

PROFILE: MICHAEL FINNISSY

Michael Finnissey was born in Tulse Hill, London in 1946. He began to write music almost as soon as he could play the piano, aged four. Self-taught until eighteen, he then won a Foundation Scholarship to the RCM where he studied composition with Bernard Stevens and Humphrey Searle, and piano with Edwin Benbow and Ian Lake. Afterwards, he studied in Italy with Roman Vlad. During these early years as a freelance musician, he played for dance classes, coached singers and



Michael Finnissey (photo: Ben Britton)

taught Music Appreciation to visual artists and choreographers, founding the music department of the London School of Contemporary Dance. As a composer, he worked closely with choreographers Jane Dudley and Anna Sokolow, pioneers of modern dance, and in more experimental work by Richard Alston, Siobhan Davies, Jackie Lansley and Fergus Early. His concert debut as a solo pianist was at the Galerie Schwartzes Kloster in Freiburg, with a programme mostly of first performances, featuring works by Brian Ferneyhough, Jennifer Fowler, Oliver Knussen, Nigel Osborne, Robert Saxton and Howard Skempton, as well as his own. He was a member of the ensemble Suoraan (founded by James Clarke and Richard Emsley in 1979) and, later, its artistic director when it became Ensemble Exposé. He joined Ixion (founded and still directed by Andrew Toovey) in 1987 – in both groups he not only played the piano but also conducted concerts. He has served on various committees (SPNM, BMIC, ISCM), and has promoted new (mainly British) music worldwide, giving over 300 premieres as a performer and serving as President of ISCM from 1990–1996. Michael has taught at Dartington Summer School, Royal Academy of Music, Sussex, Leuven and (currently) Southampton universities. His music is widely performed and recorded worldwide, and is published by VNM (Berlin), Ricordi (Deutschland), UE, OUP and UMP.

Q. *What is inspiring you at the moment?*

A. I am actually spending a lot of time thinking about the notes F and C, and how they can be positioned vertically to make an interesting sound, and then, what will happen to them? Also some re-shaping of Schubert D.765.

Q. *A lot of your music engages with music of the past. How would you describe your relationship to this as a resource?*

A. I am interested in working with the music of the past on my own terms. Not attempting to re-create, or fake, technical apparatus and aesthetic or ideological totems. The found materials are removed from their original context, viewed differently in perhaps unexpected and inappropriate ways. This is hardly an original practice – it fuels a great many masses of the late mediaeval period, and surely most music refers to some sort of ‘past’, even if it is cunningly concealed.

I had a bit of a crisis around 1980: I felt I was hiding in an 'avant-garde music world' and its limiting conventions. I also felt I should admit to, and work with, my anxiety about a culture that prefers, and apparently only has ears for, the past – without wasting too many bullets.

Q. *How has your own performing informed your writing?*

A. I try not to be limited by my own abilities when I write for the piano. I have a lifetime's experience of doing a wide range of different things with my composing, not all 'difficult' or 'impossible'. I have written for a few local church choirs, and I have worked regularly with CoMA [originally East London Late Starters Orchestra] since its inception, and it seems natural that I sing or play along with those groups.

Q. *What does collaboration mean to you?*

A. For composing I prefer isolation, but I greatly enjoy collaborating with the piano, an instrument I never wanted to master or dominate, but just 'love' as a friend. As a performer I have enjoyed working with some composers more than others. I try not to get in the way of their music, not adding anything, remaining attentive to those details I am able to project. For almost a decade I was heavily involved with the ISCM, including six years as its president, and this involved collaborating with other members of its Executive Committee, and with concert-giving and funding organisations all over the world, gently (!) persuading all and sundry that the performance of new music was an essential component of a healthy Arts environment. As a composer I have only once really enjoyed a *creative* collaboration, as distinct from guiding interpretation, and that was with the choreographer and dancer Kris Donovan. Maybe I give in too readily (from deep-seated insecurity). There are many bullying factions, especially in the theatre, plenty of experts to tell you what cannot possibly 'work' or 'make sense', and offering largely useless advice.

Q. *Have you a nugget of advice for young composers?*

A. Try to safeguard your integrity, don't waste energy on scheming and envy, try to distinguish between care and abuse (between craft and administration), between the wondrous visions of the mind and the flawed chemistry of the body.

Q. *What are you reading at the moment?*

A. *Resonances of the Raj: India in the English Musical Imagination, 1897–1947* by Nalini Ghuman (rather shallow, too much uncritically re-cycled material) and *Modernist Mysteries: Perséphone* by Tamara Levitz, a very thorough examination of one of my favourite Stravinsky scores, and just what a serious book about creativity should be.

Q. *Which pieces of music have most changed you?*

In chronological order: Ravel *Boléro*, Satie *Relâche*, Bartók *Allegro barbaro*, Varèse *Hyperprism*, Ives 'Concord' Sonata, Berlioz *Roméo et Juliette*, Schoenberg *Herzgewächse*, Gershwin *The Man I Love*, Beethoven Op. 131, Janáček *The Diary of One Who Disappeared*, Verdi *Don Carlos*, John Cage *HPSCHD*, Chris Newman *Sad Secrets*, Andrew Toovey *Shining Forth*, Laurence Crane *Derridas*.

Q. *Which other artists have most influenced you?*

A. Robert Rauschenberg, David Hockney and Edgar Degas (painters). Stan Brakhage, Gregory Markopoulos, Jack Smith and Andy Warhol (filmmakers).

Q. *This year you celebrate your seventieth birthday! What does 2016 hold?*

A. I am celebrating my writing with some of my favourite musicians – CoMA, EXAUDI, the Kreutzer Quartet, Mark Knoop, Ian Pace, Amanda Bayley, Philip Thomas – and I will be in Köln (with Musikfabrik) and in Huddersfield. All in all, this year there will be three or four premières and around ten or so concerts of my music.

Q. *Is there a project you are dreaming about creating?*

A. There are large-scale things that I want to re-work: *The Undivine Comedy*, *The Transgressive Gospel* and two shorter pieces, *Mankind* and *Vaudeville*.

Q. *Is the future bright for new music?*

A. Raymond Chandler says, 'you cannot have Art without a sense of style and quality *throughout* the social structure ... and this sense seems to have little to do with refinement or even humanity'. I guess we have to cross our fingers and hope that we can rid ourselves of distractions.