

INTERVIEW

ON THE NATURE OF THINGS

Philip Davis talks to Kenneth Hesketh

Described as ‘...a composer who both has something to say and the means to say it’, Kenneth Hesketh (b. 1968 Liverpool) has received numerous commissions from international ensembles and organisations. A prodigy, he studied at the Royal College of Music, later in America with Henri Dutilleux and was subsequently awarded a scholarship from the Toepfer Foundation, Hamburg, at the behest of Sir Simon Rattle. In 2007 he was made Composer in the House with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra. Hesketh’s music is broad in its range of stimuli, covering classical architecture, medieval iconography, poetry and Bauhaus constructivism. He lives in London and is a professor at the RCM and University of Liverpool.

What sort of composer are you?

Contemporary Classical with strong modernist affinities which means I’m an increasingly niche composer in an ever-increasingly niche market. But the meaning and reason behind what I do – the sort of gestures and musical statements I like to make – is stimulated by a deep love of the arts in general – and is most often the starting point for my own work. I have always been intrigued by myth and folklore, and the subjective re-tellings of the same story. The idea of ritual inherent in myth, and within its telling, began to interest me during my time as a chorister.

You were a chorister at the Liverpool Anglican Cathedral in the late seventies?

Yes, in 1977 when I was nine. It dawned on me recently that the reason much of my work is bathed in generous sustained resonances arose from the acoustical properties of the building.

The big echoes of the Anglican Cathedral?

Yes, somehow it seeped into my head. Sound produced in the Cathedral has a seven- or eight-second acoustic delay – its life span. One hears the initial sound and seven seconds later it’s still there in the building, possi-



KENNETH HESKETH

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bly coming back at you. It seemed as if the numinous took tangible form in the echo, the dominance of the building, the mist of sound all around you. It affects visitors and worshippers alike. In services, the congregation, choir and organ sound together almost as if the building reverberates sympathetically. A timelessness – sound followed by what seemed an eon of resonance. The grand organ, the grand ceremony, the ritual and the text, the seeming profundity of space and echo, all left their mark on me. I associated emotion with music and text from a very young age.

There was one particular occasion that's significant: I used to have to set out the service music on certain nights – usually after evensong. Organist Ian Tracey, I think, was practising and there was no one else in the nave, central space or choir areas. As choristers are wont to do, I ran from the furthest bay of the nave up to the altar experiencing a Doppler effect as I did so due to my relative position to the organ's sound. A shift in pitch occurred similar to when a police car siren approaches and recedes due to the pitch-waves contracting and enlarging. That moment has stayed with me ever since. I try to play with that kind of sound – active musical figures fighting for clarity against a heightened acoustical resonance, the music bathing in a reverberating, embryonic fluid.

Was it important that this was a cathedral and not just a fine concert hall?

At that point the Anglican Cathedral was the only place that afforded me real musical training. Singing was already a part of my life, which is why I went to audition there, but after joining I was also given piano lessons and other basic theoretical training. From about the age of ten, I was composing. Would this have happened elsewhere? Probably not. I didn't have an especially religious background but religion and faith started to mean more as I got older through various Cathedral events, as well as through various friends who were beginning to examine their faith and who they were in regards to a God. I tried to take part in all of that for a while. But I was never really comfortable with it. What has remained with me from that time, and experience of organised religion, is that sense of ritual, the beauty of text supporting music and a sense of tangible numinousity which may lead to another way of experiencing. Is there something beyond that? I would say no.

Say something more about your background.

My folks still live in Kirkdale, a hard neighbourhood at least during my lifetime. Moving from that milieu to the more rarefied one of the Cathedral was initially overwhelming. If one shows an aptitude for something, one wants to consolidate upon that and progress, and that would not have happened by staying around Kirkdale. In the Cathedral I was surrounded by quite a few interesting and capable youngsters. It was a case of adapting and keeping up.

What did your non-musical contemporaries think of your involvement in music?

They were bemused. It must have seemed to have no relevance to what was going on around them. A memory from this time outlines the juxtaposition of what the local youth were interested in compared to the rarefied, antiquated and seemingly pointless exercise we choristers were in the service of in the huge, however beautiful, concert hall, as I see it now. I was a chorister at the Cathedral during the Toxteth riots in the eighties; we were playing football outside the undercroft when a gang of youths started throwing bricks and bottles and hurling abuse, so we headed back inside – or did some stay and fight for a while? I can't remember.

Other kids from the neighbourhood surely had no understanding as to why I would find any of what I was doing interesting. Perhaps it looked like some kind of dodge. But for me it was a way to change, a way out. At that and subsequent times, music saved me in various ways.

What did you need saving from?

From aspects of the music profession itself! One example is my attendance at music school which was daunting at a young age. They can be unpleasant places; everyone's extremely focused on developing their talent but don't necessarily have the social skills to get on with others or to know how, or when, to take others into account. So when things were bad, music – and what music led me to – became a great place of safety. For example, listening to medieval music, which I did a lot at that time, led me to read the original songs of Beuren, the *Carmina Burana* which Carl Orff set to music, and then the *Roman de Fauvel*, a fourteenth-century allegorical poem, and the imagery in the medieval iconography became places where I could retreat from my 'now'. I suppose I created my own bolt-hole. I am drawn to the antique, whether it be the ribald epigrams of Martial or the beautiful lines of Lucretius. Until quite recently certain types of more recent modern culture was something I couldn't work with artistically. The majority of texts I have set have been ancient or, if they have been modern, as with Dylan Thomas, a poet I love, there's an archaic Biblical flavour devoid of specific religious meaning. I seem to need stories which are told and made more potent by their *distance*. The contemporary reading that I do is similar in many ways: Orhan Pamuk, the Turkish novelist, *My Name is Red*, for example or *The Saddlebag* by Bahiyyih Nakhjavan. They are like modern versions of the composite stories of Boccaccio or *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, even Hesse's *Fairy Tales*. I'm interested in a central core narrative, some great book or myth or epic out of which other story possibilities emerge yet resonate.

It's almost like a genetic model.

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Yes, there is a mitosis of idea which, even though it keeps important elements of its parent nature, spreads and changes and my work is certainly influenced by this way of thinking. It's important that those processes are self-determined. I have to somehow guide each one yet allow for a mixture of the spontaneous with the foreplanned.

You were a prodigy. Born 1968, first orchestral work completed at 13. You had had something played by the Liverpool Phil and Charles Groves when you were just 19.

Yes, my first professional commission. I was in my first year undergrad. But before that I'd written a lot of orchestral music, which had been performed at the Phil Hall by the Merseyside Youth Orchestra, including a symphony.

Very often with people who have early success or talent, there is a point where they then get stuck and have to stay still. Did that happen to you?

I hit a complete wall when I was an undergraduate at the Royal College. I knew that my writing was shallow and conventional and I needed to give my work a more personal profile.

Was it conceivable at that point that you would have stopped composing?

No, but I did think about becoming a hack and using my skills that way, which is a very simple agreement: You do that, We pay you this: Next job. For a while, that was the path I followed but eventually I realised that there ought to be more. I applied to the Tanglewood Music Centre in America, a course run every summer, and my successful application re-set everything. Tanglewood is the Boston Symphony Orchestra's summer home and attracts large numbers of students from all over the world to work with well-known and important musicians, composers and conductors. I worked with people who have since become big forces in my life and friends: Oliver Knussen and Henri Dutilleux to name but two. Though I don't keep opus numbers, Tanglewood is where my opus 1 was written. That's 14 years ago.

I was surrounded by intelligent and driven young composers in their early- to mid-twenties. I had no idea why I had been accepted, wonderful as it was. I composed absolutely nothing while I was on the course, apart from a small clarinet piece. I retreated into books and into musical theory and it was the theory that allowed me to feel a way forward and out again. I began slowly to answer important questions for myself – how does one put note on top of note in an individual manner without simply resorting to pastiching previous musical types? How is musical meaning projected through form? Until that time my composition had been grounded in sheer basic ability. I hadn't done any real apprenticeship. I had been very lucky and yet very *unlucky* in my youth with early works being performed immediately – it was good to hear these attempts but I never had any

time to rethink. When people say, 'That was wonderful, let's have some more of that' it's easy to continue along the well-trod path.

In a piece At God Speeded Summer's End, which I think you once said was a turning-point for you, the relation of acceleration and retardation is very close. It feels as though sometimes it is holding back a feeling that it's therefore pushing forward. I kept thinking what does it mean? Is it to do with the sense of ending?

Perhaps it has something to do with rushing towards a void. The desire to jump from a high building which must be fought against. I'm always aware of it – rushing towards, pulling back. Funnily enough, the title of the work is taken from Dylan Thomas's 'Author's Prologue'. 102 lines in total, the first 51 lines of the poem rhyme, in reverse order, with the last 51 – an aural palindrome. 'At God Speeded Summer's End' is the only line that doesn't change. It opens:

**This day winding down now
At God speeded summer's end
In the torrent salmon sun,
In my seashaken house . . .
Out there, crow black, men
Tackled with clouds, who kneel
To the sunset nets,
Geese nearly in heaven . . .**

I remember reading it when I was a teenager, re-reading it again when I was about twenty-six, and the torrent of imagery and onomatopoeic effects completely overwhelmed me. It was a marvellous literary realisation of a model I'd been groping towards for some time.

It seems to me that when the text, the words come into your music, it's sudden and abrupt and sometimes even scary, like an eruption.

Sudden change, or perhaps more correctly, *seemingly* sudden change – as it always has to be earned or worked towards – is somewhat alluring. Seemingly compatible materials eventually compete with or overtake one another. A gridiron pendulum is a good analogy. Alternating zinc and iron strips allow the pendulum to swing regularly, one allowing for the other's expansion. In my work there's generally one idea set against another in some way, giving both internal cohesion and tension, both providing an inevitable forward movement of the narrative. There is also something restless, possibly disorderly, in my musical thought. Maybe the cathedral's cavernous space – the bizarre moment of running freely amidst a Doppler effect – has something to do with it. Ongoing change within a consistent core does interest me.

The technical matters are to do with discovering a language – not just learning a craft but finding ways to harness what you have. Is that right?

Craft and meaning evolve over time; I get to the structural heart of a work much more quickly these days. Architecture and the study of rhetoric are two of my many interests. Both are ways of supporting and expanding a core idea; a scaffolding that supports the act of creation, which, once removed, leaves you with what has been produced by the mould-shape.

Tell me about your piece which I've just been listening to, 'Graven Image'.

It's a short piece, just fifteen minutes, and is conceived as a musical 'stele' or marker stone, something which marks the *having been*. I wanted to call it 'Stele' but the title had already been used. In this piece, the retracing and embellishment of things is important, as it is in my work generally. One idea may have been previously perceived but elements of that idea progressively take over, evolve. Ideas never actually return, something is always just out of grasp. Such will-o-the-wisp ideas are very attractive – seeking furtive patterns in chaos, looking at the night sky and joining indistinct dots of light. There are structures in the music that should always materialise otherwise it wouldn't work, but in live performances, through acoustic vagaries or the unexpected dynamic of individual players, certain things will emerge in different ways at different times. It's not that we'll hear more 'melody' or 'harmony' – different textural elements take on greater importance which in some circumstances are submerged whilst in others are in relief. Those aspects create a dynamic quality in my work.

The emotive quality in my music should communicate, it is a strong need within me. When one experiences any art, one questions it at a deeper level. To agree with it or to be repulsed by it. Such dichotomies I try to project in my work in various ways, for example via density – loud, soft, full, narrow. There are moments when things scream at one and times where one can hardly make out any clarity, it's too hushed, packed with cotton wool. In trying to make sense of the actual musical narrative the influence of abstract theatre shows itself in my work, a drama working itself out.

That seems urgent and personal. Say more about that loudness and quietness.

I could mention my mother's deafness caused through meningitis when she was a very young child. When I was growing up there were moments when she would communicate her frustration at her deafness through shouting, just to make herself understood, and at other times through absolute quiet when a situation didn't require verbal articulation. The memory of sound in the cathedral is a useful example here as well. A loud organ chord is utterly different when you're standing not five yards away from it compared to when you're downstairs in the building. One is crystal clear, the other muffled, almost underwater. I think of the building in terms akin to a grotto, an otherworld into which one retreats, is changed, and from which one emerges. The loud and muffled, an often

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grotesque combination, are part of the ritual accompaniment.

And when you come out again, what has happened – are you enlightened?

One is shriven, to use an archaic Biblical term! There is a sense of completion, of having divested oneself of a necessary task.

You like those encounters that change the human scale.

Yes, I think that's a very good way of putting it – the changing scale of things. It hits me with greater force the more dizzying the intertwining of threads and conflicts.

At the moment I'm close to giving up the search of finding a story, or text, for my next opera – should I just write the damn thing myself? I know all the ingredients. I know exactly what they would be.

Let's do that. What are the ingredients? The grotto sounds a good place to go and I love the idea of the penitent, the shriven – could we have that in?

Well, certainly someone outside the normalities of life, but someone who combines the possible with the unfeasible.

So we need a sort of enclosed area like a grotto or a cave?

Or one room.

Has the room got windows? Or just appear to have windows?

There may be doors which lead somewhere but the audience never sees the place: they are means of egress, possibly, but it's effectively dead space to the audience.

We need the enclosure to build something within it.

We've selected a living space. To fill it, we could add the dramatic idea of an individual against a collective of others, negative only from the individual's point of view – perhaps the protagonist struggles with negative human emotions arising from betrayal, cruelty or indifference. Next add the presence of the mechanical – I'm a great lover of automata in general. A very sad minor horologist myself, in that I attempt to put clocks together and get them working. It's the tinkering with structure that interests me, the interplay of pinion against arbor, against gear, the gearing up and gearing down of the going train, that which both maintains the energy and directs it to produce movement.

How does the mechanical get into the room in terms of the story?

The protagonist might be a clockmaker or wished he or she inhabited a world of clockwork order: the music will link the two, the clockwork and the human. This reflects something I'm focusing upon more and

more, a concept I call unreliable machines. Machines of course have been the stock-in-trade of composers for many years, from Liadov to Ligeti – reproducing the unchangeable, the programmable in rhythmic gesture or bell-like timbre. But the unreliable machine tries to reinvent its mechanism, to change, but only brings on its own demise more quickly. It works brilliantly for a short time and then fails through some last-minute internal change made by itself.

Interesting – the machine tries to make itself more a machine and ends up being more a person and that's a disaster. It wants to be a free person just as your protagonist wants to be more like a machine. These are your two things swapping over.

The search after regularity, of order – not conformity! – which is itself, possibly, only one step on the road to entropy, to winding down. It would also be important for the protagonist eventually to try to leave that room, to go through a door to another place. There might be a return but not quite a return, some sort of cycle in which, even so, nothing is ever quite the same again either.

That sounds just like your music. Is music a machine?

Some people would say some music is.

Would you?

I would say that *my* music's construction specifically includes cycles, returns and seeming regularity, a play with unreliable machines, alongside something which is indefinable, sudden, emotional, improvised, perhaps flawed.

If the fate of the unreliable machine is that it kills itself, is that what happens at the end of the opera? You are interested in self-determining or self-enclosing structure and yet it's the very attempt to get out of that cycle which is the fatal fault.

An attempt to leave, to get out, that only rushes one more quickly towards the void? Friedrich Dürrenmatt's story 'The Tunnel' is about that. Passengers are travelling on a train, the train enters an uncharted tunnel yet none of the passengers seem bothered by this. The main protagonist asks the conductor 'Why are we in here?' He replies, 'It's all right, don't worry'. Eventually the train just goes further into the tunnel, descending helter-skelter into the void. The conductor asks what they should do, and our protagonist says 'nothing' to which Dürrenmatt adds 'with spectral serenity'.

Moving on an unstoppable conveyor belt of existence inexorably pushing one towards an end, a finality, and being aware of that end rushing up towards one – it seems honest, more real and I don't see that as nihilistic in the least.