it. I had seen videos of Chiasmus working and was very impressed by the expertise and dedication of the young dancers but I don't think it influenced the kind of music I wrote. It was up to them to interpret the music with their own choice of movements

*So you threw the music at them and let them sort it out*

More-or-less yes, though Bette and I discussed the choreography often and I was present at many of the dance rehearsals. I also threw it at the band in a big way. Geoff had asked me to write a piece of moderate difficulty, giving me examples of band music they were working on. When I looked at them, I didn't feel I was going to write anything remotely similar. Obviously I kept within the ranges of which the juvenile players were capable. But after all I am telling a story here, a very passionate story, and you have to write passionate music for it. I find that when I allow my emotions to have free reign with a pen in my hand, then technique has to catch up. I certainly extended their rhythmic horizons quite a lot.

*But they coped with it?*

They coped with it amazingly and Geoff drilled them to perfection. He said that because of working on *The Bacchae* he felt the band had achieved the highest standard of which they were capable, which I find very rewarding. They certainly have my fullest respect.

*I shouldn't think there is much ballet music for wind instruments about is there?*

I don't know of any other, though I'm sure there must be somewhere.



Bette Spencer

*Does this cause difficulties? Because one thinks of ballet maybe wrongly as being a rather delicate art but a wind band is not necessarily a very delicate group of musicians. Those are two popular misconceptions. If you have ever been present at a ballet*



Geoffrey Reed

rehearsal — and I have been lucky enough to see the Royal Ballet rehearse at Covent Garden — you will know that the physical discipline of a ballet dancer is as strenuous as that of an Olympic athlete, whilst a well trained band can produce a sound like gossamer. I took Geoff's title for the ensemble as being very indicative of how he regards the medium — he calls it the Sefton Youth Wind Orchestra not Band with its associations of military marches. Much of the wind band music Geoff showed me had a rather 'lumpy' feel to it with the instruments moving in heavy blocks and excessive doublings. I try to write for wind band as I would for symphony orchestra.

*Were you influenced by any of the wind band music you had heard?*

No, not really. It was largely a matter of writing what I wanted to hear, which is what I always do.

*How do you make a ballet out of an ancient Greek classic with all its long speeches?*

*How did you deal with the choruses? No one can talk in a ballet.*

Well I had no idea at first! Presented as I was with a welter of words and a little apparent movement, I began by deducing the essential physical action from the text. I then got a long strip of paper, representing 21 minutes, calibrated it in seconds and laid the action out on it, so many seconds for this, so many seconds for that, and then wrote accordingly.

*It sounds a rather coldly calculating process!*

It is at first, until you begin writing. It's a bit like writing a film score, but in reverse. There you are given the final cut of the film and have to co-ordinate the music to it to the split second. In a ballet it's the opposite, you write in timed sections of music and the choreographer must create the ballet so the dancers can precisely fit with it.

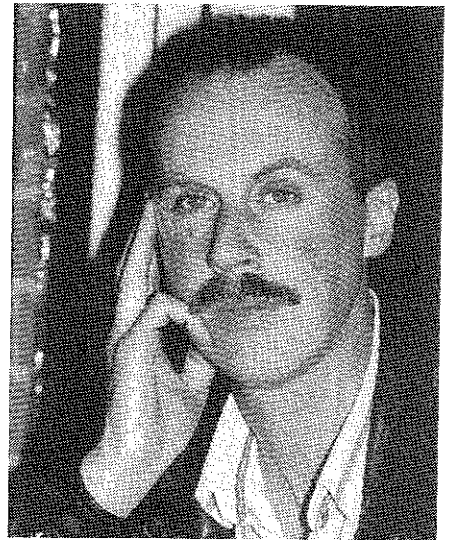
*I know some of your music has utilised twelve-tone techniques in the past. Did you follow that procedure in this case?*

No, it wasn't appropriate as I was using an ancient Greek melody called *Seikilos Song* as the main theme. It was discovered on a Second Century BC tomb in Aidin in Turkey and was Seikilos' epitaph to his wife. It is actually one of the oldest known pieces of music.

*How did you come to know it?*

It's strange how things come full circle. I first came across the song in my school library 25 years ago and I was obsessed by it for months trying it out in various forms without knowing what I was doing. It then lay dormant in my memory until I read *The Bacchae* and then it just popped up and demanded to be used! It was written within two centuries of the play and I like to think of Euripides and Seikilos joining hands to speak to us over two thousand years later!

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*Richard Gordon-Smith was born at Croydon, Surrey in 1952, trained at the Royal College of Music, London and is presently a violinist in the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra. He writes 'Music can often excite me to fever pitch, make me laugh or move me to tears. I believe it is one of the most important civilising influences on our lives, and is a real force for good in the world. At its highest, music is a way of expressing love — not just human love, but love of all things. It freely expounds areas of thought where spoken language stumbles or is silent, and in the process it touches not just our hearts, but our very souls. Every note I write comes from my heart, (often to the annoyance of my brain, which complains it does not have enough time to write it all down), and I send it to the hearts of my listeners. Whether or not it strikes home I cannot say. I write because I must, and at least it harms no one.'*