


Colour, collaboration and creativity



Paul Hindmarsh talks to composer Nigel Clarke about the importance of collaboration and teamwork in his writing for brass and wind band

As I sit in the Royal Albert Hall listening to the finalists in the Championship Section battle it out for the 2013 National title, performing Gregson's *Of Distant Memories*, composer Nigel Clarke will be in Dover to hear the first performance of a new virtuoso work for string orchestra, bearing the splendidly evocative title, for all lovers of the Shipping Forecast on BBC Radio 4, *Dogger, Fisher, German Bight, Humber, Thames, Dover, Wight*. This new piece tells us a great deal about the way Nigel Clarke likes to create his compositions - through creative partnerships that cross conventional boundaries. It forms part of the Grand Finale to Dover Arts Development's 18-month *War and Peace* programme and is the latest in a line of pieces commissioned by violinist Peter Sheppard Skaerved, with whom Nigel has enjoyed a long and fruitful collaboration. They met as students at the Royal Academy of Music (RAM), and in their many collaborations since and in his other writing for band and orchestra, the exploration of colour has played a crucial part.

"I write for brass instruments as if they were strings, especially in pieces like *The Flavour of Tears*, the slow movement from the Cornet Concerto *Mysteries of the Horizons*," Nigel commented in conversation last week. "When I was studying at the RAM, I used to love composers like Lutoslawski, who had interesting, colourful titles that portrayed something. I was always a bit bored by titles like Sonata No. 4! I liked titles that suggested some other imagery, a multi-sensory approach if you like, and now I always commission poetry to go alongside what I write."

For the new string piece, the accompanying poem by Marlene Sheppard Skaerved is inspired by the memories of people she encountered in Dover. On Nigel's recently-released double album of brass band pieces, *When Worlds Collide*, the complementary texts inspired by the music were by the Brussels-based poet Martin Westlake, who has also provided the poem that accompanies Nigel's latest band work, *Storm Surge*. This is the first fruit of a new residency with the Marine Band of the Royal Dutch Navy. Next year Nigel and Martin will be collaborating on a major, 45-minute creative project involving the Middle Tennessee State University Wind Ensemble, in which the text will come first.

Colour, collaboration, crossing conventional boundaries: these are what seem to drive Nigel Clarke's distinctive approach to composition. Over the past 20 years his music has developed an international dimension. He divides his time between the UK and Brussels, where his wife is a European civil servant; his music is now being heard throughout Europe and increasingly in the USA, where his concert band work is highly regarded. However, things might have been very different. Nigel is dyslexic. He struggled with the written

word at school in Margate in the 1970s, leaving at 16 with few qualifications, except a latent musical talent. The school band became a lifeline: "I went to St. John's Secondary Modern School in Margate, where the school's music teacher was a great motivator of young people. I joined the school band. We could hire instruments for practically no money at all. From Margate it wasn't very far to get over to France, and we had great fun giving concerts over there in places like Le Touquet. I held a cornet, as you might say! I was a competent 2nd or 3rd cornet player, but not really designed for all sorts of reasons to be more than that. In Malcolm Arnold's words, I was sitting there listening to what was going on around me."

There was also a strong tradition of students from the school band going into the military. Nigel heard all the best military bands in Margate's Winter Gardens or on the bandstand at Folkestone and on leaving school joined the boys' service of the Royal Marines in nearby Deal. He didn't last that long there, and moved on to the Army, where he auditioned for the Royal Army Medical Corps Staff Band, Musical Director Major Peter Parkes: "We didn't see him much, as he was always going off to conduct a brass band up in Yorkshire!" Nigel quips, "but his words to me at my audition have stuck with me. He said, 'To be very fair, you are not good enough to be in the band, but if you promise to work hard I will take a gamble on you.'" Nigel was never going to be a star cornet player, but the move into the Army was crucial in the long term, since it opened up other creative avenues. In 1982, when he was 22, he moved to the Band of the Irish Guards and was able to take advantage of the musical training on offer at Kneller Hall: "By this time I had been trying to write music of my own, and a marvellous man, Gordon Reynolds, who was organist to the Queen, was the harmony professor. I showed him some of my pieces and he said that I ought to have proper composition lessons, suggesting Paul Patterson, who was teaching at the RAM."

Nigel's first approach for private lessons didn't come off. Paul suggested someone else, but when some years later Nigel successfully auditioned to enter the RAM as a mature student, Paul Patterson did indeed become his composition teacher: "Having left school at 16, I didn't have the qualifications for what would have been a grant in those days. So I remained in the military to earn enough to pay my way through college. After a while the RAM was very helpful in that side of things as well." During the latter stages of his RAM years, Nigel got to know James Watson, trumpet professor and by then Musical Director of Black Dyke Mills Band: "I was in a lift one day and one of Jim's students asked if I had ever thought of writing for brass band. I said I was quite interested but not sure about the opportunity. That was actually an indirect request from Jim and, a little while later, he

stopped me in a corridor and said 'I hear you are interested in writing a brass band piece for Black Dyke!' That's how my association with the band started."

By then Nigel was Manson Fellow at the RAM - "in that nomadic land of earning a bit of money but still able to take advantage of the student side of things" - and had begun to be noticed as a composer, with a Queen's commendation and a number of awards and prizes under his belt. James Watson saw in Nigel Clarke a creative mind that could challenge his Black Dyke 'racehorses' as he described them. The first fruit of what was to become a six-year residency was the dynamic *Atlantic Toccata*, which I was delighted to premiere at the 1994 BBC Festival of Brass in Manchester. Listening back to that piece now, its freshness remains, despite perhaps a lack of complete conviction in the writing for band.

Two other band pieces followed, *The Pendle Witches* (1996) and *Mechanical Ballet* (1997), plus *Gwennan Gorn* (1997, for the National Youth Brass Band of Wales), but the work from that period that has endured, and which features on the new double album brilliantly played by Glenn van Looy, is the Euphonium Concerto *City in the Sea* (1996), which is an evocation of the ancient Suffolk seaport of Dunwich, the tiny remnant of which is still gradually eroding away into the North Sea. Nigel thinks that this atmospheric piece still stands up well: "I'm pleased with it. There is no other piece quite like it in the band repertoire. I wrote it for Robert Childs and in those days we didn't have email, so I would fax pages to Bob and he would then play bits of it down the telephone to me. Bob was very open to doing new and interesting things. The pedal note idea that the piece starts off with was actually one of Bob's warm-up doodlings. He would always be growling away at the bottom of the register after a concert and I remember it becoming a conversation piece. The other connection is the sound of the old Margate fog horn, that inspired the 'submerged' sounds of Dunwich." Looking back on the Black Dyke association almost 20 years on, Nigel thinks that, with the exception of *City in the Sea*, that level of exposure came a bit too soon for him in his career development and he now cautions against the current trend of appointing composers too early in their careers: "Quite a lot of people are perhaps getting the resident roles a little too early on, so they don't have the vocabulary to keep things fresh. I'm watching a generation of brass band writers - not all - who are what I call copy and paste composers. There are a lot of them out there now and they don't necessarily have fully-fledged techniques, although they can write very quickly. These days I don't choose to write quickly, but at 53, I am willing to take far more risks than I would have done 15 years ago. I want to challenge myself and see what comes out, rather than the copy and paste 'be safe'

approach. I write every piece as though it were my last one and work harder than I have ever done before."

When James Watson and Black Dyke parted company, Nigel Clarke brought his association to an end as well, but also stopped writing for brass band: "I am a very loyal person and I felt I couldn't continue writing for brass band." While brass bands might not have heard from him for nearly ten years, Nigel continued to enjoy great success writing for wind orchestra, particularly through a strong connection with the biggest name in the artistic side of the wind band scene in this country, Timothy Reynish: "The wind band has always been a happier area for me, because it isn't territorial like brass bands can be, with certain players and composers associated with certain bands. Brass banding doesn't flow sideways very easily!" Nigel's Millennium piece *Breaking the Century* has gone round the world. The colourful *Samurai* has been recorded four times. *Mata Hari* and *King Solomon's Mines* have continued the vivid technicolour trend.

The greater range in style evident in these wind band creations has much to do, in my view, with Nigel's productive engagement with film. His first foray into movie music was in 1997, for the feature starring Christopher Lee and James Fox, *Jinnah*. Since then he's been involved in over 15 films - features, children's films, and documentaries - usually in collaboration with another composer, Michael Csányi-Wills. Although he's been very successful in this area, Nigel views scoring film as the work of an artisan rather than an artist: "You are the servant of someone else. It becomes a job without any artistic freedom, but that's not to say that it's not interesting to write to order. The fun thing with writing for film is that you can be asked to write in any style, from classical to jazz and rock, and I've gained a lot



of experience working in different styles."

This wider experience is amply evident when comparing the sound worlds of Nigel's Black Dyke pieces and those from his current collaboration with Brass Band Buizingen and conductor Luc Vertommen. Texturally the music is far more complex. The harmonic palette is larger and more direct in impact. The instrumental colour is far more precisely conceived - with multiple division of parts the norm. These bespoke creations were commissioned as own-choice competition pieces, but the writing of test-pieces *per se* is of little interest to Nigel Clarke. His fascination lies in the subject matter and in the way the music is performed and appreciated. It took about 18 months of persistence and many restaurant bills on the part of Luc Vertommen before Nigel agreed to write for Brass Band Buizingen. Listening to the live contest performances of *Swift Severn's Flood* and *Earthrise*, as well as the fine studio performance of *When Worlds Collide*, it is abundantly clear that this collaboration is really working. Nigel enjoys his time with the Brass Band Buizingen players, as the increasing artistic and technical demands of the pieces he has written for them amply demonstrate. The subject matter is wide ranging, from the portrait of battle in Shakespeare's *Henry IV, part 1*, via a Space Portrait for brass band, to a re-imagining of the American cult Sci-fi movies from the 1950s. Is there a longer or wackier title in the brass band repertoire than *When Worlds Collide* (or *Little Green Men in Intergalactic Spaceships with Rayguns and Phasers*)? All three works are high on impact, colour and fresh invention. *When Worlds Collide* is a very visual work as well, in some respects a welcome antidote to the conventional and often po-faced approach to contest music. "I wanted to get away from the idea of music as a menu for adjudication," Nigel

says, "to create a piece where the conductor would have a certain amount of input beyond the composer. There are a series of choices to be made because, for me, performance is just as much about a visual element as it is an aural one. We've lost a lot of the fun in some of today's music, and I wanted to go back to some of the things that excited me in new music when I first became interested in it." Nigel is clearly thoroughly engaged and excited about developing his musical and artistic collaboration with the band from Belgium. "As a composer-in-residence, it's important that you don't keep writing the same piece. I've gone out of my way to keep things fresh and the next piece, when I get round to it, will have to be different again. It's a thrill working with a conductor of Luc Vertommen's calibre and with Brass Band Buizingen. With Luc the music always comes first and it is an invigorating musical environment to work in as a composer." As our conversation drew to a close he had some forthright comments to make on the current state of brass banding in the UK, especially with regard to artistic ambitions. "We occasionally see a football style 'hiring and firing' approach to banding, which I believe is beginning to put our great movement on the back foot compared with our continental European colleagues. Great artistic ideas and achievements take time to grow and cannot be made to happen overnight just by changing conductor. This might explain why some bands are currently stuck in the doldrums! Finding performance opportunities is a little bit easier on the continent in Norway, the Netherlands, Sweden and Switzerland, where bands seem far more open to being inventive. With the exception of events like the RNCM Festival, things have got a little bit stale here in the UK. Bands give very conservative concerts, with the excuse of pleasing their audience. But looking at the demographic of some of those audiences, you have to worry for the future."