

Inclusive Creativity – Derry~Londonderry – 15 June 2013

Ian Ritchie – keynote speech

## IN QUEST OF BEAUTY

I am delighted to be here in Derry~Londonderry at this time and to be sharing this space with so many friends and colleagues with whom I have enjoyed fruitful, transformative encounters and collaborations, in some cases for many years. I really appreciate the continuity that this Inclusive Creativity conference provides: only last year, I led a two-day event under the banner of *Level Playing Field*, including a conference very closely related to this one and embedded in the very heart of the 2012 City of London Festival; some of the inspiration for that came from Northern Ireland and Frank Lyons' previous work, which was also concerned with the 'level playing field' and particularly the way in which new technology in support of composition and performance can embrace a wider range of abilities in making music at the highest level. So thank you, Frank, and the Derry~Londonderry 2013 City of Culture, for maintaining this vital continuum in the creative development of music.

I am also really pleased to be back here, because a five-year journey began when I first came to Derry with colleagues from other City of London institutions to meet in conference with interested cultural and educational parties. I was here then, and I have returned several times since, to discuss our two Cities' desire to mark 400 years of shared history in 2013 in an appropriately creative manner and support the wider aspiration of Derry~Londonderry one day to become a 'City of Culture'. Our determination to work together actually pre-dated Derry's bid to be the first UK City of Culture: I gave my commitment back then in 2008 to devote my final City of London Festival in 2013 not only to the themes of conflict and resolution, and to trees – following naturally in the wake of my programmes about birds, bees and flowers – but also to focus on a special artistic partnership between our cities. The combination of your city's winning this accolade and the coincidence of 2013 being such a significant anniversary has profoundly enriched these collaborative intentions and the programme of my Festival, which kicks off in just a week's time, with several Derry~Londonderry elements to look forward to in the City of London.

Now I want to speak to you about *beauty*, which I believe to be the quest of every artist and perhaps of most human beings, without realising it. In the course of what I shall say, drawing upon my experiences over the years and especially recently, you may be forgiven for wondering why I am apparently speaking at a tangent to the core concerns of this conference, and doing so in the manner of a generalist rather than a specialist. Well, 'tangent' is the important word here because I hope it will mean that I shall be still in touch with the central issues while travelling around them and presenting their context. For this event is all about inclusivity and therefore needs the big picture in its wholeness – and I am not ashamed to be the non-specialist traveller through this beautiful arcadian landscape of music and its sister arts. So please bear with me.

I may not manage to give a brilliant and clear definition of what is meant by *beauty*, because others' efforts to do so have already filled libraries, but I do make the sweeping assertion that beauty is inseparable from art. I talked about this subject in an after-dinner speech to the Berlioz Society a couple of years ago, when the subject of their annual meeting was the relationship between Berlioz and the works of Shakespeare: I pointed out that when the composer encountered the actress Harriet Smithson for the first time, playing Shakespeare, he saw the playwright's genius absolutely personified in this woman – art and beauty merged into one.

Looking back over my own artistic journey and to the mid-70s when I was still harbouring ambitions to sing professionally, the realisation gradually but painfully dawned on me that I was not destined to be the next Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau or even to scale the foothills of his Mount Olympus! So I went to work for Universal Edition as Promotion Manager and I found myself steeped in some of the most difficult and incomprehensible music ever written. I grew to know it, to like much of it and even to love some of it. This was the late 1970s, a time when the three cornerstones of what Benjamin Britten described as music's sacred triangle – the composer, the performer and the audience – had never been more alienated each from the other. For all their tearing up historic conventions, using new vocabulary and redefining aesthetics, I still believe that those mould-breaking composers, the very antithesis of Britten, were nevertheless in pursuit of beauty of one kind or another – for the simple reason that they were artists.

Back in 1983, before heading north to run the Scottish Chamber Orchestra in 1984, I spent a year as Artistic Director of the City of London Festival, to which I would return

more than 20 years later. It was then that I first came under the spell of the poet Byron and came close to pulling off a rare production of dramatic poem, *Manfred*: I was defeated finally not by the near impossibility of staging this work but in the struggle to find the last bits of sponsorship on which the Festival depended – and nothing has changed in that respect, I must say. But two summers later, in the mid 1980s, I travelled to Switzerland, for the first time finding myself in the shadow of the Jungfrau, where *Manfred* was set and, indeed, created. This place, I discovered, was one of the cradles of Romanticism and epitomised the quest for beauty: it was not only Byron who stopped here and then passed through this beautiful landscape, but also Goethe, Wordsworth and Turner who came before him and the likes of Mendelssohn, Schumann, Liszt, Tchaikovsky, Wagner, Nietzsche – the list goes on – who followed in their footsteps.

Byron had just spent several weeks with the Shelleys on Lake Geneva in creative ferment and wrestling with Prometheus, half man and half god: Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* found its time again as the Greek gods came to symbolise the heroic human potential of late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe; Goethe, Beethoven and others had already picked up this theme and, in those intense weeks on Lake Geneva, Mary Shelley created her *Frankenstein: Or, the Modern Prometheus*, Percy embarked on *Prometheus Unbound* and Byron wrote his own *Prometheus*. His poem was relatively restrained by comparison with the unfettered personal outpouring which immediately followed, his *Manfred* (or Man Freed, as he surely meant it). This great but rambling self-reflection, set on the slopes of the Jungfrau from which the poet in his remorse threatens to throw himself into the valley below, shows Byron's brand of romanticism at its most over-reaching.

Some years later Robert Browning wrote these lines in one of his poems: "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, Or what's a heaven for?" Whilst Byron tended to go too far, Browning offers a more manageable romanticism which reaches into the beyond but without over-balancing, and his words should be the mission statement for all of us who work in the arts. When I return to the Jungfrau region every summer I can virtually sense the ghosts of the great artists who had travelled there before: on my 2007 visit I was actually accompanied by a poet, a composer and a photographer and we went to the very place where Byron and others stopped and gazed at the great mountain; the idea was to create something new and I gave them each a copy of *Manfred* as their only preparatory homework. The following summer, in the 2008 City of London Festival, we

premièred the resulting new piece, a melodrama depicting Byron's early 19<sup>th</sup> century journey from London in disgrace to Switzerland and the Jungfrau, then on to Italy.

Later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Nietzsche followed exactly these same paths through the Swiss Alps, stopped to gaze at the Jungfrau mountain and even tried his hand at composing some piano music as he sat there – entitled *Manfred Meditation*, as a tribute to Byron. He sent the result to Wagner who apparently rolled around on the floor in helpless laughter, which I find hard to picture. In his *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, Nietzsche argues that the tragedy of Ancient Greece was the highest form of art due to its mixture of both Apollonian and Dionysian elements into one seamless whole, allowing the spectator to experience the full spectrum of the human condition. Apollo and Dionysus, not Prometheus, are the Olympian gods which bring us to the heart of the matter, I feel. Great art has surely always required emotion, expression and extroversion – the Dionysian – to coexist with form, structure and containment – the Apollonian: true beauty springs from both of them.

Last year, 2012, was the City of London Festival's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. I decided to use this opportunity to place the very issues which we are addressing this weekend at the heart of the Festival and on the highest-profile platform that we could offer within the City: so we ran a two-day event of performances, workshops, outdoor activities and a conference in and around the City's Guildhall itself – the *Level Playing Field* which I mentioned at the beginning. This included the official 50<sup>th</sup> birthday concert itself, at which the City's bigwigs, ambassadors, politicians and cultural opinion-formers rubbed shoulders with the paying public. The works I chose for this occasion included the London première of an extraordinary new piece which I had seen in 2009 at its first performance in Sweden; I went at the insistence of its music director, the remarkable trombonist, composer and conductor Christian Lindberg, and was bowled over. It is called *Dawn of Galamanta*, was premièred in Stockholm's Central Station and, by any standards was a wonderful, groundbreaking new piece. I hope that Sophia Alexandersson will find time to tell you more about this in her talk later this afternoon: it was developed by Share Music Sweden over a period of two years as a collaboration between physically disabled artists of all disciplines working with able-bodied musicians of the Swedish Wind Ensemble, under the guidance of Lindberg and an equally inspiring choreographer. I will never forget one point in the show, when an actress came to the front of the stage, rose out of her wheelchair, struck an extraordinary pose and captivated the audience with a gesture which said "I am

beautiful” – so she was, for all of us in the audience, and the same was true of the work as a whole.

Over the past 17 years I have been involved with two particular projects, initially unrelated, in which new musical instruments have been developed using the latest technologies to enable people with very limited movement to make music: for adults potentially at the highest professional level as well as for young people in school or special centres. The first of these has involved the fine musician and former trumpeter, Clarence Adoo, whose inspiring presence we have experienced after lunch. I first met him while I was doing a substantial piece of work for the Northern Sinfonia not long after Clarence, an important member of the orchestra, had sustained his dreadful accident on his return from a concert. Not to be defeated, this remarkable man has been determined to continue to make music and, with some help from a new charity called Carnyx & Co, which I set up with the trombonist John Kenny, with the inventive genius and generosity of the scientist-composer Rolf Gehlhaar, who unfortunately cannot be with us this weekend, and with the support of many of Clarence’s musical colleagues, we have been able to witness the development of an instrument for him to play, specially designed for him and drawing upon advanced technology: as you have seen and heard, this is called *Headspace* and has also given its name to Clarence’s ensemble of professional brass playing colleagues, for which new music has been specially written.

It was not until ten years after that accident that Clarence had the opportunity to return to the professional platform, playing his new instrument and, of course, a brand new work composed especially for it by John Kenny, for the closing concert of the 2005 St Magnus Festival in Orkney, which I was directing. Seven years later, Nigel Osborne was among the composers who wrote specially commissioned music for Clarence and his Headspace Ensemble to perform during last year’s City of London Festival, as part of our wider exploration of the aesthetic and creative opportunities to be found at this new musical frontier. In the process, which included a happy merger of the Headspace and Skoog technologies, his instrument was developed further to rise to the new musical challenges and opportunities.

I should mention, by the way, that some initial financial support for Headspace came from Diageo, the Scottish drinks conglomerate, who 20 years ago funded the commissioning of a new work by Nigel Osborne for the Carnyx, a 2000-year-old Celtic war trumpet

resurrected and performed by John Kenny, together with string quartet and pre-recorded tape, for a festival I started in the Highlands. Following this we set up Carnyx & Co and it is a delicious irony that a brand new instrument for a brass player in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can claim part of its ancestry from a rediscovered lip-reed instrument from the Bronze Age!

The second of the two developments a new musical instrument, which I mentioned, involved me in a supervisory role on behalf of NESTA who funded it. It took place in four Scottish local authorities as an extended action research programme, involving young people in special education, their teachers and workshop leaders, under the leadership of Nigel Osborne and with the central involvement of scientists at Edinburgh University: these included Ben Schogler and David Skulina who have continued to develop and produce the resulting instrument – the Skoog. Ben will have been able to tell you a great deal more about this. I felt that it was really important for this game-changing new software to belong to a lovely instrument, more than just an ordinary computer with lots of wires sticking out, and designed to be something of which a young musician could be as proud to take out of its case as if it were a Stradivarius violin or a golden flute. And, for the observer-listener, what you see is part of what you hear. The Skoog is indeed not only a scientific breakthrough in its infinite capacity to be expressive but also a beautiful object to be learned, mastered and appreciated.

It is of course a matter of vital importance to music and musicians to carry this research, development and practice onwards and outwards, beyond schools, day centres and other private spaces – where organisations such as Drake Music have traditionally done most of their marvellous work – and into the public realm of major festivals, orchestras and concert halls. But, notwithstanding some positive exceptions, progress is still slow and we are left with a long-term challenge. The development of these and other new instruments in response to individuals' special needs not only involves more people in music making but also offers an extended palate for composers: it follows, therefore, that it should make demands too on the conservatoires to extend their teaching and orchestras to extend their instrumental range. However, just as there are only limited calls upon the expertise of a professional musician like Clarence to ply his trade in public, the pathway which might also take skilled children – with their disabilities but now armed with their special instruments – through advanced training and into the music profession is completely blocked. The jobs simply are not there and the creative imperatives that should generate the demand remain on the margins. If Berlioz was with us now, he

would surely have been as interested today in extending the possibilities of the orchestra, taking advantage of the new instruments and their latest technologies, just as he was 150 years ago.

Why has the symphony orchestra, which grew and developed continuously from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, been frozen in the shape and form that it reached a century ago? I have my own theory. Orchestras had always been directed by composers right up until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century: the triangular relationship of composer, performer and audience was alive and kicking and the profession of conducting had remained uninvented. You probably have to blame Wagner for what happened next: he was no mean conductor and, like Berlioz, was forever expanding his musical palette and championing the new instruments required to deliver the sounds he sought in his quest for beauty; but he became too busy to conduct and so encouraged his already put-upon friend von Bulow to take up the baton. Throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the conductor gained the ascendancy over the composer, pure performance became more important than rounded creativity and the economic power of music-making fell into new hands.

The effect of this has been that large areas of classical music have become virtual museum objects – much as one might appreciate the original, dust-free classical meaning of the ‘museum’ as a home of the Muses – and has caused the ossification of orchestral ensembles which can no longer readily expand or adapt to the potential creative imperatives of our composers. Worryingly, I have observed in conservatoires recently that these so-called ‘imperatives’ – the need to combine acoustic music with new technology, for example – are now not nearly so strong among young composers as they were just a few years ago. I could not get any of the Guildhall School’s student composers to engage in the *Level Playing Field* last year, even though this excellent institution was itself an official partner. This evident retreat into writing almost exclusively for long-established combinations of instruments has been economically driven and there is pressure from a growing number of directions to be musically conservative. These are factors which may go some way to explaining why Clarence, whilst engaged in excellent education work in the Northern Sinfonia’s home at the Sage, Gateshead, has no place as a professional performer, playing his new instrument among his old friends in the orchestra. So things are clearly not as they should be.

Looking on the brighter side, the work of Share Music Sweden, which gave us *Dawn at Galamanta*, is a shining example of professional integration of disabled artists at the highest level, and I cannot wait to see their new show this evening. And there are other glimmers of hope for diversity and inclusion in creative music-making: in Portugal, for instance, where I founded a music festival three years ago in the city of Setúbal, south of Lisbon. On my first visit to discuss the possibility of making this happen, I was hosted – as I am on every occasion I go there – by a local resident called Hugo O’Neill: he is Portugese, but descended from Hugh O’Neill, High King of Ulster, who left Ireland in the *Flight of the Earls* more than 400 years ago; now head of the O’Neill name worldwide, Hugo actually will be here in Derry in a few days’ time to revisit his real homeland. In the present context, this is an extraordinary coincidence, but a slight digression! In that first exploratory visit to Setúbal, I told the local leaders that I would not agree to prepare a festival programme in my own kitchen and hand it to them on a plate – an easy thing to do, but wrong – and instead I asked for a meeting with the Municipality’s directors of Education, Social Inclusion, Youth and Culture, the leaders of the different immigrant associations, who represent about 25% of the local population, and the heads of the various schools. It was a remarkably comprehensive and comprehending gathering, in which we agreed our artistic themes and identified the local needs.

Before we reached the Festival itself, I had two animateurs engaged in workshops with hundreds of young people from across the community in drumming and in song-writing, developing their skills and creating work to present in the programme several months later. With precious little money and no instruments to play, the theme of nature and the environment was a happy choice: the participants made their instruments entirely from recycled materials and there are now almost 1,000 young people learning and making their music on old paint tins, water bottles and the rest! The Festival thus fell into local ownership immediately, taking root in fertile ground and growing from there, enjoying the inspiration and nourishment of fine visiting artists and making music together at every level.

While all this was cooking, I got to know an inspirational musician from the neighbouring village of Azeitão who teaches at the school for special needs there – it is called *Rumo ao Sucesso*, which means ‘aiming to succeed’: he picked up the theme, shared it with his students and then they started to create music together. He took them on a bus trip through the beautiful local countryside of forests, hills and beaches, retracing the steps of

a great local poet, Sebastian da Gama. The result was a beautiful song-cycle which they made themselves, reflecting their natural environment, and which they performed in one of the most moving Festival concerts.

The following year these young people joined forces with the contemporary music ensemble of the City's Conservatoire – really the music school for gifted children – and together they created a musical drama for the Festival, based on a story by Hans Christian Andersen written after he had visited Setúbal (as a guest of the O'Neills as it happened) some 150 years earlier. It was a triumph and last autumn the Conservatoire was inundated with applicants to join their contemporary music ensemble, now heavily over-subscribed, simply so that they could collaborate with the special school and create work for the next Festival. The Conservatoire's Director told me that they reckon it is their own gifted students in fact who have the special needs and this project had utterly changed their lives and their agenda.

The special school's music teacher and a colleague from Setubal's Social Inclusion team came to the City of London Festival last summer for our *Level Playing Field* conference – and now they own two Skoogs, which their students are starting to learn to play. Just a month ago, in the third Setúbal Festival, those two schools for young people with special musical gifts and for those with special needs – now begging the question as to which is which! – presented their latest creative collaboration, this time joined by a choreographer from Lisbon, and the result was a fully-fledged piece of music theatre. Sitting there on the stage of the city's newly refurbished theatre was the Skoog, making its Festival debut, alongside more familiar instruments. It was played by a girl with only one arm and she had been learning it for just a few weeks – her music was simple but distinctive and, in the manner of a chaconne, underpinned much that went on around her. How long this work will be sustained, and continue to sign-post a new direction for integrated music-making, remains to be seen. But now there is this small but growing number of young musicians living in an impoverished Portugese city, the same size as Derry~Londonderry, who will hopefully take their creative and inclusive musical aspirations into their adult lives, perhaps to influence others too. The City's Mayor has meanwhile announced that Setúbal's own strategy for urban regeneration for the years ahead is rooted in the idea of becoming a 'City of Music'.

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We have already associated Berlioz and Wagner with growing the symphonic orchestra, always looking to add new instruments and promoting their development, on requests for beauty. But size is not everything. About a dozen years ago I spent a year advising another chamber orchestra that had taken up residence in Imperial College and helped to set up a joint physics and music professors partnership with Jonathan Harvey as a partnership between Imperial and the Royal College of Music. Jonathan introduced new technologies and instruments into the orchestra to expand the range of musical colours and sounds available to him. I am sure that many composers of the past would have wanted to work in this way too, had they been with us today. Unfortunately there was an unhappy ending when this adventure fell victim to the funder's axe not long afterwards. I hardly need add that, if there is any chance of unblocking the pathways for young people heading towards their dreams and established professionals, like Clarence, seeking ways back into performing careers, we must continue to make the creative case for diversity and inclusion – as I have tried to do today – for beauty's sake.

[*Heads up* film shown here - <http://disabilityarts.creativecase.org.uk/>]

**Ian Ritchie**

June 2013