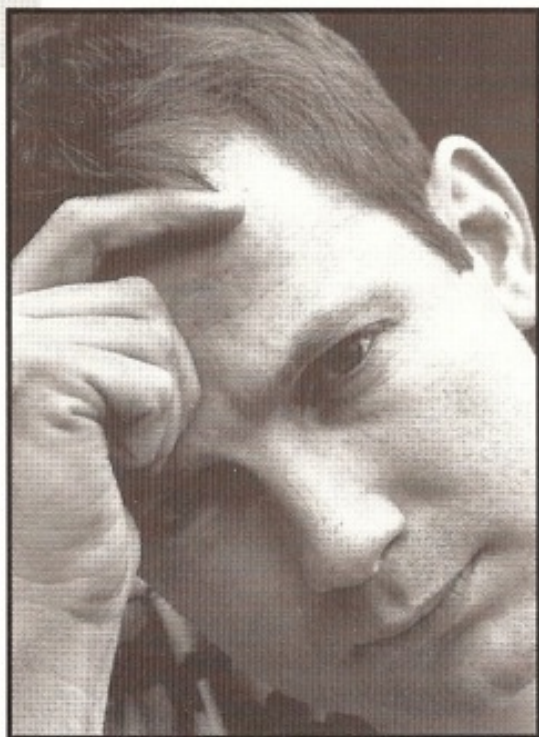


# THE PENDLE WITCHES CAST THEIR SPELL



To describe Nigel Clarke as a "late starter" would not cause eyebrows to be raised. It would, however, be an extremely careless description. It is true he did not shine at school. Indeed, he left school after having been given special permission to take O-level music a year early, which he passed albeit with something less than flying colours. This lack of academic distinction was a little curious because he was an inquisitive boy.

"I don't have any A-levels, not even in music," confesses Nigel, whose *The Pendle Witches* will receive its world premiere at the BBC Festival of Brass at 7.30pm on Sunday, February 25.

Born in Calcutta in 1960, his start in the world of music was unremarkable - cornet in the secondary school band followed by a stint with Margate Silver. He was a fairly decent player but no one enthused over his playing or suggested that, with just a little more practice, he could become a second Phillip McCann.

His parents had no background in music so obviously they were not in any position to advise him for or against.

However, the cornet was a start, and enough of a start for him to enter the Royal Marines School of Music when he was 16. Two years later he took the Queen's shilling

Alan Jenkins meets  
**NIGEL CLARKE**, the young  
composer with a fascination  
for strange subjects, most  
recently the *Pendle Witches*  
of 17th-Century Lancashire

and joined the Royal Army Medical Corps Band. Within two years he was at Kneller Hall, and just getting into his compositional stride.

Stride! - now there's a word to raise your hat to, and most apposite when describing Nigel and his many accomplishments. A member of the Belgrave Harriers, he was, some years ago, the London Army Cross Country Champion. Last year he ran in the London Marathon and this year he intends to run in the Rotterdam marathon.

Whilst at Kneller Hall he was advised that he needed some "serious lessons in composition" and was given Paul Patterson's name. Paul, head of composition at the Royal Academy of Music, didn't have time himself but he gave Nigel a telephone number.

In 1982, Nigel transferred to the Irish Guards on the understanding that he would be given a day off each week so that he could attend the Academy.

This was granted and he remained with the Guards until 1986, meanwhile studying composition with Paul Patterson. His student career was exceptional and brought him many awards and prizes including the Parker/Manson prize, which was adjudicated by Sir Michael Tippett. He also received the Academy's highest distinction, the Queen's Commendation for Excellence.

After four years with the Irish Guards, Nigel bought himself out and, in 1987, a British Council scholarship enabled him to participate in the 8th Summer School for Young Composers, which is held in Poland. Whilst there was able to study the music of Penderecki and Lutoslawski at close quarters.

Between 1987 and 1988 Nigel was the Young Composer in residence at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, writing mainly scores for drama and dance productions. This experience underlined for him how important it was for music to both motivate and inspire young musicians.

In fact, according to his publisher, Giles Easterbrook, "This had a profound influence on both his compositional outlook and approach, loosening up textures, increasing





Soaking up the atmosphere: Nigel seeks inspiration for his latest work at Pendle Hill, north Lancashire, the scene of incidents of witchcraft in 1612 which resulted in the trial and public hanging of 10 local inhabitants.



► fluency and stimulating in him a concern to compose works that are accessible to artists and listeners as well as dramatically and musically effective..."

He then returned to the Royal Academy, first as the Manson Fellow and then as Tutor for Composition and Contemporary Music. Whilst a Manson Fellow, Nigel married Stella, an amateur pianist who works for Barclays Bank.

Early on in their relationship Stella noticed that Nigel had enormous trouble writing and that his written English left a lot to be desired. So she advised him to have some tests and he was diagnosed as being "dyslexic".

Now, for sure it is an accomplishment when anyone rises above their tribulations, even when they know the precise nature of the problem. But for Nigel to rise so triumphantly above adversity whilst still in ignorance of the true nature of his disability is testimony to the strength of his character and pervasive optimism.

This remarkable attribute no doubt goes a long way to explaining why strangers immediately warm to his generous personality, even after the briefest acquaintanceship.

Happily, he has since found ways of overcoming those problems and now fully understands why his school career lacked a little academic sparkle.

During his time at the Academy as a Manson Fellow, Nigel was asked to write a six-minute piece for the trumpet, *Premonitions*, for the Leggett Awards. Martin Winter, who is now one of the country's finest professional trumpet players, played the piece and won the award.

The music was published by Novello and Nigel thinks that the publisher sent a copy to James Watson, who had been trumpet tutor at the Academy for many years. Anyway, they met and, shortly thereafter, Jim asked Nigel if he would be interested in writing a piece for a brass band. The result was the *Atlantic Toccata*, which received its premiere by Black Dyke and Jim at the 1994 BBC Festival of Brass. This led to his appointment as Composer-in-Residence of the world's most famous band.

It is an appointment that Nigel believes offers him the best of all worlds. "They were my heroes when I was a kid and I find working with them really inspirational. I believe it really is time that bands such as Black Dyke became part and parcel of the classical world.

"Working with Dyke has enabled me to compose block by block. For example, when I was writing the *Euphonium Concerto* for Robert Childs, it became an extremely rewarding collaboration. He would say, 'This is great, but what if...?' All of his suggestions were helpful to me. After all, the euphonium is his world.

"It is similar to having a suit made

**'The truth is I am prepared to listen to whoever has a constructive comment to make about my compositions because I want audiences to be excited, satisfied and intrigued when they hear my music. I would like them to want to hear it again.'**

by a tailor. First you choose the material, then you are measured and next comes the first fitting. When the suit is ready, hopefully, you will look like a million dollars. There is no point in tailors making suits that don't fit.

"Everything I do with Black Dyke is substantially enhanced by the commitment I get from the conductor and the band. Another plus is the fact that good conductors often see beyond the composers' original intentions."

In short, he believes it is close to being as



Tranquillo: Nigel Clarke and his wife Stella enjoy a moment's relaxation

ideal a situation as a composer could wish for, with the barometer factor yet a further example of the benefits that accrue when a composer has the opportunity of working in close collaboration with the performers. "If you can't convince a performer, you can't convince an audience. I also have to convince Stella, who is one of my most astute critics. The truth is I am prepared to listen to whoever has a constructive comment to make about my compositions because I want audiences to be excited,

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satisfied and intrigued when they hear my music. I would like them to want to hear it again."

Black Dyke, James Watson and the composer also collaborate at the Canford Summer School, with one of the more exciting future projects possibly including a brass band conductors' course.

Discussing Elgar Howarth's piece *Songs for B.L.*, when some responsible band members of lesser-known bands acknowledged they had trouble understanding the music - (no doubt due, in some cases, to insubstantive rehearsals) - Nigel believes that a Composers' Association could possibly provide an answer. Regional workshops to be set up for all band members interested in coming to grips with contemporary contest music.

"Of course, the problem does not entirely rest with the performers. The fact is some top composers find difficulty in writing relatively simple music. Malcolm Arnold is an exception. His *Little Suite for Brass Band* demonstrates great skill and doesn't sound in the least condescending."

In his compositions, Nigel displays a fascination for subjects and places. Two such works are *Lindisfarne Stone* for violin and piano and his *Euphonium Concerto* subtitled *The City in the Sea*.

*Lindisfarne Stone* takes as its theme the gaunt ruins of an 11th-century Benedictine priory on Holy Island, which is located off the north east coast of Northumberland.

Whereas *The City in the Sea* tells the story of how the East Anglian capital-town of Dunwich was partially engulfed by the sea following a series of violent storms in 1326. Legend has it that the bells of the nine submerged churches still ring out on stormy nights and that a ghostly procession of monks walk amongst the monastery ruins chanting ancient verses.

Most mornings Nigel is up at 4.30 anxious to play with his Sibelius 7 computer programme. "It has changed my life," he chuckles. It also has helped him to provide the Black Dyke Band members with pristine copies of *The Pendle Witches*.

Pendle Hill, in north Lancashire, was the centre of an outbreak of witchcraft in 1612, which resulted in the trial and execution, by hanging, of 10 local inhabitants.

The story's beginning has a contemporary ring to it. Once upon a time, near the town of Colne, a beggar-woman was alleged to have made a pedlar lame because he wouldn't give her money...

Ah, but no point in telling half a story. By far the best thing for the already-spellbound reader to do is to be at the Manchester Town Hall on February 25 when the unexpurgated version will dramatically unfold in what promises to be fiendishly descriptive, utterly compelling music from a man who accepted his second wind as a blessed gift. ■