

THE MUSIC OF PHILLIP



Phillip Cooke

As I write, the media are in a frenzy of discussion about the lockdown activities in Downing Street and what may or may not be in the ‘party-gate’ report of the civil servant, Sue Gray. In the absence of any actual knowledge of the report’s contents, a symphony of speculation has developed on the theme of political integrity. Surrounded by this current noise whilst trying to get to the heart of the composer Phillip Cooke, his own honesty and modesty seems to leap out. “I wish composers were more honest. One of the first things I say to students is, ‘Don’t make myths about composition’. Writing music is *hard*. It’s difficult because I quite often don’t like writing music. It’s horrible! I wish I did something like build stone walls or plant trees.” The remark seems to echo Malcolm Arnold’s famous desire to ditch music for bus driving. Despite this, Cooke has a catalogue of over 50 choral works, along with some strikingly original works for organ.

He describes himself simply as a ‘British composer’, in a manner which doesn’t seem to do justice to the breadth of his activities and experiences. Born in the Lake District, his student years took him to Durham and Manchester, before moving to Wales for a doctorate in composition at Cardiff University under Anthony Powers. A prestigious junior research fellowship at The Queen’s College Oxford followed, along with a teaching post at Eton College, before he moved

to his current home as a Senior Lecturer at the University of Aberdeen.

I ask him what he’s learnt about ‘British’ music from his travels around the isles. “I’m a Northerner with many interests in the south, and the ‘British’ label links back to a period of music history and cultural thought that was ostensibly British, and that’s a link to a tradition that I feel very comfortable with. As an English person living in Scotland, I do think about it a lot... Living in the Lakes, I always felt the Scottish influences coming down, far more strongly than any southern ones.” This comes through not only in his music, but also in his many writings, as Cooke is as much of a musicologist as a composer, having co-edited a volume of essays, *The Music of Herbert Howells*, along with a superb monograph on the music of James MacMillan.

“Some of my favourite research moments have come from writing about Scottish history, and it was on my doorstep. So, for example, MacMillan wrote about the disaster on the Piper Alpha oil platform (*Tuireadh*) and the memorial for that disaster is ten minutes from the university; the witch trial which forms the basis of *The Confession of Isobel Gowdie* is half an hour up the road, so the sense of being embedded in that research is quite satisfying.”

COOKE Dr Jonathan Clinch

This desire to feel ‘embedded’ by a sense of place comes through when Cooke talks of his first experience of hearing the music of Herbert Howells. “When I moved to Gloucestershire, I was absolutely intoxicated by the musical links. There just happened to be a concert in the village of Sedbury where I lived. Living there, I was conscious for the first time of what it might mean to be English, especially when I was going into Cardiff and experiencing elements that were anti-English.” This encounter with Howells was crucial as Cooke now sees himself within that English pastoral tradition, albeit with elements of the Lake District as well as Gloucestershire. “It’s an intangible link, I don’t write tone poems, or think about larks or bluebirds, but the tradition element gets me out of bed in the morning. I want to contribute to that.”

More recently, as elements of Scottish culture have become more apparent in Cooke’s music, he reflects: “I’m an onlooker, rather than this being part of my heritage. And I feel the same about church music, and it’s OK to be looking in, from a different viewpoint.” He didn’t set foot inside a cathedral until he was an undergraduate at Durham, but the experience of concerts in that vast space, such as those with the organist Ian Hare and another with the composer Arvo Pärt (in the same week), was ‘an awakening’. Compositionally, however, Cooke was following a much more avantgarde diet from late Stravinsky to a host of living composers including George Benjamin and Oliver Knussen. “That kept me going to the end of my PhD, and then I changed completely. It was not for me.”

So where did this overnight change of direction come from? “Oxford! Being there, purely from being asked to write pieces for so many choirs. And before I knew it, I had a body of work and a sea-change of aesthetic which fitted with my own interests in Howells and Vaughan Williams and the like. It’s a decision that I’ve never regretted because I’ve had far more of an impact and many, many more performances than I would have had with my initial music. By 2008, 90% of my music was instrumental and orchestral, now it’s 90% choral, organ and song. I’m certainly not yearning to write a violin concerto.

“Looking back at my PhD work, I was clearly desperate to write the music I write now. I was constantly sneaking in ‘ironic’ modal sections and quotations into my pieces. It was so good to break away from that. Now it’s perfectly acceptable to write in a softer, modal way.” He quotes MacMillan talking about tradition as ‘a river running through music’, a thread which binds it all together with a shared cultural outlook, all working within that heritage which continues into the future. “As a composer, I’m certainly not at the end of the journey. Working within a tradition doesn’t mean preserving it, it means adding to it and trying to invigorate it... It would have been great to be a composer working in the 1960s or ’70s with all the funding and such a clear idea of the area you were working in, but actually now, at this moment, I feel we’ve moved beyond that dogmatic era into a more pluralist one where I can recommend diverse listening from, say, Vaughan

Williams, Elliott Carter and Stockhausen, and students will accept it all.”

In the field of choral music, however, we often encounter music that clearly aspires to the modal sound-world of Howells or Vaughan Williams but falls significantly short. How do students avoid this? “I always ask, ‘What is it about this piece that says *written in 2022?*’ – Contemporary music doesn’t have to sound like anything in particular, but it needs that awareness of what’s happening now and what’s gone before.” That’s a high aspiration, but listening to Cooke’s recent work, it’s clear that he’s carved out a very distinctive voice of his own.



Queen's College Oxford, East end of the chapel - Photo: Rex Harris

His motet for The Sixteen, *Ave Maria, mater Dei* (2017), is a response to William Cornysh’s setting in *The Eton Choirbook*. Cooke uses an SATB choir and two off-stage sopranos to create ethereal echoing to the main choir’s chant-like phrases, along with resonant humming effects and rhythmically independent elements. The motet certainly sits in the same ecstatic visionary tradition of unaccompanied Howells or Holst, but there are elements of spiritual minimalism and the elemental power of Henryk Górecki, John Tavener or the work’s dedicatee, James MacMillan. Listening to the choir of King’s College, Aberdeen, in the magical opening of *O lux beata Trinitas* (2013), it’s clear that Cooke has a highly developed ear for sonority. These are not just the ubiquitous cluster-chords upon which so much contemporary choral writing depends, but harmonic units where the voice-leading drives the seemingly static music forward. This sense of forward motion pervades the glorious secular anthem *The World on Fire*, commissioned by the choir of The Queen’s College Oxford for their recording *A New Heaven*, which sets remarkable diary fragments from Jackie Stedall, former university lecturer in the history of mathematics and fellow of Queen’s – ‘The world on fire, not the fire of destruction, but of energy, creation, love. Burning in every moment.’



King's College and chapel, Aberdeen
Photo: University of Aberdeen

In 2013 the chapel choir of Selwyn College in Cambridge under Sarah MacDonald recorded a CD on Regent Records which gives a wonderfully immersive experience of Cooke's writing, from the morning and evening services to the substantial secular work, *The Hazel Wood* (2012), which sets W B Yeats's famous poem *The Song of Wandering Aengus* from his 1899 collection *The Wind Among Reeds*. "I was taken by the inherent drama in Yeats's verse, from the passion and obsession of the opening lines ('a fire was in my head'), the years of searching, the revealing of the girl and then the final nostalgic reminiscences – it felt like a grand narrative, a story that had to be told, and one that would benefit from music." Certainly the addition of a brass quintet to choir and organ makes for a very dramatic setting of over 12 minutes.

Cooke's largest work is the 2015 oratorio *Noah's Fire*, which was commissioned by the Chester Music Society for their 70th anniversary. Having written two earlier works for their youth choir (*Jabberwocky*, 2010 and *Far-Away Music*, 2012), this was a natural succession, and Cooke consciously saw the musical mystery play in the 'British oratorio tradition' as heard in works by Elgar, Walton and Britten.

Although fewer in number, Cooke's compositions for solo organ also capture this flare for sonority, harmonic colour and dramatic form. They include the *Elegy* (2003), *Prelude & Lament* (2012), *Praeludium* (2013), and *In modo elegiaco* (2014, rev. 2020). His recent *Hymn Tune Prelude on 'Rhosymedre'* (2019) is clearly a nod to Ralph Vaughan Williams, but with a more modern voice. My favourites would have to be *Exsultet* and the *Epitaph* (both from 2014). The brilliant ringing of super-imposed major triads gives *Exsultet* the triumphant energy of Kenneth Leighton's music as it evokes the lighting of the paschal candle during the Easter Vigil. In contrast, the elegiac *Epitaph* achieves a remarkable stillness as it explores a particular minor-ninth sonority, touching upon the works of the dedicatee, fellow composer John Tavener. Cooke writes: 'Although *Epitaph* has few similarities with his work, there is something of the deep benevolence of his music that informs mine'.

His most recent works include a ten-minute *Fantasia* for organ – 'a transfiguration of a motet of mine, *Veni Sancte Spiritus* (2012)' – and a choral motet *Canticum Mariae virginis* (2021)

for the Marian Consort, which will be recorded in 2022 for a new CD release. Beyond the world of choirs and organs, readers may also enjoy his recent piano arrangement of *The Turtle Dove*, written during the Covid lockdown for the pianist Duncan Honeybourne.

For those wanting to explore further, his website (www.PhillipCooke.com) is a gift. Not only has he made the majority of his works freely available for PDF download, but there are links to recordings and a wealth of programme notes. He also writes a very interesting blog; "I try to give an honest take on it all, to demystify being a composer, to be a voice of normality" – so there are pieces on *not* getting commissions, *not* being an organist (or a conductor or a singer), writing in isolation, dealing with creative block, and all sorts of other personal matters, alongside broader reflections on works by other composers. Visitors will be richly rewarded.



Photo: Rachel Goodhand

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*Interior of the chapel at King's College, Aberdeen
Photo: University of Aberdeen*