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WASBE WORLD



The Collaborative Composer

Nigel Clarke with contributions from Peter Sheppard Skærved & Reed Thomas

Back in 2014 I found myself on the College Band Directors National Association (CBDNA) composers' Question and Answer panel at the University of North Florida chaired by Professor Allan McMurray. I remarked that it was a rare opportunity for me to address a room packed full of conductors and college band directors, and as a composer perhaps also a good business opportunity to line up a few commissions for the future! My subsequent declaration that I was not interested in writing any of them a new commissioned work seemed to cause some amusement in the auditorium. I qualified my position by saying that I only ever wrote music for people that I had built a long-term musical relationship with. As an example I mentioned my great friend Dr. Reed Thomas, Director of Bands at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU), as the one person in the room at that moment in time that I was sure I would be interested in writing for. Reed and I met for the first time in early 2010 at another CBDNA event, but it is only now 5 years later that I have written him a new work. I will come back to Reed and MTSU later.

My best compositions have (nearly) always resulted from long-term collabora-

tion with conductors, performers, composers, directors, authors and ensembles in the many different genres with which I work. I have never enjoyed just writing a work on request: I prefer to be more hands on and love the two-way (and sometimes multilateral) interaction of ideas that happens when you get excited about stuff with others. Something unexpected always emerges, and the end result is usually better than you could have ever imagined on your own. To view commissions as a way to climb up the career ladder and get noticed is in my view short sighted. However talented a composer is, he/she is missing a trick by treating every contact with potential commissioners as a 'target of opportunity'. For me this type of pushiness is not only behaving badly, but can also compromise the creative process itself – it's the difference between buying an off the peg suit versus one that is fully tailor made.

My longest standing musical collaborator has been the violinist Peter Sheppard Skærved, going back over nearly 30 years. In that time I have written Peter two violin concertos (one of which is the Violin and Wind Orchestra piece '**Black Fire**'), a handful of solo violin works and 5 string orchestra pieces. We never stop exchanging



musical ideas when we're together! The freedom to experiment is key to the success of our collaboration. We certainly take Beethoven's advice seriously in his '*note to self*' in his *Tagebuch* "Every day share a meal with musicians, where one might discuss instruments and techniques and such...." (1812).

Collaborating with Nigel Clarke by Peter Sheppard Skærved

My work with Nigel Clarke has served as a "test bed", paradigm, and ideal for a career-long series of collaborations with composers of every generation, ranging from Hans Werner Henze and George Rochberg, Judith Weir and David Matthews, to composers of my own generation, such as Kenneth Hesketh and Jörg Widmann and not forgetting the younger creators, including school children who are the future and the hope for music making.



Nigel Clarke studied composition at the Royal Academy of Music with Paul Patterson, winning the Josiah Parker Prize (adjudicated by Sir Michael Tippett) and the Academy's highest distinction, the Queen's Commendation for Excellence. He gained his Doctor of Musical Arts from University of Salford. Nigel has previously held positions as 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, visiting tutor at the Royal Northern College of Music, Associate Composer to the Black Dyke Band, Associate Composer to the Band of HM Grenadier Guards and Associate Composer to the Royal Military School of Music and Associate Composer to Brass Band Buizingen (in Belgium). In 1997 Nigel joined the United States International Visitor Leadership Program sponsored by the US Information Agency. He is currently Composer to Bands Middle Tennessee State University Bands, Composer-in-Residence to the Marinierskapel der Koninklijke Marine (Marine Band of the Royal Netherlands Navy and International Composer in Association to the world famous Grimethorpe Colliery Band in the UK. For information about Nigel Clarke and his work go to www.nigel-clarke.com



Peter Sheppard Skærved working with Reed Thomas at MTSU

I think that it is fair to say that Nigel and I learnt as we went along. The collaboration began, in the traditional place, in the rehearsal room, and only gradually found its way 'behind the workshop door'. Initially, this more 'transgressive' practice (and by that I mean, where the performer has a direct impact on the material as it is created), began with conversations over coffee, and then, with the composition of Nigel's epochal 'Pernambuco', found its way into the workroom, to the blank sheet of paper, the 'what are we going to do?', which is at the heart of collaboration.

Encouraged by the British Council, we were able to take this further, and explore environments and deeper questions, of identity, of history, of politics as part of the processes around Nigel's composing. So the 'workshop' came to include time spent in the Balkans, the Far East, in Latin America, 'hunting the piece'. This 'hunting process', which continues to this day, includes just as much coffee as before, but in plethora of different environments, be they a ruined castle in Croatia, a field of tragedy in Belgium, a market in Ankara, or as ever, our respective homes and worktables.

The practice which has evolved, grown between the two of us, seems to me to be one where there is no difference between questions of semiquavers and demisemiquavers, and questions of the meaning, of the ethical obligations between the imagining and making of music. At its heart, it is shared discovery, and the sense that there's no limit to that. Always, I look forward to the next step on this shared road, to the

new music that will emerge, and the insight that comes with that.

Other long standing collaborations have been with Belgian conductor Luc Verthommen in the brass band arena, with Matthew J George (from the University of St. Paul) for whom I have written four works to date including 'Gagarin' and 'Mata Hari' and with the late James Watson, the foremost British trumpet player and conductor of brass bands. In the area of film scoring, I have had a productive long-term collaborative partnership with the British composer Michael Csanyi-Wills.



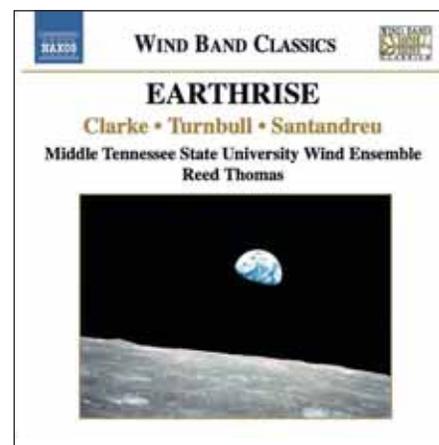
In the wind orchestra arena my piece 'Samurai' is another example of collaboration. I wrote the piece back in 1997 for the British con-

ductor Timothy Reynish and the Royal Northern College of Music Wind (RNCM) Orchestra, and it was premiered at the WASBE conference in Hamamatsu, Japan. It was my first wind orchestra piece, and Tim gave me the opportunity to work closely with the musicians. I was able to conduct the first run-through and had the luxury of making alterations and returning to try them out, before Tim finally took over the conducting. This approach is one that I still like to use today. I particularly enjoy the first rehearsal and interacting with the musicians to get the most out of the music.

For me, the composer is like a 'master tailor' who must understand the style that

will best suit the performer. On some occasions, the tailor must try to convince the client to choose a more adventurous style. In the course of the project the suit must be adjusted to ensure a perfect fit. Ultimately the client has to feel good in his/her new clothes or the outfit will remain on the hanger. In short, conducting the first run-through of 'Samurai' with the RNCM students was like the first fitting and the outcome was a few 'nips and tucks' here and there.

Back in 2010 Reed Thomas invited me to be a guest composer to MTSU in Tennessee. Between rehearsals with his talented musicians, Reed suggested that I should write him a new work for his premier Wind Ensemble at MTSU for the forthcoming season's concert programme. Though interested, I said I would like to get to know the group and understand their musical approach. Reed suggested that the first step could be for his group to make a recording of three of my works for a Naxos disc. This would be an excellent way of really getting to know the strengths of the players and finding out what they look for in music. This project led to three USA premieres ('Earthrise', 'Their Finest Hour' and 'Heritage Suite') during the preparation of which I attended many rehearsals and co-produced my pieces on the disc. During this same period, Reed returned to the subject of my writing an original work for his orchestra. The first seeds were sown during one of our car journeys together. Reed told a story about an act of arson that had been committed against a mosque in the USA; his reaction was to say 'Who are the terrorists now?' This sparked an idea to produce a work about the troubled times that we live in, which would aim to show that war, terrorism, revenge, violence and bigotry have occurred and reoccurred throughout mankind's history. Needless to say Reed's remark about the mosque features in the text accompanying the piece.



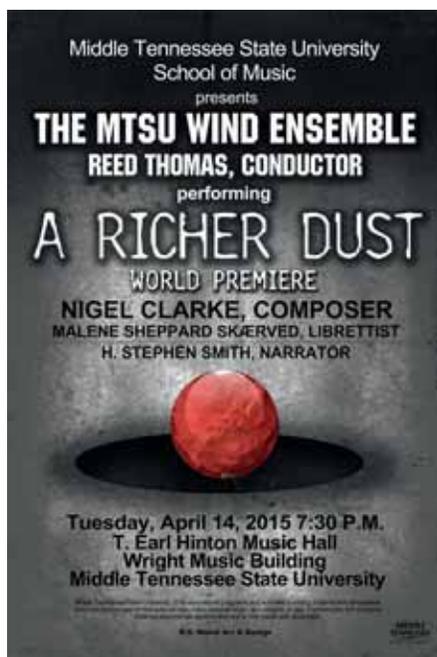
At first we had thought about doing a staged theatrical drama with actors and audience participation, but for various reasons it could not go ahead at that time. As the idea may be developed again in the future, I do not want to reveal too much about this project!

The result is a work entitled **'A Richer Dust'** Symphony No. 1 for Speaker and Wind Orchestra with an orchestration that has not only more than one double bass but cellos also – an instrumentation that I have not used before. For me the work is deeply personal and relevant because it deals with subjects that I feel strongly about and touches the lives of all of us every day. The approximately 50-minute work represents a double collaboration, not only with Reed, but also with the Danish writer Malene Sheppard Skærved.

Malene and I had many conversations around summer 2014. We had already worked together on a piece for words and string orchestra, a collaboration which had been fruitful, so it seemed natural to find another joint project. Using music and words, **'A Richer Dust'** explores what it means to live with violence and extremism, the constant companions of human history. The intertwined text and music, ideas and images, weave together voices ranging from those of historically significant figures through to the voiceless, ordinary people living in extraordinary times.

An important component in the success of any collaboration is **trust** – which is why it is necessary to get to know your fellow collaborators. For example, I had asked Malene to write a text that could be structured into four movements. The amount of text is crucial – too little or too much could kill the work stone dead. Malene said that she would not show me any sketches but that I would see the whole text when finished. It involved a leap of faith, as I only had limited time and had to decide quickly on how to approach the work. What she sent me in the end was inspirational and showed great understanding of how I might use her words. Trust is paramount and must apply on all sides in equal measure. In this case it was not needed, but trust is an element of good collaboration because constructive compromise may be needed.

I treated the text in the same way as I have worked with dialogue in film scores in the past – the music can reflect the mood of the words, it can forewarn about what is about to be said, it can be at odds with the speaker or simply create a backcloth or, in film scoring terms, be an underscore to the dialogue. At certain points throughout the work, the orchestra chant Malene's words in



a modern day rap style. In some places the sound of the words is used as an instrumental texture and in other places the words add dramatic effect. It is very important how a word sounds when spoken, and I have given instructions to the speaker about how to pronounce certain words in the same way as I would add accents, dynamics, and expression markings to musical notes.

During the writing process, many ideas started to emerge about how to bring further drama to the work. I recently bid for and purchased a 1916 First World War British Officer's trench whistle, which is blown by the Speaker several times during the brutal climax of the work. A century ago this antique whistle may have heralded the death or wounding of soldiers going 'over the top', and this adds a poignant musical connection between the present and the past.

The title for the symphony came to me after a visit to the National Portrait Gallery in London during the 2014 World War I

'The Great War in Portraits' commemoration exhibition. In the exhibition there was a postcard sized photograph that had caused controversy, as there was no human form on it. The photograph depicted a field in 'no man's land' between the trenches in France, a pulverised landscape in which no living tree or plant was left standing. I was already aware of the famous WW1 Rupert Brooke poem 'The Soldier' in which there is a line *'In that rich earth a richer dust concealed'*. The poem and the photograph together inspired me to name the piece **'A Richer Dust'**.

An important aim of this project is to add to the repertoire of brass, wind and percussion a work, which in the same way as Benjamin Britten's 'War Requiem', deals with the subject of man's destructive capacity. **'A Richer Dust'** also marks the culmination of my association as Visiting Composer to Bands at MTSU and my fruitful collaboration over a number of years with Reed Thomas.

Collaborating with Nigel Clarke by Reed Thomas

Throughout my tenure at MTSU, I have commissioned well over 40 works, either directly or through joining a consortium. As one might expect, the quality of these pieces vary and it is the hope that terrific masterpieces can come out of this process. I believe this collaboration between Nigel Clarke, Malene Sheppard Skærved, Professor H. Stephen Smith (MTSU Voice faculty), the members of the MTSU Wind Ensemble, and myself has resulted in such a work of art. From the initial request, Nigel had explained that he wanted to write something "special" and not just another commission. While I was flattered, I did not fully realize at the time how important this statement was and is.

It has taken over five years for the idea to



Reed Thomas calls to the stage Nigel Clarke and Malene Sheppard Skærved



Writer Malene Sheppard Skærved hits a Mahler-Box made by Reed Thomas for Nigel Clarke's 'A Richer Dust'

germinate and fully blossom and the amount of input from everyone involved has been tremendous. The collaborative work exhibited from Malene and Nigel is paramount, but the inspiration Professor Smith brought to the narration and the professionalism of the musicians must also be recognized. As an example, we decided to wear blood-red carnations on our concert black and scatter dozens of flowers along the stage front as a visual representation of the concert poster that had been created for this premiere (another collaborator, Rufus Walsh) which was black and white with a red carnation in the center. During intermission (just before the premiere) a student musician suggested that all of the players discreetly remove their flower and let it fall to the floor, which ended up being a memorable effect at the end of the work. Another level of collaboration is in the instrumentation. The piece calls for several "Hammer Blows," which are created by a Mahler Box. One had to be constructed so I took it upon myself to research and build one and the effectiveness of this new instrument was very powerful.

My collaborative efforts with this project varied from ideas for content in the very early stages to crafting the Mahler Box, to interpretive decisions up to and during the concert. Nigel and I would talk often via Skype and we were lucky enough to have both him and Malene on campus for a week giving us input and receiving feedback during the rehearsal process. A final note of collaboration was during the recording process. The engineers made themselves available for several rehearsals, taking notes on how best to capture the

piece that presented several large issues. How to balance the narrator with the ensemble, how to utilize the power of the Hammer Blows without compromising the delicate aspect of the woodwind lines and how to get this massive work down in the available time frame, all took great collaborative efforts.

The end result of all these people collaborating with their individual talents and everyone feeling as if they were a part of the process regardless of when they entered, was a magical event. I believe Nigel said it best when he wrote "...interaction of ideas that happens when you get excited about stuff with others. Something unexpected always emerges, and the end result is usually better than you could have ever imagined on your own."

With so much music in existence, for wind orchestra or otherwise, I believe that composers need to ask themselves these questions:

What am I writing for?

Who am I writing for?

Does my music have any importance or function in today's society?

Today we have so many distractions in our daily lives and have surrounded ourselves with background noise: in every sports-bar, restaurant, from our home to the shopping centre we can hear a backing track of music. The music of today is like fast food – a quick dose of comfort-sound. Our musical diet needs to become more nutritious.

I have always had great admiration for the late British composer Sir Michael Tippett, whom I had the privilege to meet at the Royal Academy of Music in London in 1984. Tippett questioned the role of music in today's society:

"I am a composer. That is someone who imagines sounds, creating music from the inner world of the imagination. The ability to experience and communicate this inner world is a gift. Throughout history, society

List of Wind Ensemble / Wind Orchestra

- Samurai (1995) **
- City in the Sea – Euphonium Concerto (1997) **
- Breaking the Century [transcription] (1999) *
- Battles & Chants – clarinet concerto (2001) *
- Mata Hari (2002) *
- Tilbury Point (2003) *
- King Solomon's Mines (2003) *
- Gagarin (2004) *
- Forgotten Heroes (2005) *
- Black Fire – violin concerto (2006) *
- Fanfares & Celebrations (2007) *
- Fields of Remembrance (2008) *
- Heritage Suite (What Hope Saw) (2009) *
- Their Finest Hour (2010) Studio Music *
- Earthrise [transcription by Nigel Clarke] (2012) *
- Storm Surge (2013) Studio Music *
- Old World Overture (2014) *
- A Richer Dust (Symphony No. 1 for Speaker & Wind Orchestra) (2015) *
- Mysteries of the Horizon – Trumpet Concerto (2015) *

** Maecenas Music / * Studio Music

has recognised that certain men/women possess this gift and has accorded them a special place. But if such men – poets if you like – are honoured, are the products of their imagination of any real value to the society which honours them? Or are we, particularly at this point in history, deluding ourselves that this may be so?" Sir Michael Tippett

In my view we need to recalibrate the meaning of music in our lives, and collaboration is an excellent starting point to achieving this.



Peter Sheppard Skærved, Reed Thomas and Nigel Clarke work on Black Fire at MTSU

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity. W.B. Yeats

'A RICHER DUST'

Symphony No. 1 for Speaker & Wind Orchestra

1. Still We Drudge In This Dark Maze

Words: Malene Sheppard Skærved

Music: Nigel Clarke

Larghetto ♩ = c.56 (*fragile in style*)

Conductor Note: The style of the opening material (and similar music elsewhere in the work) should remind us of early Christian plainsong

The musical score is arranged in a standard orchestral format. It begins with a tempo marking of 'Larghetto' and a metronome marking of approximately 56 beats per minute. A conductor's note provides context for the style, suggesting early Christian plainsong. The score includes parts for a wide variety of instruments, with some parts marked as '1 player on a part only'. The piano part is marked 'p (with Piccolo)'. The percussion section includes a suspended cymbal, wind chimes, vibraphone, and glockenspiel. The woodwind and brass sections are mostly silent in this section, with some light activity in the flutes and clarinets.