

A British composer based in Kenya explains his approach to writing

YELLOW

It all began on Tom Mboya Street in Nairobi, back in 1990. Negotiating the broken pavements, street vendors and handcarts, I found myself immersed in a rhythmic cacophony of thudding drum machine beats and punching piano chords.

In those days, the *matatus* (or minibus taxis) pumped out distorted house music from blown-out speaker systems, in the belief that it would enable them to attract more passengers. They also had a reputation for being overloaded and recklessly driven.

But all of that changed on 1st February 2004, around the same time as I began work on this piece. A tough traffic regulation introduced by the new coalition government came into force. All *matatus* had to be fitted with speed governors, their crews licensed and uniformed, and their sound systems

removed. And, as if to reinforce the feeling of discipline, every *matatu* is now encircled by a regulation 15-inch yellow stripe.

So, for those people who prefer music to be linked to imagery – *Yellow Stripe* is a colourful eight-minute piece about chaotic city traffic in Africa. It should feel approachable to a variety of audiences, as it rarely ventures into extremes of atonality, rhythmic irregularity or extended instrumental technique.

Tom Mboya Street hasn't actually changed much, but the visitor who spends more than just a few hours in Nairobi will gradually begin to perceive the underlying sense of order and system that exists despite the apparent chaos. In a similar way, there are several other dimensions to *Yellow Stripe*.

For the players in the band, it offers an extension to the normal

kind of challenge they might encounter. The musical material is very frequently passed from one instrument to another – often within the space of less than a bar [Example 1]. It's always tempting to measure a musician's virtuosity by their level of skill in fingering technique – "how fast can you play that complicated sequence of notes?" But this piece sets the challenge in other areas of musicianship – in fact there are hardly any complicated fingering sequences to worry about!

Instead, the real challenge is that each and every player must develop very high sensitivity to what others are playing, and use this to co-ordinate precision in timing, articulation, dynamic, phrasing and tone. This, while of course true for any piece of music, is taken to a greater extreme in *Yellow Stripe* than in many works for the genre. The

Example 1

$\text{♩} = 112$

The musical score for Example 1 is written in 3/4 time with a tempo of 112 beats per minute. It consists of two systems of staves. The first system includes staves for Eb clarinet, Alto sax, Tenor sax, Horn con sord., Ipt con sord., and Cornet. The second system includes staves for Bb clarinet and Ipt senza sord. The music features complex rhythmic patterns, often with notes beamed together, and dynamic markings such as *mp* (mezzo-piano). The notation includes various note values, rests, and articulation marks.

This first wind orchestra work, commissioned by the BASBWE Education Trust

YELLOW STRIPE

Example 2

$\text{♩} = 112$

players will experience a degree of interdependency that they may not have encountered before

What I aim for with *Yellow Stripe* is that the players will eventually reach a level of perception that transcends recognition of their own contribution to the whole. In a really magical performance, all the players will be so familiar and confident with what they are playing that they will have no difficulty in 'aurally floating' above the band and experiencing for themselves the subtle changes of colour brought about by the intricate orchestration of every phrase. Normally it is only the conductor and the audience who have this privilege! The result should be an electrifying sense of energy flow amongst the players.

But why stretch the performers in this way?

The answer lies in the compositional parameters that I set myself a decade ago after taking part in a composers' conference in South Africa. I had taught music in Kenya for several years, and the impact of the African cultural and physical environment was so powerful that I felt I couldn't ignore it – but all my musical training had been in western composition and performance techniques. I was curious to know how I could hope to recon-

cile these seemingly opposing forces

The hot debate in South Africa at the time was how to reconcile European and African influences to create a new musical aesthetic for a newborn nation – an aesthetic which would fairly encompass all sides of the cultural divide that had existed during the previous political era. Composition techniques came under close scrutiny, particularly the practice of directly quoting rhythmic patterns or melodies from African sources, or incorporating African traditional instruments (and even African musicians) for 'ethnic effect' in music intended for the concert hall. Was this actually 'westernising African music' but making little or no contribution to African culture? Was it also misrepresenting a rich diversity of styles under one convenient African music label?

Grainger, Vaughan

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5 Bushey Close, Old Barn Lane, Kenley, Surrey CR8 5AU, UK

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Example 3

♩ = 112

solo

Example 4

♩ = 112

Williams, Bartók and Dvořák freely quoted melodies from within their own folk cultures, but the post-modern era has produced an abundance of composers who enthusiastically borrow from *outside* their own cultural backgrounds – with different degrees of subtlety and success

I sat up and listened attentively when South African composer Kevin Volans spoke of his attempts to turn things around and to ‘Africanise’ western music.

A possible way forward, Volans suggested, was for western composers to honour the *concepts* that unite traditional music in Africa, rather than simplistically extracting rhythm and pitch content and quoting it out of context (a trap we all tend to fall into because rhythm and pitch are the two principal parameters of our notation system).

Volans provided a helpful if generalised insight into the broader differences between African and European artistic concepts of music in his essay ‘Of White Africans and White Elephants’ (1986). These ‘African concepts’ include an extreme degree of interdependency between performers, equality of contribution to the whole, a personalised approach to building and playing instruments which results in a rich and unpredictable timbral palette, and an aural tradition that perceives cyclic forms and continuous time in a very different way to western thinking.

By contrast, in western music, we often favour hierarchies such as melody and accompaniment, we have concerto format, in which an individual is admired for domination over everybody else, we strive

to produce a ‘perfect’ sound on instruments made in factories, we make extensive use of notation, and we place great importance on the relationships between the chronological sequence of events in each piece (we always feel that the music has to be going somewhere)

Yellow Stripe is my latest attempt to reconcile African concepts with European composition techniques.

I’ve experimented in this way before; high-energy cyclic forms in my *Sextet for Piano and Wind Instruments* (1994), interlocking patterns in the clarinet quartet *Three Beginnings* (1996), and Ugandan playing positions for the marimba quartet *Switchback* (2000).

But the commission of *Yellow Stripe* offered the diverse timbral possibilities of the wind orchestra for the first time. The piece explores many tone-colour combinations, including some which make use of the rarer instruments such as marimba, alto and bass clarinet, string bass, bowed vibraphone, pedal tamps and baritone sax. There are very few places where the band plays *tutti*; more often it is treated as a constantly mutating chamber ensemble, with different groupings emerging from the texture, disappearing, and then re-forming elsewhere. In keeping with the spirit of equality, all the instruments contribute significantly to the piece, but there is also room for individual players to apply subtle dynamic phrasing to individual lines or parts of lines that they play.

Despite the aforementioned pitfalls of the western notation system, it has been essential in developing an extended structure for the

piece out of material that is largely cyclic. All the thematic material originates in one four-bar passage where the “punching chords” borrowed from house music are stacked on top of one another to produce a layered rhythmic counterpoint [Example 2]. The rising and falling motifs that appear elsewhere in the piece were created by extracting threads of notes from the different layers in these four bars, then altering their octaves [Example 3]. Sometimes the motifs are inverted and displaced laterally [Example 4]. The interplay between these motifs is then set against different textural backgrounds to create the contrasts and patterns of tension and release that are considered so fundamental in western music.

Jim Pywell teaches in the Department of Music and Dance at Kenyatta University, and at the Workers’ Music Association Summer School in England. He first encountered wind band music during the 1980s as a bassoonist in the Croydon Schools Centre for Wind Players under David Kendall’s direction. Later he went on to study at the University of Huddersfield, the Royal Northern College of Music, and the Dartington and Canford Summer Schools. In addition to working individually as a composer, he has collaborated with other artists in dance, theatre and non-classical music. From 2000 to 2003 he was Fellow in Music at the University of Bradford.

www.composers-uk.com/jimpywell

Sample scores can be obtained from Charles Hine BASBWE Education Trust 8 Beverley Road, Colchester, CO3 3NG. We are actively seeking bands to perform this exciting new work - the première is yet to be arranged. Please also contact Charles for details of any of the College Commission Consortium works for Wind Orchestra and Ensemble that have been commissioned over the past decade. A list of the works and facts on the Consortium can be found on our website www.basbwe.org