

A SONG ON THE END OF THE WORLD

Phillip Cooke



Francis Pott

Photo: Rumel Mitchiniov Photography

Francis Pott (b. 1957) is one of this country's most distinctive and original composers, with a distinguished corpus of works which represents an individual artistic voice, honed over 35 years through a lifetime of performance and the study of music. Pott's compositional style is multi-layered: on the one hand instantly recognisable, with a distinctive thumbprint to each work which shows the hand of both a master technician and a craftsman; on the other, his work can often be elusive and ephemeral, with beautifully wrought choral miniatures vying with grand oratorios which interrogate the very nature of human existence. His music asks important questions of the contemporary world and doesn't shy away from tackling difficult issues, but conversely it is through the synthesis and assimilation of previous models, styles and philosophies that Pott seeks to engage with modern society. His music may be viewed as traditional, conservative or perhaps even reactionary when considered alongside that of some of his contemporaries, but there is an eclecticism and a 're-encountering' of tradition that make his work anything but regressive, and these showcase a composer very much in the zeitgeist of contemporary British music.

Pott's musical upbringing is steeped in the tradition in which his work now sits: a chorister at New College Oxford in the 1960s, he was then a scholar at Winchester College and followed this with a degree at Magdalene College Cambridge. Although this background could have been stifling for some composers, it is not true of Pott, who found the experience of being a chorister 'the cornerstone of my development as a composer, having first awakened my awareness both of composers in general and of composition as a pursuit'. It was whilst at New College that Pott was initiated into the mix of ancient and modern that characterises his later aesthetic, both through the regular services the choir undertook (with the repertoire from Byrd to Leighton and everything in between) and through the artworks present in the chapel and antechapel. Here, El Greco's *St James the Greater* rubs shoulders with Jacob Epstein's *Lazarus* (1947-48), which has a contorted angularity but this, with its conventional form, was an obvious influence to the nascent composer. However, the regular performance of English Renaissance masters such as Tallis and Byrd had the greatest effect on Pott; they engendered the beginnings of the complex modal polyphony that characterises his mature output.

The early 1980s saw Pott's first tangible successes on a national stage. There were two competition wins by two different works for organ (the instrument has been a prominent part of the composer's oeuvre throughout his career): *Mosaici di Ravenna* won the 1981 Gerald Finzi Trust National Composition Award and *Empyrean* won the 1982 Lloyd's Bank National Composition Award. Both these works are still part of Pott's recognised output, with the composer acknowledging them as 'beginning to develop something approaching a personal idiom'. The 1980s also found Pott embarking on his first commissioned work, *Nunc natus est altissimus* ('Now the most high is born'), a four-movement sequence for soprano voices and harp that was premiered by the choristers of Christ Church Oxford at St John's Smith Square in 1983. The work was commissioned as a companion piece to Britten's *A Ceremony of Carols* and, despite some striking deviations from the earlier piece, Britten's offering is never far away and looms over the newer work like a benevolent ghost. However, *Nunc natus est altissimus* had a lasting impact on Pott's later work

in two ways: first, that the text of the second movement (an anonymous 14th-century offering) was re-acquisitioned and re-used to great effect in the much more substantial *A Song on the End of the World* from 1999, and secondly, that it was the first instance of the composer collating, combining and interpolating different texts for dramatic and narrative effect, something that characterises his later, mature output.



Another facet of Francis Pott's musical development was encountered in the late 1980s when he became a lay clerk in the choir of the Temple Church, London, a position he held from 1987-1991. Unlike many composers of his generation, Pott has been a prominent performer throughout his career, either as a choral singer (he followed his spell at the Temple with a decade in the Winchester Cathedral choir) or as a pianist, and this has had an impact on his artistic life both practically and philosophically. Today, he is most well known for his choral music, honed by his years of singing, and this has given him access to some of the country's leading choirs and organists, including performers with whom he has regularly collaborated from his earliest works to current commissions. Like his experiences as a chorister, Pott's years as a lay clerk have had a strong bearing on the direction and development of his work – what he refers to as 'a long process of osmosis and critical reaction' – refining his compositional aesthetic and his technical prowess with every subsequent piece. Alongside his work as a performer, Pott has juggled academic commitments with his compositional career (like many contemporary composers), first as the John Bennett Lecturer in Music at St Hilda's College Oxford (a position he held from 1992-2001) then as Lecturer and later Professor of Music at London College of Music (a position he holds to this day).

Pott's music is characterised primarily by its polyphonic and contrapuntal textures, not merely as surface-level decoration to a simpler underlying progression but as the very fabric of each composition: a thorough, almost compulsive procedure that moves beyond the ambitious to a *tour de force* of compositional technique. The effects are often bewildering in both their technical complexity and their artistic beauty, with works from the briefest motet to the grandest statement all exhibiting the same expertise and attention to detail. Pott is aware of how important the polyphonic aspect of his work is to his music in general and how it distinguishes him from his contemporaries: 'Counterpoint is important, but it is partly a matter of looking around and thinking, "This is an area where I can be me because there aren't too many other people jostling for space."' Certainly, with the current



Francis Pott is 2nd row from back, centre, with Winchester Cathedral choir at Fleury July 1984
Photo: John Crook

vogue for contemporary choral music to be slow, static and homophonic, Pott's music feels of another age: not necessarily of a distant era of complex polyphony, but of a time when the horizontal aspect of a work was as important as the vertical, and composers gave credence to the technical rigour underpinning even the shortest piece. Like many aspects of his compositional voice, Pott's love and mastery of counterpoint sprang from his earliest musical experiences, filtered again through his career as a performer: from the singing of Byrd's *Laudibus in sanctis* to the playing of Bach's *Orchestral Suites* at the piano and the early introduction to the adroit polyphony of Kenneth Leighton, all these pointing in the direction of a renewed, contrapuntal musical language.

The 1990s found Pott writing more and more intricate and expressive works for the Anglican Church, many as commissions from some of the leading cathedral choirs and choral foundations. Two of the most impressive were substantial anthems for double choir and organ: *Turn our captivity, O Lord* (1993) and *Bring us, O Lord God, at our last awakening* (1995). These two works (and a host of other motets, carols and anthems from the period) could easily paint the picture of Francis Pott as a parochial Anglican composer, found mostly in the choir stalls or the organ loft, but this wouldn't do justice to the aesthetic and philosophical journey that the composer was beginning to undertake in the late 1990s. This journey reached its culmination in one of his most significant works, the oratorio *The Cloud of Unknowing* from 2005.

The late 1990s saw the composition of arguably Pott's most high-profile commission to date, the oratorio *A Song on the End of the World* that was the Elgar Commission for the 1999 Three Choirs Festival in Worcester. This hugely ambitious work, scored for large choir, orchestra, and soprano, mezzo-soprano and baritone soloists, traverses seven substantial

movements in its 70-minute span. Although the piece is greatly indebted to the English oratorio tradition (including Elgar's own contributions), it is a work that is focused in a much more contemporary way than an august commission from a venerable festival might suggest: it is a sacred piece at its heart, but one that asks difficult yet pertinent questions about faith, suffering and redemption. It is one of many pieces in the composer's *oeuvre* in which carefully chosen texts are combined to create a powerful narrative that underpins a composition, a theme that has carried on in Pott's work to the present.

If one piece represents most fully Francis Pott's work, philosophy and aesthetic it is his oratorio *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which was premiered by the Vasari Singers (tenor James Gilchrist, organist Jeremy Filsell), and conducted by Jeremy Backhouse at the 2006 London Festival of Contemporary Church Music. The piece draws together many of Pott's experiments and discoveries from the previous 20 years in a dramatic and affecting form, asking deep questions of performers and audience alike in its 90-minute arch. Originally conceived as a more modest offering, it quickly swelled to something much more substantial and epic: by negotiated agreement it would end up four times the length of the original commission proposal! As in *A Song on the End of the World*, sacred texts form the framework of the narrative, but again these are augmented by judiciously chosen secular fragments and poems which shine a light on the darker recesses of man's inhumanity to his fellow man. It is a work of great significance in the composer's output, and one that continues to speak to its audiences nearly 15 years after its premiere.

Pott's stock has continued to rise in the years after *The Cloud of Unknowing*, with more performances, recordings, publications and commissions creating an impressive corpus of works.

Though his reputation may seem to hang on his larger, weightier compositions, it may well be on his slighter works that his legacy depends. In recent years Pott's expanding collection of Christmas carols has found a place in the repertoire of many choirs across the country, with multiple recordings of pieces paying testament to the lasting success of this. Perhaps the most successful has been *Balulalow*, probably best known in Britten's setting from *A Ceremony of Carols*. Pott's *Balulalow* was written in 2009 for long-term collaborators Judy Martin and the choir of Dublin's Christ Church Cathedral. Over the last ten years it has had countless performances, and seven commercial recordings from the likes of leading groups such as Voces8, the Gabrieli Consort and Commotio. Although short, the work acts as a microcosm of Pott's style and compositional concerns, as *The Gramophone* remarked in 2016: 'A minutely wrought harmonic structure combined with an ingenious use of compositional techniques ... to construct a piece that stands up to rigorous technical scrutiny, while retaining a strong appeal to the human side of any listener thanks to the warm tonality of its melodies and their harmonisations.'

As Francis Pott enters his seventh decade, his creativity and ambition show no sign of abating. Semi-retirement from an academic post in September 2018 has given the composer more time for some large-scale projects that have been gestating for over a quarter of a century. In a musical climate where choral music is enjoying a renaissance and sacred texts are almost a *lingua franca* amongst certain composers, Pott's work has an engaged audience and is an important voice to be heard. With 'tradition' no longer being a dirty word to

artists and ensembles, composers who look to embrace and assimilate traditional models, forms and ideas are increasingly in vogue and it is to be hoped that the work of Francis Pott will continue to resonate with contemporary audiences for a long time to come.



PHILLIP COOKE is active as a composer and academic with regular performances of his work across the UK and further afield from the likes of *The Sixteen*, the BBC Singers and many cathedral choirs. He was the co-editor of *The Music of Herbert Howells* in 2013 and has just completed the first study of James MacMillan's work, which will be published by Boydell & Brewer in 2019. He is currently Senior Lecturer in Composition and Head of Department at the University of Aberdeen. www.phillipcooke.com

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