

Peter Graham

talks to Mick Dowrick

Last month, Peter Graham became the first British composer to win the prestigious American Bandmasters Association/Ostwald Award with *Harrison's Dream*.

Mick Dowrick, the Military Representative of BASBWE, spoke to Peter about the work and his growing involvement with wind music.

MD: Can I congratulate you on winning the Ostwald Award. I know this wasn't the reason for writing Harrison's Dream. Who originally commissioned the piece?

PG: I received a call out of the blue in early 2000 from Major Frank Grzych, asking if I would be interested in writing a work for the US Air Force Band. It took me around 2 seconds to say Yes!

MD: There is also a brass band version of the piece. Which came first?

PG: I was already working on sketches for the brass band piece when I got the call from Frank Grzych. The Air Force wanted to give me a year on the piece and that time frame was going to be impossible for me to meet. However, I had heard recordings of the Air Force Band and was really keen to do something for them, so we negotiated the possibility of a joint commission. Boosey & Hawkes commissioned the brass band version for the National Championships in October, and the première of the wind version took place the following February. In the end however, I worked on both versions simultaneously, and I can see wind influences in the brass and vice versa.

MD: Do you have a preference?

PG: I think the piece works better for winds, although my bias is probably due to hearing a recording of the Air Force Band's performance. It's quite stunning.

MD: Is that recording commercially

available?

PG: No, the one I have is a live recording, although the band has just recorded it for a CD release in June. It has also been scheduled for recording by Eugene Corporon and North Texas Symphonic Winds, so I'm delighted that the work is getting high class performances, as you can imagine!

MD: The orchestration is very fresh and imaginative. Did you have any models to work from?

PG: It's nice of you to say so, though I don't see it like that. I'm conscious of where improvements could be made. Nevertheless, I do feel that there are some advantages working on brass band scores, if only in the tremendous feeling of freedom when moving to the wind band. I relate brass band orchestration to the discipline of strict 16th century counterpoint i.e. so many parameters that you are forced to be creative to overcome the limitations. The wind band gives a huge range of colours by comparison, especially the Air Force commission which allowed for a desk of cellos and harp in addition to the wind.

As to models for the scoring, I haven't mirrored anything consciously though I'm sure my listening habits have filtered through. I'm a great admirer of David Bedford's *Sun Paints Rainbows*, and of course Philip Wilby and Martin Ellerby are doing some great things. However, for fresh and imaginative orchestration Philip Sparke is hard to beat. *Dance Movements* is a tremendous achievement and I guess Philip must be Britain's most successful export in wind band writing.

MD: Are you influenced by any composers in particular?

Well, apart from the usual suspects I suppose the major influence in my formative years was Eddie Gregson. When I later studied with Eddie at Goldsmiths' he encouraged me to listen to a wide range of contemporary music, and for that I am grateful. There are some conscious references to John Adams and Jimmy MacMillan in *Harrison's Dream*, the latter for old times sake perhaps. I really respond to a lot of what Jimmy is doing in composition, and there is a certain irony in the fact that we were at

Edinburgh University together, and at that time I had no interest whatsoever in what he was doing in composition. In fact, I recall him offering to write me a trumpet piece and my response was lukewarm to say the least. I couldn't afford him now!

MD: Is Harrison's Dream your only work for wind band?

PG: No, although it's only in recent months that I have become quite active in writing for the medium. I have dabbled a bit over the years, resulting in a Grade 2 piece for Jim Curnow's company and an arrangement of Irish composer Ronan Hardimans music, entitled *Cry of the Celts*. I also transcribed a brass band work, *Montage* which was recorded by Nigel Boddice and the excellent Royal Norwegian Navy Band. Nigel has been a tremendous supporter of Scottish composers in particular and has been fantastic in promoting and encouraging my work. He has just recorded a CD of my wind music on the Doyen label - again with the Norwegian Band - and the pieces are due for release through my wife's company Gramercy Music any day now.

MD: Are any of these pieces for brass band in a former life?

PG: In fact almost all of them are - *Gaelforce*, *Shine as the Light*, *Windows of the World* and so on. I don't have any hang up about the original/transcription position. If the pieces work, why not? Not all will of course, but I recently heard a fine piece by Kenneth Hesketh called *Masque* - in brass band and wind band format, and I certainly didn't feel shortchanged by either version. In fact I just discovered it was originally an orchestral score so he is certainly getting mileage from the piece, and good luck to him!

MD: So an orchestral version of Harrison's Dream is on the horizon?

PG: Well, I wouldn't rule it out!

MD: We'll look forward to hearing the first British performance of the wind version of Harrison's Dream in due course, but for now thank you for taking the time to talk to Winds.

Harrison's Dream

Peter Graham

The approach to the millennium celebrations saw, perhaps not surprisingly, a proliferation of books and articles dealing with the subject of Time.

The most popular of these was undoubtedly Dava Sobel's epic tale *Longitude*, which I encountered while on holiday a few years ago. A brief summary of the story, extracted from the score notes, follows:

At 8 00pm on the 22nd October 1707, the Association, flagship of the British Royal Navy, struck rocks off the Scilly Isles with the loss of the entire crew. Throughout the rest of the evening the remaining three ships in the fleet suffered the same fate. Only 26 of the original 1,647 crew members survived. This disaster was a direct result of an inability to calculate longitude, the most pressing scientific problem of the time. It pushed the longitude question to the forefront of the national consciousness and precipitated the Longitude Act. Parliament funded a prize of £20,000 to anyone whose method or device would solve the dilemma.

For carpenter and self-taught clockmaker John Harrison, this was the beginning of a 40 year obsession. To calculate longitude it is necessary to know the time aboard ship and at the home port or place of known longitude, at precisely the same moment. Harrison's dream was to build a clock so accurate that this

calculation could be made, an audacious feat of engineering.

I was drawn by the dramatic potential in the story, and in particular by the conflicts faced by John Harrison:

Much of the music is mechanistic in tone and is constructed along precise mathematical and metrical lines. Aural echoes of the clockmaker's workshop alternate with nightmare dream pictures - Harrison was haunted by the realisation that countless lives depended on a solution to the longitude problem.

The emotional core of the work reflects on the evening of 22nd October 1707, culminating in the sounding of eight bells and the symbolic ascension of the mariners' souls in the sounding of the hand-held bells.

For many listeners the programmatic element will be the key to making sense of the sounds heard, and the music allows for a personal interpretation of the sequence of events.

It would be quite legitimate for example, to hear in the frantic opening bars the tightly wound clockwork mechanism winding down and in the music following, the machine-like struggles for uniformity of rhythm alternating with a sequence of nightmare dream scenarios.

The central slow section (another dream picture) is intended as a Requiem for those lost in the Association tragedy. The sparse and cold sounds give way to a

sad warmth which ultimately climaxes with the sounding of eight bells, and the souls' ascension symbolised by the small handbells. The manic clockwork music returns, and this time rhythm and harmony come into alignment in celebratory mode. With echoes of the Requiem the music draws to a conclusion. However, this is just one of a number of levels upon which the music exists.

The material used in the work's construction comes from two sources. Firstly, the harmony is mostly derived from an artificially constructed mode, or scale, while the thematic material is based on the four phrases of the famous Tallis Canon (ex 1). The Canon is never heard in its entirety however, and the four phrases appear as much altered fragments (ex 2,3,4). The reasons for embedding the Canon in the work are twofold. Firstly a symbolic reference to the fact that Harrison, in addition to his many other talents, was a keen musician and choirmaster at Barrow Parish Church and would no doubt have been familiar with the Canon. Secondly, Greenwich, often described as the home of the prime meridian also houses the Harrison clocks and, by coincidence, is also the burial place of the great English composer Thomas Tallis.

Most of the ground-work on the piece was spent on the structure. The tempos are controlled using metrical modulation (with one or two exceptions), ensuring an exact relationship between them. In theory a computer could produce a precise 12 minute performance, although the human element thankfully provides relief from this. To determine gravitational and dynamic climaxes the technique of Golden Section or Golden Mean is employed. This is a number theory which has been proved to link all manner of life growth in the natural world. All this number-crunching draws parallels with the Harrison subject matter.

Harrison's Dream was first performed by the US Air Force Band, Commander/Conductor Colonel Lowell Graham, in March 2001.

Harrison's Dream

Ex 1

Ex 1 shows a musical phrase in G major, 4/4 time. It consists of two staves. The first staff contains notes G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, with labels A, B, and C above. The second staff contains notes G4, F4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, with label D above.

Ex 2 - Phrase A

Ex 2 - Phrase A shows a musical phrase in G major, 4/4 time. It consists of a single staff with notes G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, with a forte (f) dynamic marking below.

Ex 3 - Phrase C

Ex 3 - Phrase C shows a musical phrase in G major, 4/4 time. It consists of a single staff with notes G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4.

Ex 4 - Phrase D

Ex 4 - Phrase D shows a musical phrase in G major, 4/4 time. It consists of a single staff with notes G4, F4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3.