

THE COMPOSER'S ANALYSIS OF SAMURAI

Samurai was dedicated to and commissioned by Timothy Reynish and the Royal Northern College of Music Symphonic Wind Orchestra for the World Association of Symphonic Bands and Wind Ensembles Conference at Hamamatsu, Japan. The world premiere was conducted by Timothy Reynish in July, 1995.

I had always told myself that I would never write a wind ensemble piece. Before going to the Royal Academy of Music to study, I had spent over eight years as a musician in the armed forces, where I was surrounded every day by the sounds of combined woodwind, brass, and percussion instruments. My unwillingness to consider writing for wind band was no reflection on my service colleagues or the music that we played. It simply came from a desire to branch out into something new.

It was not until I met Timothy Reynish at Canford Summer School of music that I was influenced by his infectious enthusiasm for wind instruments and Symphonic Wind Bands. Tim asked me to write a work for the Royal Northern College of Music Symphonic Wind Ensemble for their Gala Concert at the WASBE Conference in Hamamatsu, Japan. How could I refuse such an exciting project?

As a composer I have always preferred to focus on a particular subject. I remembered from a trip to Korea a few years ago that I had heard traditional drumming, and had been inspired by the sense of theatre and sheer ritualistic power conveyed. I knew there was a Japanese equivalent of this, and started to investigate. I had an idea that this powerful drumming could form the core of the work. In the course of my research, I found a recording of a traditional Japanese drumming ensemble, "Kodo" (Children of the Drum), and through this developed my knowledge of the traditional Japanese sound world.

As I looked into the subject further, I discovered that Japanese drumming dated back many centuries to the days of the Samurai warrior, where it played an important part in warfare. It was at this point that I decided that the work would be called "*Samurai*."

Contrary to popular belief, not all Samurai were warriors. They were highly educated people from the Japanese military ruling class, the Eastern equivalent of Renaissance men, who were just as skilled in the discipline of warfare as they were in the art of painting and music. I sought to juxtapose these two very different facets of the Samurai within the work.

Musical instruments played an important part in early Japanese warfare. On the battlefield a wide range of audible as well as visible signs were used, the most

significant of which was the *Taiko*, a large war drum. Another instrument featuring in warfare was the *Horagai*, which was a conch shell trumpet. The trumpet was sounded to tell the warriors to put their battle plan into action, and could be heard up to six miles away! When the *taiko* was heard on the battlefield, the Samurai soldiers knew they had to regroup. In ancient Japan the village boundaries were not only decided by geography, but also by the farthest distance from which the *taiko* could be heard.

Although I wrote *Samurai* in one movement, I divided it into three main sections "Signals and Flags," "The Ceremony of Departure," and "Attack." The first section represents the signalling methods used by the Samurai on the battlefield, where powerful war drumming and heraldic flags helped to identify the various units of the army. I made the central section "The Ceremony of Departure," a more tranquil movement, representing the review of the troops by the *daimyo* (aristocratic leader) and his generals before the battle, and the ritual offering of prayers presided over by a Buddhist monk. The final section returns to the powerful Samurai war drumming, signalling the attack.

I have always maintained as a composer that if you are writing new music there should be something for the listener to hold onto. I see no reason why music should not be modern, original and thought provoking on the one hand, and approachable on the other. There is nothing wrong with a composer writing music which stands a chance that performers will want to put it into their repertoire. If players are convinced by it, this should feed through to the audience.

With Tim's help I tried out musical sketches with the ensemble, and in a few cases, I had to change my ideas of what would work and what would

not. This approach to writing the work springs from my philosophy of the composer as a "tailor" working in sound. First of all you talk to the "client," (the commissioning musician, in this case Tim and the RNCM ensemble players) and help them to decide what kind of musical "suit" they require. It's no good tailor-making something that doesn't fit the client. They just won't wear it, or if they do, they will only do so once, and it is subsequently condemned to the back of the musical "wardrobe" forever. The aim at the end of the whole process is that your client has a garment that will show them off to their best. I hope I achieved this with *Samurai*.

Samurai starts off with an aggressive rhythm that occurs in many forms throughout the piece. Slowly underneath this a chord starts to form, and with the help of an *accelerando*, builds to a climax. This powerful



introduction depicts the might and military discipline of the Samurai, and reflects their war making activities. Once the climax is achieved the audience hears for the first time my version of Japanese drumming in the section entitled "Signals and Flags." The performance given by the RNCM ensemble in Japan used authentic Japanese drums, but I have made sure that a similar sound can be created using Western percussion. I create the same effect in the score by using a medium sized tom-tom and several orchestral bass drums played with snare drum sticks.

I used this traditional drumming as a backcloth for the piccolo, two flutes, Eb clarinet and xylophone to punch out a rhythmic, staccato tune which recurs throughout the work.



After this section, layer upon layer of semiquavers are introduced, forming yet another great crescendo for the ensemble and building towards an even bigger and louder climax than in the introduction. The momentum in this section is derived from sheets of sound which form an "organised chaos." To add more power and drama to this section I wrote rhythmic "shock chords" on high woodwind and low brass. This whole section comes to an abrupt halt when practically the whole ensemble comes together in a bar of semiquaver runs, followed by two quavers. This section conjures up the Samurai on horseback riding "full pelt" into battle.

Immediately after this at letter E comes a tranquil hymn-like passage in unison harmony by two flutes, two clarinets, two horns, and a tuba.



This short section is broken quickly by the tune we heard at letter B, and then the explosive chords heard in the introduction, but this time garnished with very aggressive running passages "staggered" throughout the ensemble. The work goes through many ebbs and flows, but there is no reprieve from its relentless momentum.

The slow middle section, "The Ceremony of Departures," is formed around the same hymn-like tune mentioned earlier, but this time far more oriental in flavour, and interrupted by violent interjections from the woodwind instruments. A Japanese-style flute solo, accompanied by double bass and xylophone takes over from this section at letter Q.



This is followed by piccolo, oboe, and bassoon in octaves with an accompanying rhythm given by the double bass, claves and xylophone. The percussion serves to provide an oriental backcloth throughout. Eventually this section reaches a highpoint, which fades away and brings us to the "Attack" movement. For 34 bars this is made up of pure percussion (with double bass playing pizzicato) impersonating traditional Japanese drumming.



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In April 1996 *Samurai* will receive performances by The Eastman Wind Ensemble, conducted by Donald Hunsberger, at the New York State Band Directors Association, and the National MENC Conference in Kansas City, before being toured in Japan in June. Nigel Clarke's new commission, *The Pendle Witches*, was premiered by James Watson and the Black Dyke Mills Band at the Whitworth Hall in Manchester as part of the BBC Festival of Brass.

Nigel Clarke studied with Paul Patterson at the Royal Academy of Music, where he won many awards, including the Josiah Parker Prize, and the Queen's Commendation for Excellence, the Academy's top award. He is now Composition and Contemporary Music Tutor at the Royal Academy of Music. For further information contact, Giles Easterbrook, Maecenas Music, 5 Bushey Close, Old Barn Lane, Kenley, CR8 5AU Tel: 0181 660 4766.