

Interview with Kenneth Hesketh

Samuel Becker

The composer Kenneth Hesketh has made a huge impact in the wind band world over the last few years. His works are extremely well crafted and attractive to both listen to, and perform. When the Editor suggested that Ken be interviewed I jumped at the chance - as well as being one of our best composers; he is also delightful to talk to.

I thought the interview could take place in a nice restaurant, and wondered if *Winds* had a secret expense account that I didn't know about and could make use of. But then the Editor made matters very clear by suggesting I do the interview by e-mail, so I settled myself at my computer with tea and digestive biscuits. This seemed to work very well until Ken's computer crashed, meaning that some questions remain as yet unanswered. We both feel that this is the perfect excuse to have a 'Kenneth Hesketh Interview: Part Two' in an issue of *Winds* in the near future. This also gives me the chance to throw open the interview to you, the *Winds* readership. Do you have a question that you would like Ken to answer? If you do, send it to me and I will include it in the next section of the interview.

When did you first encounter wind band music?

I played tuba in my local school brass band and so was aware of non-string based forms of music making from an early age! However, it was only quite recently that my attention and interest were piqued by the windband medium (about 3 years ago) even though I had been aware of music written for this

medium since I was a teenager. The standard and inclusivity of music making is fantastic - I have been very lucky to have so many fine bands throughout the world perform my work for band. I have so enjoyed the opportunity of working with bands such as the RAF, Chethams and the RNCM, all who maintain high standards of performance, musical integrity and a sense of enjoying the music they perform. It's a dream!

Had you known much of the repertoire until you started writing for the band?

Very simply, no. I knew Holst's *Hammersmith*, some Walton transcriptions and one or two other things from some Frederick Fennell recordings. A little later Clark Rundell let me have a recording of *Winds of Nagual* (Colgrass) and *Gazebo Dances* (Corigliano). Then the next things I heard were the Nigel Hess works for band. It is only since having written various things for band that I have become aware of the excellent corpus of works written over the last decade or so.

What attracts you to the sounds of this type of group?

The extremes - the brittle and the lush. Dynamically this medium is impressive - a band playing *ppp* is magical. There is, with so many flutes and clarinets (!) the possibility of a quite neutral way of scoring. It poses many questions in matters of balance and shading, and when successfully handled the results are unlike any other.

Composers of wind band music are nearly exclusively played by amateur musicians, as there are so few professional groups around. Is this important to you or does it not influence your attitude towards your writing?

The fact that there are so many talented amateur musicians in this movement playing all standards of music is a credit to all concerned. I have to be honest and say that the integrity of the idea of the work at hand is the only guide to standard of difficulty. What has been great to hear is that many bands who



thought they would not be able to get close to the level of a work have had a go anyhow and have actually been able to rise to the challenge and, most importantly, enjoy the process.

Your first wind band pieces were in a much 'lighter' style than the rest of your output. It is great to see a composer embracing all styles - but it leads to the question of whether you intend to keep this division in your output or whether we can expect some of your future wind music to be more 'serious'?

My first work, *Danceries*, is very tame harmonically. *Masque* ups the stakes a little, *Festive Overture* continues to tighten the harmonic knot. I will, when time allows, write something adventurous for the medium. I do not have a problem with the multi-stylistic approach within an oeuvre. However I am not a post-modernist and so have a problem with styles living cheek-by-jowl within a single piece. That is my own hang-up, I guess.

I have had a glimpse of the proof score of 'Diaghilev Dances' and it seems there is some development there in a more serious direction. Tell us a little more about 'Diaghilev Dances' - the College Consortium Commission for 2003.

COMPOSERS

The idea for *Diaghilev Dances* came from my interest in and love for the great ballet music of the early 20th century, much of which was commissioned by or written for the Russian impresario Serge Diaghilev (1872 - 1929). From 1909 to 1929 Diaghilev's company, the Ballets Russes, nurtured some of the leading composers of the time including Stravinsky, Ravel, Debussy and Prokofiev. Not only music, but also dance and art were all combined to produce some of the greatest works of the 20th century and Diaghilev's legacy has influenced much of the ballet world following his premature death.

As a very young musician I was spellbound by the sounds and colours of this music and have long wanted to put my own homage forward in honour of Diaghilev and the music he inspired. My work, *Diaghilev Dances*, could be considered a miniature ballet consisting of an introduction, three dances and three entr'actes. There is no actual scenario for the work though I knew the piece would have a big dramatic sweep and would be balletic in shape. The primary theme, a very simple folk-like melody, acts as the binding thread to the work, being heard at the very beginning and at the end, whilst sections of material that accompany it can be found transformed into the main themes of the other dances.

My primary concern was to combine my own musical personality with the rich *fin de siècle* period of French and Russian music and, in doing so, offer a generous bow to a great tradition.

You have so far written for fairly standard large bands - where do you stand on writing for smaller and more variedly scored ensembles? Is this something you would like to explore or do you like the sound of the full band?

I very much enjoy the large colour resource of the full band, but I would like to write something with tailor-made scoring, possibly a concerto. I would also like to write a spatially oriented work as antiphonal effects have always interested me.

Do you have any long-term plans for pieces that you would like to write? Any symphonies for band in the pipeline?

At this time I have a few pieces planned for windband, mostly short pieces, but, yes, there will be a symphony for band. When that will see the light of day, I'm not sure!

Do you have a question that you would like Ken to answer?

**If you do, send it to Samuel Becker
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Kenneth Hesketh was born in Liverpool in 1968. His musical talent became evident at an early age: in addition to being a member of the National Youth Orchestra (as orchestral pianist and percussionist), he started composition lessons in his early teens. By the age of 16, he had written a Symphony, which was performed by the Merseyside Youth Orchestra. Hesketh studied composition with Edwin Roxburgh, Simon Bainbridge and Joseph Horowitz at the Royal College of Music. While still a student, he completed his first formal commission (*Harlequin* for orchestra). This work was given its first performance by Edwin Roxburgh and the Royal College of Music Symphony Orchestra in 1989. But after leaving college, he moved away from the world of serious musical composition for three years.

The turning point in his career came in 1995, when he attended the Tanglewood Festival, Massachusetts. He studied with Henri Dutilleux, who encouraged him, and met Oliver Knussen who has subsequently championed his music in the UK and elsewhere. Hesketh cemented his American connection from 1996, when he studied for a Masters degree in composition at the University of Michigan, while in the USA, he was awarded the Shakespeare Prize by the Toeplitz Foundation of Hamburg, a prize which included a year's residency in Berlin from September 1997 (but stayed until 1999); this Prize was awarded at the request of his fellow Liverpoolian, Sir Simon Rattle, who has conducted his work in the UK and Europe. Kenneth Hesketh now lives in London.

An early enthusiasm for Franco-Russian music of the last century was one of the stimuli behind Hesketh's interest in colourful orchestration, and he has always been inspired by the other arts. Several recent works have their origins in medieval symbolism and iconography, notably three pieces for chamber ensemble: *Theatrum* (1996), *Tortuous Instruments* (1997-8, after Hieronymus Bosch's depiction of Hell from *The Garden of Earthly Delights*), and *The Circling Canopy of Night* (1999). He is also intrigued by children's literature with a sinister or melancholy streak: his *Netsuke* (Book One) for chamber ensemble (2000-1, commissioned by the Endymion Ensemble at the request of Hans Werner Henze) comprises five short movements inspired variously by Saint-Exupéry's *Le Petit Prince*, *Struwwelpeter*, and a poem by Walter de la Mare.

Hesketh has described *Netsuke* as 'intricate and ornate', a description which could apply to most of his works. He favours complex textures, though the transparency of his instrumental writing ensures that every note is clearly heard, and the rhythmic flexibility typical of his style gives his music an improvisatory character. His marvellous orchestral work *At God speeded summer's end* (2000, premiered by the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra) has a Dutilleux-like clarity of texture and orchestral virtuosity. *The Circling Canopy of Night* reveals Hesketh's characteristic sound world and his favouring of certain instrumental sonorities, notably the celesta and the burbling sounds of the bass clarinet.

Kenneth Hesketh's current projects include a chamber opera, after Gogol's *The Overcoat*, for the English National Opera Studio, and a Michael Vyner Trust commission for the London Sinfonietta. Frequent performances in the UK, the rest of Europe and the USA ensure the growing reputation of one of the most talented and original British composers of his generation.

Biography by Caroline Potter