ED HUGHES

SINFONIA (2018)

for ensemble

flute
oboe
clarinet
bassoon
horn
trumpet
percussion (timpani, B.D., susp cym, 4 tom-toms, glockenspiel, vibraphone)
piano
strings (min 2.2.2.2.1)

Score in C

Dur. 30 mins

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V. 8
Sinfonia

Sinfonia was written for the New Music Players. These are world class musicians whose musical intelligence, instrumental skill and multiple interests produce amazingly vivid performances and premieres, and give the New Music Players its distinctive edge. Sinfonia reaches back into the world of fifteenth century English composers. Like my first composition teachers, Michael Finnissy and Robin Holloway, I have always been interested in musical history and indeed it is a love of music and curiosity about the practice of music that primarily motivates me as a composer.

Sinfonia is in six short movements and scored for a large instrumental ensemble, but one that is not as big as an orchestra. In essence, five of the movements are portraits of pre-existing works by early English composers, and the sixth is free-form. These are not arrangements; these are homages which turn into something new and different. The originals were vocal compositions, written down in musical notation between about 1400 and 1600. My set of six ‘portraits’ are for modern instruments, which is already a pretty radical transformation of the originals. But the new pieces go further and incorporate modern twists and spins, reflecting all sorts of influences and interests, many derived from the influence of modern composers and some from my work with film (thinking of rhythmic clashes in moving images, superimpositions, and sharp contrasts).

Sinfonia is the Italian word for symphony - the languages of Europe are interconnected. It also means a small orchestra. However, in this context I am not writing a work that uses the forms of a traditional four movement symphony. Instead, I am interested in the word’s connotation of ‘agreement’ or ‘concord of sound’ in the sense of a suite of short movements which are connected - not through shared musical themes, but rather to imply a journey through time and personal understanding of what it means to compose out of the historical.

The movements of Sinfonia are:

1. Agincourt
The Agincourt Carol is an anonymous English folk song, in verse and chorus form, written down some time in the early 15th Century - probably soon after the 1415 Battle of Agincourt where Henry V defeated Charles VI in the Pas-de-Calais region of France. It exists on the Trinity Carol Roll. It has been adapted and performed by many composers and artists including Maddy Prior and June Tabor, and the Californian folk band the Poxy Boggards (these are on Youtube). The word ‘carol’ is derived from ‘carole’ (Old French) meaning circle dance. Initially popular as dance songs from 1150-1350, carols became processional songs to accompany religious mystery plays. So while modern English usage associates the carol with Christmas, this was not always the case. For me the dance-like quality of the Agincourt Carol is a reminder of the visceral function of the original - celebration of a victory, certainly, but perhaps even more so a palpable expression of relief in delivery from the trauma of battle. As a result, there is a quality of joy (not sentiment) which transmits itself through this music which I think is a quality that is often found in great music, including complex music. While the rhythm and tune of Agincourt Carol are brilliant is this a good moment to be appropriating a battle hardened tune all about attacking continental Europe? Perhaps not. But modern folk adaptations and performances show that this is music which transcends its origins to become something choreographic and timeless - all about dance and movement. And while it speaks vividly through the language of its own time, with buzzing syncopations and rich, crunchy, third based harmonies, one realises that its characteristic English musical qualities owe a lot to positive engagement with continental developments. In my own composition, to create a layered, fractured, coloristic effect, I have overlaid the basic 3/4 metre with material in 5/8 and 2/4, and for good measure thrown in a canon in three voices!

2. Stella Celi Extirpavit
John Cooke lived from c.1385 to 1442. His Stella Celi Extirpavit is a ‘three-voice descant motet’ in the Old Hall Manuscript. Its parallel melodic shapes and curious cadences are characteristic of the period. It is enriched with delicate touches of third based harmonies in the middle of phrases rather than at their
endings, which drew me to this short and elegant composition. But I realised my response was too
abstract and 'aesthetic' when I read that this apparently opaque Latin text was a fervent prayer to the
mother of God to save the population from the terrible effects of the plague. It was a monophonic chant
in various versions before it became the subject of polyphonic composition for several 15th century
composers, Cooke amongst the first. The music scholar Christopher Macklin wrote an article reflecting on
the story of this text and its associated chants and compositions and suggested that it is through these
manuscripts we can glimpse the shadow of the plague under which so many lived. Further, Cooke was a
member of Henry V’s household chapel in 1413. Macklin states that Cooke travelled to Agincourt with
the king and was present at the historic victory over the French in 1415. So this apparently remote and
abstract Latin composition is the other side of the Agincourt coin, in the sense of its concern with deep
human agony.

This is how I composed this movement of Sinfonia. I began by copying the original into notation that I can
personally cope with:

![Notation example]

I decided that this would be the underlying structure for the new composition. I then decided to slow it
down (the original composition takes less than 2 minutes to perform). This created space for things to
happen between the notes. Gradual accretions and ornamentations that almost take over and occlude or
transform the original, perhaps. I like generating new material out of the found material by creating a
series - in this case a chromatic series which was suggested by the curious chromaticism in bar 1 of
Cooke's tenor. I used this turning idea as the basis for my series, which follows the shape of Cooke's tune,
but expands it to give the beginnings of fluid and endless melody. Working on this movement taught me
that being interested in early English music is much more than just abstract appreciation of beautiful
polyphonic sounds in Gothic cathedrals. It leads you to stories that are messy, compromised, painful,
vivid and political.

3. Veni Sancte Spiritus

Veni sancte spiritus is a sequence (a chant or hymn for the Christian Eucharist before the proclamation of
the Gospel) which John Dunstable (1390-1453) combined with the hymn Veni creator spiritus as the basis
of a composed polyphonic motet. Studying this motet, I could see the justly celebrated chords with thirds
(the 'contenance angloise' was a phrase coined by the poet Martin le Franc to describe the rich
harmonies of Dunstable's music) but while these harmonies are vivid and lucid, they are not static. A
change from C/G fifths and octaves to C/E/G with thirds is itself a change of harmony, not merely a
colour/orchestration change. It is a moment of emphasis just as much as other more obvious harmonic
changes in the piece. Throughout, Dunstable's composition retains astonishing lucidity as the harmonies
change, which helps to illuminate the densely layered texts. The piece I've written is genuinely a tribute
to changing harmony in Dunstable - a core background of 'diatonic' harmony overlaid by shifting
chromatic lines with the overall shape of the piece determined by the structure of Dunstable's work. This
is a recurring motif in my compositions.

4. In ieiunio et fletu

Tallis published In ieiunio et fletu in Cantiones Sacrae (1575), a volume he edited with William Byrd that
included some of Tallis's final and most expressive musical statements. This is a penitential text
particularly suited to Ash Wednesday, with priests weeping at the altar and pleading for forgiveness for
the people. I first developed this movement for the New Music Players in a five piece ensemble (flute,
clarinet, violin, cello, piano) for Sussex University's Spring 2018 Tallis Festival. As I absorbed the strange and beautiful harmonies the violin came forward in my mind - producing a new foreground that blurred the original. To this the piano added further decoration. For me, writing this music for modern ensemble became an exploration of the conversation between vocal and instrumental ensembles that was a feature of 16th/17th century practices in English music.

5. Silver Swan
The Silver Swan is the title of a madrigal by Orlando Gibbons (1583-1625). In this piece there is the faintest outline of the original melody - tracing a line through textures. A thread around which extended triadic harmony expands and contracts; layers which obscure and reveal. The process enfolds the source - one in which the piano's fantasia like embellishments bleed into a structure comprising slow loops and repetitions.

6. In Nomine
This final piece is different in that it has no specific source; instead it responds to the In Nomine genre. Many instrumental pieces were composed during the 16th and 17th centuries by English composers with the title 'In Nomine'. They were compositions devised using the plainchant Gloria Tibi Trinitas, and inspired by a section of the Benedictus from John Taverner's mass of the same name. One of my favourites is Christopher Tye's In Nomine, a very distinctive work because it departs entirely from the original religious mood and echoes the sound of mid-16th century London town cryers. Learning from Christopher Tye, this final piece uses the "in nomine" chant tune as the anchor point of the composition, bridging a change from standard duple to the 'ecstatic' rhythms of triple metre (to use scholar Remi Chiu's term). Thinking about Tye led me to the amazing London Sound Survey (www.soundsurvey.org.uk) where one can explore actual recorded songs and calls of town cryers and stall sellers active in London in the 1930s. I quoted the song of a lavender seller in London on 2 November 1938 and a children's game song called The Muffin Man, both specially recorded by the BBC. I added splashes of imaginary car horn sounds as a nod towards this more recent 'urban' environment.

Rather than arranging a series of found objects from the past, I wanted this to be a creative response to English music of this period that would acknowledge my debt to the emotional life of this music, with its soaring lines (like cathedrals); its curious structures; its high culture (for chapels/courts); but with the popular/vernacular also sometimes reflected in its legacy of notated manuscripts; its balance between the profane and sacred; its harmonic intensities; its contenance angloise; its harmonic progressions; its occupation and transformation of imaginative and actual spaces through the acts of composition and performance; and its gradual admission of instruments. I wanted to pay homage to this early music through the filter of my own musical language, formed by encounters with modern music and visual culture.

So the method was to adopt some of the early composers' methods and durational schemes and then write through them - a bit like deciding to use an archaic technique for mixing colours, or adopting an unusual approach to perspective, that one observes, or perhaps thinks one observes, in an early painting. People have said that my music is repetitive and it sometimes is, because this is partly how I build my music. But I identify more with 'maximal' music. I admire the energy of Ives, Tippett and Xenakis, for example, without actually trying to be those composers. There is complexity and clarity in the polyphony of early music - in the best examples of early music there is also a sense of language that is actively being forged, as in compositions today which refuse to be formulaic.

Ed Hughes. 11 Oct 2018

First performance:
The New Music Players conducted by Nicholas Michael Smith OBE
The Warehouse, Theed Street, London. 28 September 2018
not for performance

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perusal score

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