

CAROLINE POTTER

## Unreliable machines: an interview with Kenneth Hesketh

**I**N 2008 the British composer Kenneth Hesketh celebrated his 40th birthday with radio portrait concerts in Germany and Switzerland, a Proms commission (*Graven image*, premiered on 1 August 2008), and numerous performances in his native city of Liverpool as part of its European Capital of Culture celebrations. Something of a prodigy, Hesketh was a chorister at Liverpool's Anglican Cathedral (an experience which fostered a continuing enthusiasm for medieval texts and iconography) and a talented pianist. He began composing while still a chorister, and his First Symphony was performed by the Merseyside and National Youth Orchestras when he was only 17, two years before he began studying at the Royal College of Music in London. His love of the Franco-Russian orchestral school of the early 20th century, particularly the soundworld and colourful designs of the Ballets Russes, marked these early works; although he no longer acknowledges these pieces, his passion for orchestral colour has persisted.

After his studies in London, Hesketh's compositional direction was undecided until he won a place on the Tanglewood summer school in 1995, where he studied with Henri Dutilleux. We met near his home in Ealing on 28 March 2008 to talk about his musical development and recent projects.

CAROLINE POTTER: *I'm interested to hear about the impact of Tanglewood and Dutilleux on you.*

KENNETH HESKETH: Tanglewood for me was a watershed because it coincided with a complete loss of faith in my compositional abilities; I was surrounded by lots of incredibly able, driven young composers, and I felt I still had it all to learn. Musically, at this time, I had run into a cul-de-sac. I stopped composing for three years and was basically getting by writing commercial music – so at the 'old' age of 27, I felt I had to do something with my compositional life and Tanglewood gave me a renewed focus. All the student composers at Tanglewood agreed that, thanks to Dutilleux's presence, an open-natured camaraderie pervaded the course. He had chosen young composers with widely different musical styles and he had an understanding of their aesthetic viewpoints. We often talked openly about each other's work, which was important to me at that time.

Dutilleux lectured on his own music, while, on one occasion, George Perle, like many composers who were present during the course, gave a

more personal, constructivist view of Dutilleux's work. He analysed the pivot chords from [the cello concerto] *Tout un monde lointain...* and said that, actually, Dutilleux had got some of the pitch transpositions wrong! So a five-minute back-and-forth banter ensued – 'if you notice this, you got that wrong...', 'well, no...' and so on – in the end George said 'well, you're probably right from your point of view', and that was the end of the session! In Perle's eyes, Dutilleux had made a miscalculation – but Dutilleux's compositional procedure is not strict in the same way that Perle's is. In his book *Twelve-tone tonality* Perle outlines his way of constructing harmonic hierarchy, something Dutilleux has spoken of many times – it's just that Dutilleux achieves this in a far more fluid manner. That was interesting and liberating for me: one didn't need a procedure that was so restrictive. It was open-minded, allowing for the improvisatory, spontaneous moment. For me, Dutilleux's work was an extension of musical preoccupations that had interested me greatly for many years.

*You're talking about the Franco-Russian orchestral tradition?*

Exactly – something which had colour, vibrancy, harmonic pungency and, in its broadest meaning, a sense of development. Regarding Dutilleux's impact on my musical thinking, however, I would say that happened later, when I was at the University of Michigan.

*... where you studied for a Master's degree.*

Yes – in 1996–97, though I lived in Michigan a little before that, writing *Theatrum*, which was commissioned by Tanglewood in 1995. When studying all of his [Dutilleux's] works but specifically *L'arbre des songes* for my Master's thesis, I noticed many of the typical Dutilleux forms and procedures, the poetical inferences, and through this I reconnected with something I had lost within myself, which came directly from being a chorister – text connecting to music on a fundamental basis, each providing a different form of narrative possibility and therefore continuity.

*Did the Michigan/US contemporary scene have any impact on you?*

I studied with both William Bolcom and [the late] William Albright, and it was quite a challenging time for me because Michigan was – and possibly still is – a bastion of a specific type of musical Americana (a good example of such work being Michael Daugherty's, who still teaches at the University). Bolcom had studied with Milhaud and one can see that very clear aesthetic influence in his work – a forerunner of a specifically American postmodern crossover that many of his students have run with. My deep-felt connection to a more modernist lineage was problematic for both of us in lessons, however. Bolcom would suggest things, I would comment

to the contrary and suggest something else, and we would go round in circles, never really coming to a point of agreement. We could talk about technical matters such as pacing and scoring, and his work is an exemplar of high craft, but we couldn't really get through the hard ice of difference. Bill Albright was an equally fine performing musician, and [as pianists] we had a connection through repertoire; I remember that a great source of amusement for Albright was looking at Chabrier's droll paraphrases of Wagner, for instance. But humour or irony in music is subjective, in the ear of the beholder, and it was something I found more and more oppressive. Theirs was also a fundamental jettisoning of European tradition, it seemed to me.

*Which was fine for them, but not what you were after?*

No, and I remember Bill Bolcom as a witty aside calling me a 'difficult European', which took me aback a little! There was a wonderful music theory department in Michigan as well, which included James Dapogny, Marion Guck, and Andrew Mead (a fine composer), who were all excellent music analysts. To be honest, I learned more from theory studies than composition at that time.

*Regarding your music, there's so much energy and dynamism behind it; I know you have an enthusiasm for automata, for instance. Which was the first piece of yours to display this interest?*

The middle movement of *Theatrum*, 'Scurriae', and the last movement, 'Gyrus'; these are probably the first of what I like to call 'unreliable machine' moments. The machine figures are a little longer there than they are now, but yes, the idea of little machines co-existing briefly was something I wanted to investigate. But the love of automata probably dates back to my mid-teens, through readings of mythology and folklore, early iconography and theatre. And since my cathedral days I have been attracted to the detailed and labyrinthine.

*Interesting, because that's a quality I notice in your music as well – yet you're also concerned with transparency of texture.*

Very much so – I see it as trying to juggle two contradictory things; a saturation of the aural canvas juxtaposed with or superimposed on more immediately perceived contrapuntal textures in order to produce clarity. I do think that material when judiciously manipulated, via means of tessitura, colour or layered saturation, is capable of generating dense textures that are lucid and transparent all the same.

*You often point something up with a harp or percussion instrument...*

Actually, it [this transparency] usually comes out of tessitura placement as well as timbral consideration. Instrumental choices, such as use of percussion (of which there is a fair bit in my work, possibly because I was once a percussionist) and harp, probably reflect my French musical leanings – anything that jingles, shimmers and chimes, though there is an expressionist angularity in my work as well. Funnily enough, you notice that French influence in lots of British music from the 80's. Over the last few years, I've made a determined effort to move away from such things by saturating the texture so that it's part of a wider palette, not just a localised effect. I allow some things to bubble up to the surface and then dissipate. Small machine-like units flare into life, become part of a locally saturated texture alongside a developing narrative for a brief time, then move on to something else in a different part of the texture or tessitura. So overall, textures are often turbulent but only saturated for relatively short periods.

*In your orchestral piece At God speeded summer's end (2001), there's this intriguing idea of having a Dylan Thomas text in the background.*

Dylan Thomas' work is a long-standing passion of mine. What fascinates me most about his work is his ability to populate his writing with cunning rhymes, consonant similarities, archaic formal structures and obscure reference almost to the point that the sound is more important than the content. In 1951 he responded to a question asked by a young poet, saying he saw himself as [...] almost a magician, who would use every possible rhyming pattern and structure, wherever necessary. In his *Author's prologue*, Thomas uses almost his entire technical arsenal. As a large palindrome, the first line rhymes with the last and so on, so that the 102-line form only rhymes directly in lines 51 and 52. The only line that stays the same is 'At God speeded summer's end', which is line 2 and line 101, hence the title of my work.

Blurred aural images from the text, as well as using the structure of the poem musically, and superimposing on that a text setting without voice, were in my mind during the early conceptual stages. Thomas' work, dense in allusion, allegory and reference, was a mindset I naturally find intriguing. There are lots of little refrains and machine-like phrases in the piece which reflect Thomas' narrative construction: *God speeded* began an interest in many musical ideas I feel familiar with now come to think of it (ex.1).

The new Prom piece, *Graven image*, is, in a way, an inverted version of the same structural model. My interest in a composite narrative line achieved through dense textures is still of great fascination to me, but with *Graven image* there is no text or literary structure behind it at all. In retrospect, *At God speeded* was a very important piece for me – it allowed me to write what I hoped I was capable of, and to remember the pleasure I felt writing for orchestra, something I had not felt since my early teens.

Ex. 1: Hesketh: *God speeded*, bars 52–63

[THOMAS: line 3]

**D** A Tempo (♩ = 152)

[THOMAS: line 4]

52 (vlns + clt) *mf* *mf* *f* *mp* *molto cantab.* *f*

(vlns 1+ ob) (Hrn 1) (vlns 1+ clt)

*In the to - rrent, to - rrents - mon sun, In*

(vc. & bsns) (timps) etc.

(winds + strings) (fl + cel)

58 *f* *mf* *mf* *mp* *mf* *f* *mf* *più f*

[THOMAS: line 5]

*— my sea - sha - ken house, on a break - neck of rock, Tan - gled with chi - rrup and fruit...*

(strings)

Let's talk about *Ein Lichtspiel* (2006) written for Liverpool's Ensemble 10:10, which is linked to a Moholy-Nagy film of 1930. How did you choose the film and how did you decide to treat it?

In many ways my choice was based, once again, on my love of automata. At the time I was looking for a film to write music to, and the Bauhaus period has long been of great interest to me. *Ein Lichtspiel* is a film of what László Moholy-Nagy (an early teacher at the Bauhaus) calls a light modulator – it's a sort of home movie of the machine's light-show cycle. Its raison d'être was to provide a futuristic, immaterial scenic backdrop using light to reflect the machine's various surfaces – glass, steel, mesh – giving a constantly varying backdrop via shadow and reflection. The publication *Die Bühne am Bauhaus* describes mechanised stage forms (Moholy-Nagy was a contributing writer) and reflects French and Russian ideas on the subject, and the light modulator comes out of this. Also, it's a machine which has many moving parts but is, effectively, useless – it does nothing apart from move and reflect light. I loved that idea! A top of the range abstract automaton that combines mechanisms with theatre.

*Did you want to line the music up with the film very precisely?*

No, not really. The film is only six minutes long – I saw it like a jewel set in the centre of the music, which is 11 minutes long – and it's completely abstract, as one might expect. However, the film's pacing is quite regular in its proportions. I felt the need to impose a structural form on the film, and

Ex.2: Hesketh: *Ein Lichtspiel*, bars 100–08

The musical score for Ex.2: Hesketh: *Ein Lichtspiel*, bars 100–08, is a complex orchestral score. It features a variety of instruments and includes several annotations. The score is divided into systems, with each instrument part on its own staff. The instruments listed on the left include Flute, Clarinet in Bb, Bass Clarinet (doubling Bb Clarinet), Horn in F, Trumpet in Bb, Trombone, Percussion 1 (High Suspended Cymbal, Mid Suspended Cymbal, Low Suspended Cymbal), Percussion 2 (Medium Tam-tam, Low Tam-tam, Very Low Tam-tam), Percussion 3 (Vib), Piano (doubling Celesta), Harp, Violin 1, Violin 2, Viola, Violoncello, and Double Bass. The score includes dynamic markings such as *pp*, *f*, *mp*, *mf*, *ff*, and *ppp*. There are also performance instructions like 'cross-fade to circles within a circle and lines, all at a diagonal, revolving further to colour, white', 'cross-fade to darker colour, black grey rising ball in corner of screen', and 'half screen'. The score is written in a standard musical notation with a key signature of one flat and a time signature of 4/4.

so the idea of an abstract ballet arose: a series of ‘moving machines’ – like sections, or if you will, one machine dance morphing into another (ex.2).

That’s how I responded musically to the abstract nature of the film, as I didn’t wish to simply provide a bed of sound for the events to sit on. The film is actually quite directed – there are cross-cuts, jump-cuts, speeds up and down with lots of expressionist-film camera angles used in the treatment of the images. Musically, I was able to concentrate on various types of unreliable machine that often appear in my work but without, I hope, overloading the senses; neither the film nor the music is what I consider manically ‘busy’, apart from certain climaxes. As I get older, the idea of unreliable machines relates more and more to the Cartesian question of dualism: ‘if separated from our intellect, are we simply machines?’ Even taking into account our intellect, could we be seen as little more than unreliable machines trying to fit in to a larger societal machine? Machines have been fashioned in human or animal form from early times of course and another piece of mine, *The mechanical Turk* for solo oboe (2002), based on the chess-playing ‘fake’ automaton, reflects this interest, using mechanistic material versus quasi-improvisatory figures, as well as all manner of onomatopoeic sound effects

Ex. 3: Hesketh: *The mechanical Turk*, bars 17–48. Kenneth Hesketh comments: ‘Imagine various sized cams moving under the oboe line; the melodic line responds as a cam follower would by speeding up or slowing down depending on the cam size.’

(ex.3). Of course another interest of mine, theatre, lies at the heart of *Turk* and is inherent in *Ein Lichtspiel* because of its intended use.

*For imaginary theatre?*

Yes, exactly. In fact, theatre and dramatic situations permeate my work a lot. One example is the song cycle *Shimmerwords and idle songs* (2006) during its fourth song, ‘Three commentaries’, where I try to suggest an ancient Chinese court ensemble, replete with bells and cymbal clashes in the accompaniment; each new commentary is announced with a theatrical fanfare which gets a little lumpier and slower on each subsequent appearance, perhaps reflecting the court musicians’ annoyance at having to repeat it so many times! But I digress...

*You’ve recently come back from Montreal for the premiere of Theatre of attractions – another theatre-connected work – your collaboration with the film-maker Jacqueline Passmore.*

Indeed. Jacqueline Passmore is an American film-maker living and working in Liverpool, and we found out that we shared many interests, including Bauhaus and the films of Oskar Fischinger, which made working with her on the project a nice experience. The main difference between working on *Lichtspiel* and *Theatre of attractions* was that I wrote the music first. I remember all too well the exasperation of working out a cueing system for *Lichtspiel*, because the film was an extant visual narrative one had to deal with, but here [in *Theatre of attractions*] I wanted to compose the score first and then work with a film-maker. We agreed there would be two early

visual sources for the film: one is from a very early Lumière brothers film from Liverpool made in 1896 (when film had been around for fewer than 10 years), and the other was footage from Mitchell and Kenyon – I think there was a recent TV series called *Electric Edwardians* that talked about their work.

*It's very much an abstract film?*

Oh, absolutely – though it does mirror certain contours and moments in the score. In many ways, therefore, I was able to give free rein to various current musical preoccupations. There are quite a few machines in that piece! There is also, in the second section, something which I've termed 'floating form': a constant or stationary musical object repels or attracts other types of material, some static, some moving, all...

*Pushed about by what's going on externally?*

In a way, but more accurately, each has its own momentum really. Other localised features ebb and flow, pushing back and forth towards the central musical object, like a floating buoy at sea. Then they dissipate, whereas the central object is still in view, though perhaps slightly distorted due to the presence of other local features. The cycle evolves as it repeats with the central object eventually receding out of view, pushed away by something else to come back into view later, and so on and so forth. It's a formal structure that's been evolving for some time and it seemed opportune to codify it in some way, as the central section of the film is concerned with ships, ocean liners and the sea (ex.4).

*There's the Liverpool connection.*

Exactly – in fact that was part of the commission remit. It was commissioned by the British Council in Montreal and the Quebec Government for Quebec's 400th anniversary celebrations which coincide with Liverpool's status as Capital of Culture in 2008; Liverpool has long-standing trading connections with Quebec – both are seafaring cities as well, so of course the sea was an important part of the film.

The first movement of *Theatre of attractions*, 'Time's music box', has many of the compositional ideas I'm interested in – time, irregularity, unreliable machines, a sense of motoric inevitability which derails at the end. The middle section is titled 'L'heure dorée', which in photographic terms is that time of the day when everything is bathed in a warm glow, so this gave me an excuse to write sensual, slightly out-of-focus music. And in the last section, 'Marionetten/Marotte', I consciously use rather obvious, brutish, machine-like music; there's something chaotic and coarsely festive in this section. Events often develop their own momen-





tum, leading to a rather cruel, brutal culmination. The festive quality I mentioned is highlighted by bells (piano, vibraphone and tubular bells), an ‘Acme’ siren whistle and a somewhat insistent hi-hat rhythm – celebratory, but through a sneer, a sardonic filter: that was important for me to try and communicate, the sense of the brutish, obvious and simple-minded that seems to dog the time we live in. Despite the bright instrumental timbres in my work, scepticism and a sense of pessimism colour it more and more.

*Do you feel this?*

Yes, I would say so. And there was a time when I couldn’t deal with it – perhaps my interest in the medieval was a refuge from it – but now it’s become a source, something I can use artistically, and so it’s become positive for me.

*Finally, I want to ask about your ‘Composer in the House’ position with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Society – and as a Liverpudlian, what sort of impact do you think Capital of Culture status could have on Liverpool’s cultural life?*

Well, what’s interesting about being in Liverpool at this time, distinct from when I was growing up, is that now there are many composers in Liverpool; so it’s a very vibrant place with a much broader church of composition. Also, [Ensemble] 10:10 has become a focal point for Northwestern composers to be heard and to form a larger, lively community. [Vasily] Petrenko and the RLPO regularly schedule new and attractive works, and the playing standard is at a very high level once more, reminding me of the Libor Pesek and Charles Groves periods. Writing pieces for all the musical groups under the RLPS banner is challenging (in two years I have to write 14 pieces) but fulfilling. There’s a sense of positive musical creativity in Liverpool – a realisation that cutting edge work happens in Liverpool, not just in London, or closer to home, Manchester!

*It’s often been the poor relation, hasn’t it?*

Yes, Liverpool hasn’t always been able to focus on its artistic potential (outside the ubiquitous Beatles fascination), but now I think it can and is; there are commissions for composers as diverse as Stephen Pratt, James Wishart, Mark Simpson, John Tavener or Karl Jenkins – the latter two not necessarily to my musical taste – that have focused the musical world’s attention on Liverpool. I think this will have a long-lasting effect on the artistic milieu there. With this in mind, it’s rather nice to be a part of it all.

*Caroline Potter is Senior Lecturer in Music at Kingston University and author of books on Nadia and Lili Boulanger, and Dutilleux.*