

MMus in Composition

Some reflections

1) A personal response to the opportunity afforded by the degree

For all the evocation of Englishness that streams through the music of Gerald Finzi, his ancestry was Italian and Jewish. Finzi's dilemma in the strenuous determination to cast adrift his forefathers, so as to appear and thus become accepted as being wholly English, is neatly captured in Stephen Banfield's observation:

'... he invented himself. Perhaps he had to?'¹

That Finzi felt pressed enough to deny his roots, presumably so as not to be tainted by it them is, at least in my opinion, a somewhat bleak comment on the prevailing social mores in England at that time. It says more about the English than it does about a man and composer as reticent as Finzi.

Yet Banfield's remark and its mention of 'invention' also stirs a compositional resonance, given Finzi's somewhat fractured musical upbringing in Harrogate, Yorkshire around the outbreak of the Great War. Despite studies with Ernest Farrar (1885-1918) and Edward Bairstow (1874-1946), Finzi initially lacked, in a very real sense, those basic practicalities required of every composer. To illustrate, I well recall a BBC Radio 3 talk given by Howard Ferguson, accomplished pianist, composer, and respected musicologist. Ferguson and Finzi remained good friends, meeting occasionally to play and discuss works in progress. Ferguson made the point that in their very early days Finzi would compose, let's say, a song's piano accompaniment, but would more than likely omit to include phrase marks, even dynamics, or indeed anything at all that would inform a performer as to how one might interpret the composer's intentions. When HF pointed out these shortcomings, GF's astounded reply was,

"but surely *any* musician would understand and instinctively know how to play it."

¹ Banfield, S. 1997. *Gerald Finzi An English Composer*. London: Faber and Faber.

Gerald Finzi's music lives on, perhaps a small voice but one that still communicates nearly 60 years after his death in 1956, especially through his vocal settings and innate affinity with poetical English language. If this is a somewhat longwinded introduction, I am making the point that Finzi's task was unenviable. Essentially it was a case of him discovering his own route to composition, in the dark and minus a map and torch. How beneficial might he have found it to spend a year honing composition techniques and discussing aesthetic issues under the watchful gaze of a professional composer, as I have during the past twelve months.

Fifty years elapsed in my case before the idea of tackling an MMus in Composition became a realistic proposition. A sparse number of short vocal pieces were composed in that vast temporal interim, but working long hours as a freelance musician in the UK, and then here in New Zealand, inevitably pushed creativity well below the surface.

A half-century gap between Bachelor and postgraduate Masters may be a somewhat uncommon route, yet I doubt I am unique in having been a mature, creative student. I strongly sense that I began this postgraduate composition degree with a considerable advantage, having accumulated knowledge of reasonably large swathes of repertoire that the average 20 year-old will have yet had too little time to assimilate. Fifty years is a long time to be hearing music, familiar and unfamiliar. I can pinpoint as 14 the age at which I first heard the revelation that happened to be Bartok's Concerto for Orchestra. Not long after came Tippett (Ritual Dances from *The Midsummer Marriage* and *A Child of our Time*). *En route* from then to now has brought contact – occasionally as performer but more often as listener – with contemporary music by European, British, New Zealand and, more recently, Asian and Middle-Eastern composers.

If this introduction begins to beg the question, why then bother doing the course, the immediate answer is that it is one thing knowing *how* pieces sound. But even understanding, and being able to cope with playing at the keyboard the variety of clefs and transpositions, in no way guarantees the creation of music that is both *playable* and *communicative*. Pushing boundaries is admirable, but it can be self-defeating, even futile, as a recent conversation with a Christchurch orchestral player revealed. With one of the better London orchestras he recalled playing an exceedingly complex piece by Brian

Ferneyhough. After several intense rehearsals came a performance after which questions – *was that accurate, was that okay?* – were still being asked, but not clearly answered by these first-rate orchestral players, who generally know just how a performance has fared. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the following assessment by Paul Griffiths:

‘... and all his [Ferneyhough’s] music is exceedingly complex in its notation, the intention being to encourage a desperate virtuosity in performance.’²

Desperately encouraging? Or desperately discouraging? It’s arguable.

I suspect that, although no avant-gardist, in some of the works I have perhaps pushed, if only very *gently*, some boundaries for some performers and listeners.

I consider myself immensely fortunate to have been in the very capable oversight of Chris Cree-Brown, whose thought provoking suggestions have always been cogently and gently expressed. Even if not always heeded they have been much appreciated. Particularly valuable have been the discussions regarding textures, especially the care to be exercised if one is tempted to indulge in excessive and *simultaneous overuse* of extreme high and low pitches, a technique that can undermine rather than enhance the overall message. Above all, the generosity of the comments and time devoted to my needs, when his own creativity beckoned, has turned an ex-colleague and present supervisor into a valued friend.

2) Opportunities for performances

Also of tremendous value have been Dr. Cree-Brown’s efforts to find outlets for performances, in a city that still reels from the devastation of two earthquakes and the consequent loss of performing venues. An outstanding example was his coup in persuading the CEO and Artistic Manager of the Christchurch Symphony Orchestra to have a run-through of the two MMus students’ orchestral pieces. Financial support from the university achieved by Glenda Keam, Head of the

² Griffiths, P. 1986. *Encyclopaedia of 20th-Century Music*. London: Thames and Hudson.

School of Music, is also gratefully acknowledged. Enabling me to hear a work for large orchestra...*this fair luminous mist...* proved to be a privilege. As might only be expected, two straight run-throughs did not elicit a perfect performance. A slight disadvantage was the somewhat sluggish tempo in a quicker section, where the music, instead of gently galloping, merely limped, resulting in a c.9.15 timing compared with c.7.25 in the MIDI version.

There have also been valuable workshops and, in September, an Arts' Platform Festival provided further opportunities. *Dances for a Pope* (three pieces for violin and piano based on minute fragments of plainchant) were performed twice and earned me, as joint first-prize winner, the Lilburn Award 2014. A workshop concert in early October provided the opportunity to perform *Shaken Earth* (piano quartet), sadly only able to be rehearsed very briefly (not much more than an hour) on the day of the performance. In consequence, whilst the CD recording will give some idea, it is simultaneously a somewhat *shaky* rendering of *Shaken Earth*, the composer-pianist especially shaken by his loss of direction in the final measures.

Despite, for various reasons, the School of Music suffering a depletion of instrumental performance students the UC Consortia Chamber Choir, under Andrew Withington, performed a carol composed in 2013. *I sing of a maiden*, a short setting of very familiar medieval words, can be heard and viewed on YouTube, sung a little slower than marked, but this rigorously auditioned group, made up of students across the university and beyond, certainly captures well enough its sometimes intense atmosphere. *I sing of a maiden* has also been performed twice at Romsey Abbey in Hampshire as well as by the professional choir at St. John's Church in Southampton. Another carol setting included in the portfolio is *Out of your sleep arise and wake*, written in 1996. There was a broadcast of it on BBC Radio 3 from the annual Advent Carol Service at St. John's College Cambridge in 1998. The previous year I'd conducted a performance at a carol concert in Symphony Hall Birmingham, an occasion on which a setting of *The Oxen*, for high voice and piano, was heard.

In conclusion, I consider there to be quite some variety of expression and mood in the works produced. Serious directions in some pieces are balanced by intentional frivolity and wit in others.