

HERITAGE SUITE (W)

A HORN PLAYER'S DIARY OF A NEW WORK

It was quite slowly that I started to realise that the composition, first performance and recording of a new piece by Nigel Clarke, written specially for **Eynsford Concert Band**, was a big deal. I suspect that I'm not the only band member whose first reaction to the news was more of a raised eyebrow - "this should be interesting", and if we're honest, a degree of apprehension along the lines of "hope it's not going to be too weird".

As far as I can tell, the whole idea was cooked up between Nigel, John Hutchins (our conductor) and Brian Bennett (a long-standing member of our tuba section), over a number of beverages in the local pub. The resulting challenge was that Nigel would write a suite for the band that draws its inspiration from a statue in West Malling High Street. The statue is simply called 'Hope' and shows a woman moving forward with a dove about to fly from her hand. Her cloak billows behind and on the back it has eight different panels showing different scenes from the thousand year history of this charming Kent town.

The first I heard of the plan was during a cruise around Spain last August where the band was enjoying a great holiday in return for playing a few concerts to our appreciative fellow cruisers. Swelling the numbers of our trumpet section was an unfamiliar face which, on further investigation, turned out to belong to Nigel Clarke. Nigel had come along to get to know a bit more about the band and the players he was intending to write for. We were excited as, having heard my wife Jo playing her oboe, Nigel intimated that he was planning to include a solo for her in his new piece. The anticipation was beginning to build!

After the cruise things inevitably went quiet until August this year when we had a first glance at the nearly finished score. Printed on A2 paper with somewhere in the region of fifty different instrumental parts, each line was so small that it was hard to get an idea of the overall sound that would result. We immediately gained an appreciation of the enormous amount of work that Nigel was putting into this project.

A three line whip was issued for all band members to attend the rehearsal on September 1st when we would have our first chance to play Nigel's new piece. Meanwhile, Nigel was reportedly getting up at four in the morning during his holidays to complete the score.

The week before the parts arrived, John gave us an excellent introduction to the subject matter of the music, including an accompanying poem written by Martin Westlake, a friend of Nigel's, for the occasion.



The
Eynsford
Concert
Band

First Attempt, Tuesday September 1st

A first play-through of a piece is a generally nervous moment. We are each handed a pristine booklet with nine or ten pages of music. I felt especially privileged to be playing a brand new piece for the first time. None of us are sure how technically challenging the music is going to be. Maximum concentration is required to sight-read any unfamiliar piece, especially when the composer is holding a baton in front of you.

My first impression of the opening movement was that I was really going to have to get grips with double-tonguing once and for all. It's called 'Bric-à-brac Market' and has many rapidly repeated semiquavers in the brass. My present strategy of breathing too late and then doing a sort of flutter-tongue is not going to cut it.

Nigel was refreshingly open about where he had got some of his thematic ideas, noting little hints of *Petrushka* here, *Crown Imperial* there and a homage to the *Coventry Carol* elsewhere. Despite this, there was a clear individual voice at work in the music, and I suspect most of us heaved a gentle sigh that it wasn't weird at all. It's difficult to form anything other than a general impression of the music on the first play through. Most of my brain was fervently counting, watching and trying not to mess it up!

In the fifth movement, 'Warm Beer and Cricket', Nigel proved to be as good as his word, giving the

oboe a lovely rich, nostalgic theme. He even wrote a little note on Jo's instrumental part - 'Your solo - as promised'. The final movement is based on the suppression of Sir Thomas Wyatt's rebellion by Mary Tudor's forces. To recreate the sound of an army approaching from the distance we are asked to stamp and clap, sometimes simultaneously, while also trying not to drop our instruments... something else I'm going to have to practise! The movement builds to a barnstorming finish, though I think we're going to have to spend a bit of time getting the final bar together.

Over to John, Tuesday September 8th

For John, conducting a new piece is like walking a tightrope. On the one hand he wants to use his imagination to lift the music off the page; on the other he is trying to be true to what Nigel would want to achieve.

During this rehearsal, it was fascinating to see how many of the textures of the complete sound are built up. There's a glorious section just before the end of the piece where at least three very distinctive and different sounds mesh together into an optimistic, triumphant climax. It's also good to know that this is one of those pieces that just gets better the more you get to know it. I really should have practised that double-tonguing section at the start - I think I played it even worse this week!

HAT HOPE SAW)



Première at the Tithe Barn, West Malling

All Day Rehearsal, Sunday September 20th

With a première and a CD recording coming up, we needed something more than our regular Tuesday night rehearsal. Arriving at South Darenth Village Hall, it was great to see that we had a full horn section. Nigel had again taken Eurostar from his home near Brussels to see how we were getting on.

During one of the breaks, while munching on a doughnut, I asked Nigel about the second movement, 'Prayers and Plagues'. As pure music it works well, but I couldn't see the significance of the Arabic inflection at the end of the first theme. Nigel explained that during the time of the Black Death, most people would have known someone who had gone to the Middle East with the Crusades and would no doubt have been influenced by the different culture by the time they came home.

The Venue, Tuesday October 6th

Tonight's rehearsal was in West Malling, getting ourselves set up in the Tithe Barn where we are to give the world's first performance on Saturday. The barn itself is a magnificent 500 year old structure which used to be part of the nunnery that was founded nearly a thousand years ago. What a fantastic place to tell a musical story of this beautiful Kentish town.

Having just returned from a wonderful two week holiday in the New Forest, my lack of recent practice was clear. I was surprised by how much I had managed to forget during my two missed rehearsals. However, by the end of the evening both fingers and lips were beginning to work together again...even managing my most convincing double-tonguing thus far.

The Première, Saturday October 10th

I was hoping to try and find some time to do some still-needed practice this morning. Inevitably, by the time all shirts were ironed, shoes cleaned and lunch eaten, it was time to leave home.

The afternoon was not just a rehearsal but also a chance to introduce the work to some of the younger members of our audience. The workshop was given by Nigel to a group of GCSE and A level students. We all learned a lot more about some of the building blocks of the music. I'm almost ashamed to admit that I didn't notice that the horns had a very near copy of the *Dam Busters Theme* during the 'Warm Beer and Cricket' movement.

During the break between the rehearsal and the performance I had enough time to have a proper first look at the Hope statue in the High Street; my

playing needs all the inspiration it can get! Looking at the eight different panels depicting scenes from the history of West Malling, it's amazing how much detail can be seen. Mary Tudor is clearly visible, sending her troops to crush Wyatt's rebellion. In another panel, rather childishly I noted that one of the fielders playing the first recorded cricket match seemed to have no trousers on; maybe the test match streaker is not such a recent phenomenon!

In a change to our normal dress code, the ladies of the band were encouraged to wear long evening dresses. Adding to the sense of occasion, it was wonderful to see that the hall was full and there were even one or two people standing at the back. A lighting man had done an excellent job and the stone wall behind the band was bathed in multi-coloured light. The first few pieces we played were received well and set the scene.

We were honoured that Martin Westlake joined

us for the concert and to read his poem. It set the scene wonderfully and gave our lips a few minutes to prepare themselves. Nigel followed with a short introduction and then it was over to us.

It's always difficult to judge how a performance went when you are sitting on stage. The level of concentration, combined with a healthy dose of nervous energy meant that the seventeen minutes of music seemed to pass by in a flash. I think we gave a good account of ourselves and more importantly, of Nigel's music. If we were to judge by the audience's reception and of Nigel's reaction, then the performance was a great success.

At the end of such a special occasion, it is possible to feel slightly flat or deflated once it is all over. We've all worked so hard towards a goal and now what? Fortunately, in this case, it isn't all over. In two weeks time we'll be making the first

recording of *Heritage Suite (What Hope Saw)* as part of our new CD of British symphonic wind band music and then starting to plan our trip to Nigel's home town in Belgium next year.

During Nigel's afternoon talk to the group of sixth formers, he made an interesting point which for me sums up much of this fascinating and invigorating experience. He said that he was always aiming to improve different aspects of his music making. In the same way, a good player is always endeavouring to improve either some aspect of their technique, or their tone. Laurelsitting is not a worthwhile pastime for a good musician and perhaps even for a good person. Like the statue in West Malling High Street, enriched by past experience, there is always something new and exciting to aim for.... I certainly hope so.

David Chapman

EYNSFORD CONCERT BAND is a symphonic wind ensemble that has been based in the small Kentish village of Eynsford since 1972. The band tours overseas regularly, and aspires to attain the highest standards of musicianship within a social and friendly environment. Attracting players from all over the South East of England, the band nonetheless retains a core of long-standing members. The band is firmly rooted in its community and every year raises substantial amounts for local charities. Since 2004, nearly £30,000 has been raised and this year alone it is hoped to raise over £5,000 for four deserving organisations.

Under the direction of John Hutchins the band has grown in both size and reputation and prides itself on its eclectic, challenging and rewarding repertoire. Our most recent focus has been on featuring compositions for symphonic wind ensemble by contemporary British composers.

This year marks a new milestone in the journey of the band, with our collaboration with Nigel Clarke leading to *Heritage Suite (What Hope Saw)*, his latest composition for symphonic wind ensemble. We have had an amazing experience, from the first rehearsal with Nigel through to world première performance and the recording of our recent CD entitled *Heritage*.

Working closely with Nigel through the conception, realisation and first performance of this new piece has given the band a privileged insight into the amount of work that goes into such creations. As a result, the band has gained a far greater appreciation of all compositions for symphonic wind ensembles.

The band is now looking to the future, with many exciting plans that include a trip to Brussels next year to perform this new work, and to meet up with Nigel Clarke and Martin Westlake in their home city.

JOHN HUTCHINS has enjoyed connections with the band for some time and was appointed conductor in 2003. Having graduated from the Royal Academy of Music with a first class



Nigel Clarke (left) and Martin Westlake

honours degree, John is enjoying a career as a freelance trumpeter. He has performed with orchestras such as the Royal Opera House Orchestra, the Ulster Orchestra and the English National Opera orchestra, and can currently be found performing in *Phantom of the Opera* in London's West End. John is also a keen exponent of Baroque music specialising on the natural trumpet (without valves). He performs and records with some of the world's finest Baroque ensembles including The King's Consort, The Sixteen, the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, the Hanover Band, the New York Collegium and the Stuttgart Baroque Orchestra.

Brass coaching features highly in John's career, encompassing work as far afield as the Vietnamese Symphony Orchestra, Wells International School of Music and Trinity College of Music. He has also contributed to various brass publications and co-written a study book for trumpet. He is Professor of Baroque Trumpet at the Royal Academy of Music.

Further information about the band can be found on our website at www.eynsfordconcertband.co.uk

NIGEL CLARKE began his musical career as a military bandsman but a developing interest in composition took him to the Royal Academy of Music to study with Paul Patterson. Here his striking originality and capacity for hard work were recognised by several significant awards including the Josiah Parker Prize adjudicated by Sir Michael Tippett and the Queen's Commendation for Excellence, the Royal Academy of Music's highest distinction. Nigel was previously Young Composer in Residence at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, Composition and Contemporary Music Tutor at the Royal Academy of Music, London, Head of Composition at the London College of Music and Media and Associate Composer to the world famous Black Dyke Mills Band. He has also been guest professor at the Xinjiang Arts Institute in north-west China and Associate Composer to the Royal Military School of Music, Kneller Hall. More recently he has become a visiting tutor at the Royal Northern College of Music and Associate Composer to the Band of HM Grenadier Guards. In 2008 the award of Doctor of Musical Arts was conferred upon him by Salford University.

Find out more about Nigel and his achievements at www.nigel-clarke.com

MARTIN WESTLAKE grew up in Harrow. He studied at University College, Oxford, the John Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, Bologna Centre and the European University Institute, Florence. He lived and worked in Italy and France before moving to Brussels. He has worked for several European political organisations and institutions and is currently Secretary General of the European Economic and Social Committee. Martin is the author of a number of books and articles about British and European politics and institutions as well as a major biography of Neil Kinnock. He is also a budding poet and is currently working on an historical novel.

You can read more about Martin at www.martinwestlake.eu