Timothy Reynish

Richard Rodney Bennett

In his seventieth year

The first part of a two part assessment of his career and his music for wind ensemble

'I hope I am a composer who provides music which is beautiful to listen to and which people can use, because one without the other is for me only a halfway stage.'

Since 1986, I have commissioned four major works from Richard Rodney Bennett; the Royal Northern College of Music gave the UK première of *Morning Music* in 1987, the première of *The Four Seasons* in 1991 and the première of the Trumpet Concerto in 1993. All three works, together with another RNCM commission, *Midnight Music* by Irwin Bazelon, are recorded on CD DOY CD037 On November 4th the Concerto for Saxophone Quartet and Wind Ensemble was premièred in Manchester at the International Festival of Wind Music, conducted by Clark Rundell

In 2006, Richard Rodney Bennett will be seventy years young; for the past twenty years, he has responded to my commissions for a series of four major works for wind ensemble, together with a wonderful transcription for wind dectet (*Reflections on a 16th Century Tune*) of a work originally scored for string orchestra In New York last year, I gave a lecture to the College Bands Directors National Association Conference on British music, and in particular the music of Bennett. Unfortunately, my lecture was cut short and it was impossible to discuss Bennett's work, so I have developed my notes into a brief appraisal of his music for wind ensemble 2006 will be an opportune year in which to play some of his music.

Bennett, the Consummate Professional

I was recently asked why I approached Richard in 1986 as my first major composer for wind ensemble Briefly, Richard is a consummate professional, with an enormous range of music ranging from grand opera to works for children, symphonies, concertos, vocal and chamber music to film, radio and theatre music, jazz, popular song and arrangements from the shows, and I knew that whatever he would write would be wonderfully crafted and possibly also inspired. Both assessments were correct, and the result, *Morning Music*, 1987, remains for me one of the greatest of over sixty works which I have commissioned in the last quarter of a century.

Early Days

Richard's father was an author, his mother a pianist and composer manqué who had studied at St Paul's School under Gustav Holst. As a child during the war Richard recalls that 'I entertained myself by pretending to write music'. He was given records of Britten, Lambert and Walton, and it was the latter who remained a strong influence in future years

His list of main works starts with his Quartet No 1 of 1951 written when Bennett was 15 By the age of 16, he was already writing twelve-note music at a time when it was disregarded by the world. The doyenne of serialism in England then was Elizabeth Lutyens. Bennett said in a preface to a concert of his works, 'Elizabeth Lutyens was the first professional composer that I ever knew... I sent some extremely infantile pieces that I'd written and got marvellous encouragement and interest from her ... she's certainly the English composer who's influenced me the most'.

His studies were at the Royal Academy of Music with Howard Ferguson and Lennox Berkeley Whilst there, as a conscious reaction against the 'Englishness' of the RAM, he attended summer classes at Darmstadt with Stockhausen, Nono, Pousseur, Maderna and Berio and later studied privately with Pierre Boulez in Paris Bennett said of Boulez: 'He was the first musician I ever met who really took me apart, who questioned everything I did, who demanded to know

why I used such and such a technique. I had always assumed that any technique was fair game for my own uses. I could not see beyond the bare bones of the technique; I was thinking theory, not music. I believe he helped me to begin to understand what kind of musical personality I had, if any'

Despite the rigorous training, informally from Lutyens and more formally from Boulez, the rebellious streak emerged yet again, and he wrote a solo piano work which was a reaction against the abstract scheme of total serialisation. Serialism for Bennett was to be a device to underpin his fecund imagination. To an extraordinary technical facility, he allies a lyricism, a fastidious sense of form and architecture, a brilliant enjoyment of orchestral colour and an almost unique gift of communication with players and audience. If you trace his musical development over the last fifty years, you will find a consistency of purpose, a sense of architecture, a sensitivity to literature and a refreshing freedom from the academic restraints of serialism or any other "ism"

Bennett burst upon the British and international scene. As early as 1955, Donald Mitchell was writing in the *Musical Times* about Bennett's Quartet No 3, written when he was seventeen: 'Mr Bennett has long shown exceptional promise and his new quartet shows real achievement ... a very convincing and personal use of the twelve-note method. Mr Bennett should go far'

Seven years later in the same magazine, composer Nicholas Maw wrote that Richard Rodney Bennett 'possesses one of the most extraordinary talents that have arrived on the scene since the young Britten startled the world 30 years ago'. In the same year the critic of *The Times* newspaper found it surprising for our young creative artist in 'our age of stylistic confusion to have found his way and defined it with simple clarity; although his style is contemporary and serialist, he does not regard himself as a member of the *avant garde*. Mr Bennett is a serialist whose aim is to "compose serial music that sounds well".'

Bennett & Bernstein, Musical Eclectics

The breadth of Bennett's tastes in music and composition echoes for me that of Leonard Bernstein. I would love to know how the two got on back in 1968 when Berstein premièred Bennett's Symphony No 3, a commission from the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. 'A resounding interpretation by Leonard Bernstein reflected an active and questioning mind, a masterly technique in construction and scoring, and a musical message both logical and precise' wrote Denis Stevens in the *Musical Times*. A year earlier, the critic Robert Henderson wrote that Bennett was 'a brilliant practical musician, equally at home in the world of modern jazz ... arguably the most prodigiously talented composer of his generation'

He began writing music for films in the fifties, and has continued for the past five decades to compose for theatre, cinema and television. He was nominated for an Oscar for the score of *Murder on the Orient Express*, and his most recent films have included *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. His operas include *The Mines of Sulphur* and *A Penny for a Song*, both commissioned by Sadlers Wells Opera, and *Victory* commissioned for Covent Garden.

The Battle over Serialism

I first came across his music in the seventies, when I played in the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra in the première of his piano concerto. Like most of his major works, it is couched in a kind of free-wheeling serialism but with an inherent lyricism and extraordinary use of orchestral colour. I was immediately captivated by the sound world, an idiom which was instantly recognisable twenty years later when I premièred *Morning Music* at the World Association of Symphonic Bands and Ensembles' Conference in Boston.

In an edition of the WASBE Journal of 1998, the Editor wrote that 'The twelve-tone school was of course a return to maths. This school is now completely dead and forgotten – how many compositions from the fifty years of twelve-tone music will be performed forever? One can count them on one hand.'

This is of course complete rubbish. It is not the system that is inherently unmusical and dead. It is the boring academic music which some composers write. The critic Felix Aprahamian gives the secret of Bennett's approach to serialism in a perceptive review of his Violin Concerto: 'a worthy successor to the Piano Concerto ... the poetic fantasy resides in the music which itself stems from poetry, for each of the work's two extended movements reflect quotations from Herrick. Bennett's twelve-tone allegiance or formal cerebration, like Berg's, is secondary to the total clarity with which an expressive message of poetic mood is communicated.'

There is nothing cerebral about the results of Bennett's compositional methods. Bennett's use of twelve-note techniques, like that of Alban Berg, communicates directly to me in a way in which that of Webern fails to do. In his sleeve notes for the RNCM recording of the three major works, Michael Graubart writes of Bennett and his colleague Irwin Bazelon, and their 'ability to write vivid, approachable, communicative music often employing jazz idioms which yet uses dissonant harmonies, complex polyrhythms and aspects of 12-tone technique, and their ability to move effortlessly between film and TV music and serious concert works'.

In the next issue of Winds, *Timothy Reynish takes a close look at the four wind band pieces.*