EDWARD COWIE

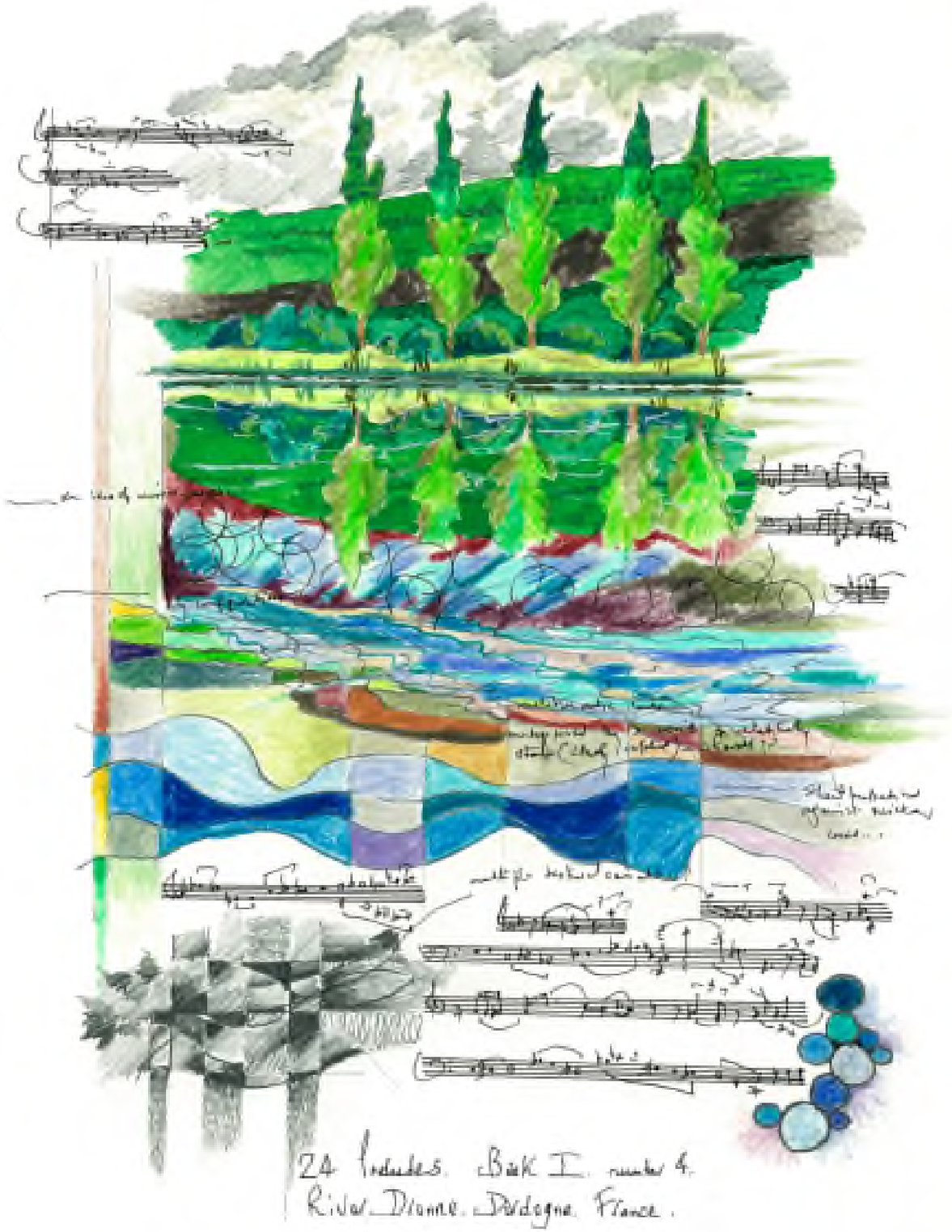
24 Preludes for Piano

Philip Mead

métier

EDWARD COWIE (b. 1943): 24 Preludes for Piano

Book 1 – Water			
1	I.	O Brook (Devon, England) in C major	3:16
2	II.	Kiama Blowhole (NSW, Australia) in C minor	2:50
3	III.	Cancleave (Cornwall, England, sea mists) in G major	3:19
4	IV.	River Dronne (Dordogne, France) in G minor	1:47
5	V.	St Maxime Beach (Provence, France) in D major	3:30
6	VI.	Tennessee River (Tennessee, USA) in D minor	4:38
Book 2 – Air			
7	I.	Boscastle (Cornwall, England, gale) in A major	2:06
8	II.	Hay Plains Twisters (NSW, Australia) in A minor	2:48
9	III.	35,000 feet (Straits of Java) in E major	6:41
10	IV.	Tapada (Portugal, thermal raptors) in E minor	2:18
11	V.	Lake Eacham (Queensland, Australia, night breezes) in B major	3:23
12	VI.	Dartington Gardens (Devon, England, autumn leaf-fall) in B minor	4:14
Book 3 – Earth			
13	I.	Uluru (Australia) in F sharp major	3:29
14	II.	Crackington Haven (Cornwall, England) in F sharp minor	1:21
15	III.	Rosedale (Yorkshire, England) in C sharp major	3:07
16	IV.	Glencoe (Scotland) in C sharp minor	3:25
17	V.	Brecon Beacons (Wales) in A flat major	1:17
18	VI.	Shenandoah Valley (Virginia, USA) in A flat minor	4:19
Book 4 – Fire			
19	I.	Sunrise (Loch Carron, Scotland) in E flat major	2:19
20	II.	Bush Fires (Bluewater, N.Queensland, Australia) in E flat minor	1:00
21	III.	Home Fire (Garlinge Green, Kent, England) in B flat major	1:56
22	IV.	Blast Furnaces at Port Kembla Steel Works (Australia) in B flat minor	3:14
23	V.	New Year Fireworks (Kassel, Germany) in F major	1:34
24	VI.	Sunset (Dartmoor, Devon, England) in F minor	2:57
Total playing time			**70:54**


24 Preludes. Book II. number 4.
River Dronne. Dordogne. France.

24 Preludes for solo piano: notes by the composer

The tremendous opportunity to re-release this cycle of preludes for piano – taken from the original UHR label (of the University of Hertfordshire) on Métier – is a huge pleasure for me. I am very grateful to The University of Hertfordshire for licensing this recording to Métier. In addition, of course, Métier's massive and ongoing support for my music, past, present and future has been a life-transforming and richly positive experience!

I freely admit that I seldom listen to recordings of my music after an initial period of 'getting to know' the album at the time of recording and release. This isn't because I don't like my music, but because I constantly want to find new things to do with music so have little time for retrospective listening. However, this changed with two important re-releases from Métier in the past two years. The first was a re-release (and re-mastering from the original vinyl recording on Hyperion) of my *Concerto for Orchestra* and my *Second Clarinet Concerto*. It having been recorded in the mid 1980s, I was very intrigued as to how I would feel about the performance and the recording itself. Since it's the **only** recording of large-scale orchestral music of mine on CD (there are several major works still awaiting the 'Lazarus' call), I found myself learning a great deal of the nature of the journey **since** arriving-at and departing-from that music.

The second is this recording of my *24 Preludes*, made in 2007 and released in 2008. The *Preludes* were in fact composed between late 2005 and mid 2007. Three instruments formed a central part of my performing activities between the age of 6 and 22. They were (in order of beginning to play) the recorder, the violin and the piano. I might conceivably have been a reasonably good violinist but for a serious rugby accident to my left shoulder and hand in 1964 when I was 21 years old. My piano playing kept pace with the violin but only when it wasn't possible to play the violin any more did I begin serious and much more focussed work at the keyboard.

Playing the piano to a reasonable standard was incredibly important to the emergence and confirmation of my life and work as a composer. It was and still is. But in those

earlier years of study (and exams), my experience of the instrument was of ‘particles’ of larger keyboard pieces such as a movement from a sonata or a short self-contained work such as a Bach Prelude and Fugue. As it turned out, one of those short pieces for piano that was set for my A-Level music practical exam was a prelude from the set of 24 Preludes by Chopin. The set work was the Prelude No. 14 in E flat minor! Neither my teacher nor I questioned the Examining Board on this choice of one of the toughest pieces in the 24-work cycle! For over a month, I battled my way into dealing with this work with its obvious imperatives for fluxes in time and intensity. However, there’d been a mistake! The actual work intended for examination was Chopin’s Prelude No. 4 in **E minor**!

This ‘mistake’ proved to be a seminal moment in my turning great attention not only to the Chopin cycle but also, within a short time, to others. I’d always appreciated the major formal differences and treatments between the Preludes and Fugues of Bach – especially where, from time to time, he writes fugues that are more like preludes and preludes that are the reverse, and **behave** more like a fugue. This idea of a ‘behaviour’ of a musical form took me right back to my earliest memories of hearing new music in my own head. Music, it seemed to me then (and still does), was and is a *natural phenomenon.* The palette of invention was always going to be a fusion of both recognisable musical forms and forms derived from observing, experiencing and studying nature. It was during the studies of the miraculously beautiful Debussy Preludes that I began to understand how much it is possible to link music with a ‘place’ and its associated forms of phenomenal activity. From fireworks to fog and from the waves of the sea to footsteps in the snow, these studies – more than perhaps any other great music for piano – sowed seeds of curiosity and invention in me too.

It was during this turbulent time in my early 30s and trying to play the Debussy Preludes that I was also fighting a battle with **harmony**. My earliest years of studying composition under Alexander Goehr were important and to some extent ‘mind-shaping’. British music in the early 60s was fighting to join the *avant-garde* so dominant in Germany and France at that time. And though Sandy (Goehr) was never to

suggest that I adopt a specific methodology or system for composition, I nevertheless felt compelled to at least **try** my hand and ear with serialism. Many other composers of the 1960s and 70s were also casting their creative nets into the 'oceans of dodecaphony'. It wasn't until my early 30s however that I found myself being tested by musical opinion on a large scale. Mainly, the reviews of my 'serial' works from that time were 'good ones'. But I seriously suspect that it wasn't my creative gifts that were being evaluated, but the closeness of my then musical style to the prevailing forms and flavours of the *avant-garde.*

But right in the middle of the 1970s, I moved into a state of rebellion. I abandoned serialism and, to a large extent, atonality. Instead, I experimented with *tonal drifts and weavings* between one key-region and another. And then – just as suddenly – I decided to fuse tonality with atonality in a kind of meltdown of harmonic procedures. It wasn't an easy step to take and the results varied, I think, between being striking or banal. I was still as self-conscious about this form of tonal fusion as I had been with serialism. Nevertheless, my music was now unremittingly connected to and with my perceptions of the forces of Nature. I began serious studies of both musical history and natural history. I also turned away more and more from massive one-movement forms (like my *Leviathan for Large Orchestra* and *the Concerto for Orchestra*), to more compressed pieces.

By the late 1990s, I was feeling much more secure in my treatments of both harmony and form. Returning as I did to actually playing the Bach '48' again but at the same time working on Debussy, I suddenly realised that **all** the individual works in the Bach '48' and Debussy Preludes, were like a series of linked parts to a greater whole. During the time that I was writing large-scale works inspired by Natural Habitats (*Gesangbuch* of 1974/5; *2nd string quartet of 1976; The American Symphony; Atlas* and *Symphonies of Rain, Steam and Speed (Choral Symphony)*), my field-studies were also proliferating. And it was a reflective study of these notebooks with their pictorial representations of places visited; notations of natural sound and animal, bird and insect songs; abstract notations on things like cloud movements, light on water,

firework displays at night, the raging blaze from blast furnaces, and autumn bonfires and much more, that I began to plan a cycle of Preludes arising from those global experiences of both natural and human-made phenomena.

I chose the 'Bach Cycle' of keys as the harmonic 'root' and 'routes' through this musical journey whilst at the same time grouping the 24 works into four books of six, each concerned with the **Four Elements**. Although it has only been in the most recent ten years that critics have begun to absorb, accept and write upon the 'pictorialism' of my music, it has **always** been my main concern that I might be a **composer of evocations.**

This is the driving force of this music. I don't think I ever told Philip (Mead) this, but it was his extraordinary recording of the complete piano works of George Crumb that most affected me in the way I composed my 24 Preludes! Philip has a phenomenal capacity for acoustic inflections. He literally 'flexes' notes as a painter would brush for colour on a palette of many colours. The more I listened to his playing of Crumb and many others, the more my imagination bloomed with possibility.

I reflect, then, that this recording represents a three-way fusion of approaches. The first is the direct but mediated responses to places and the things that happen there. The second is my ongoing exploration of and relationship with the piano, and the third is my special relationship to and with the performer, Philip Mead. Whatever special qualities this cycle might have are made all the more fascinating (I hope), by the multitude of creative impulses that arise from the conjunction between a sense of place, a part-knowledge of an instrument, and a close working relationship with a unique and very special pianist.

Edward Cowie, Cumbria. January 2022

Personal thoughts on the Cowie Preludes by Philip Mead

I was introduced to the first six preludes by the composer in 2005 at his home near the Dart River in Devon. They came as a beacon of light as I was emerging from a dark and difficult period in my life. I was immediately attracted to the pieces – difficult to categorise in their seemingly neo-baroque style yet wholly of the 21st century. Stark tonality yet with a non-tonal flavour.

In using the title *Preludes* for these pieces this immediately brought to mind memories of Debussy, Messiaen, Chopin, and Bach's 48. Interestingly for me it is not so much the Debussy and Messiaen Preludes (the nearest in time) which seem to be a shadow behind these works but that of Bach. There is an accent on polyphony, lithe, contrapuntal textures, sometimes even imitation, in strict 2-part writing. One can look for similarities with its predecessors but this seems to me a fruitless task as these works inhabit a wholly original world which only Cowie could create. Original, yet omnipresent, tonal, yet non tonal, full of movement yet also sometimes of stasis.

Certainly, as the composer has intimated in his introduction to the pieces, they are improvisatory in character and beget surprise after surprise. They need to be played with a freedom of movement as if being created spontaneously by the pianist.

Influenced by specific locations, the composer seems to have the unique gift of seeing and hearing simultaneously. Much of the writing is basically lithe and sinuous 2-part contrapuntal textures. Moreover the key scheme is the same as in Bach's '48' using the tonal minor rather than the relative minor, as in the Chopin Preludes for the pairs of preludes. The relationship with the Baroque goes further. The first Prelude, *O Brook*, indeed almost feels like harpsichord music except for the obvious need to occasionally use the sustaining pedal to sustain left hand chords. However the second, with its harmonics caused by silently depressing a minor triad (the only use of this device in the series), could only be played with the resources of the modern piano. It is as though the composer is almost leapfrogging over the romantic use of the piano back to the Baroque and also forward to early Stravinsky.

Having said that, the E flat minor Prelude (No. 20) has a kinship to the prelude in the same key by Chopin with its double octaves giving a wonderfully menacing evocation of the gradually all-consuming bush fires in Australia.

One unique aspect of these Preludes and one that has fascinated me ever since I first started to learn them is the way that often a movement seems to anatomise through its course into much quicker notes. An example of this is No. 5. But it is a recurring feature. No. 6 has tremolos in the left hand, suggesting the flow of a river. Nothing in Book 1 however prepares us for the tumultuous gale in cascades of notes in No. 7, the beginning of the second Book (air) and is no sharper contrast than to the next movement which evaporates into whispers of winds in the twisters of Australia.

For me the most extraordinary movement and my favourite is No. 9 with its hypnotic and mesmerising high notes which seem to hang weightlessly in the air at 35,000 feet. There are very few piano pieces that dare to simply repeat the same note for 3 minutes. This seems to me wholly unique in piano music. No. 12 – the only one of which I have personally experienced the location – shows a rich harmonic texture quite different from the others. This richness is carried over into Book 3 – Earth, Prelude No. 13. The low left hand thirds in No. 16 *Glencoe* give a vision of depth and grandeur, the beautiful present contrasting with the sorrowful past.

So these Preludes, enormously varied in mood and style, stand as a unique contribution to the piano repertoire. Requiring a rich palette of articulation, touch and tonal variety they will be an invaluable addition to any pianist's repertoire: a constant challenge and a constant delight.

Philip Mead


24 Preludes, Book 2, no. 7.
Barcelona, Catalonia, [Spain]

The Composer

'Considered by many to be the greatest living composer directly inspired by the Natural World'

Edward Cowie's first Prom commission was *Leviathan* – a large scale orchestral work premiered by the BBC Symphony Orchestra in 1975. It marked the first major event in a career that was to gain him national and international recognition for a new kind of 'voice' in the music world. Its title, arising from a conjunction between the mighty whale and a book by Thomas Hobbes with the same name can be seen as a signal of a composer whose imagination is deeply embedded in and inspired by the forces of nature. Throughout the 1970s and beyond, a stream of works inspired by wild places on this planet flowed into being, works like his sumptuous *Gesangbuch (1975/6),* (recently released on Signum Classics), the *American Symphony (1984), Mount Keira Duets (1985),* and his powerful *Choral Symphony, 'Symphonies of Rain, Steam and Speed'.* This immersion in the study of nature was born of a childhood spent in rural Suffolk and the Cotswolds and continues to form the core of his fertile imagination today.

But two further strands underpin and inspire Cowie's musical practice and ideas. His undergraduate studies in Physics and practical studies in Painting have been integrated into a kind of 'fusion-world' of ideas where science, the visual arts and music coalesce in a kind of creative continuum. In recent years, he has increasingly worked towards his music by means of '*field studies'*, theoretical research and painting-drawing. Studies and collaborations with leading physicists, for example, have not only seen exhibitions of his pre-compositional drawings, but have added a body of new music that directly translates scientific theory and experiment into music. His monumental solo piano series *Rutherford's Lights* was inspired by a study of the relationships between theories of light and colour, and his more recent *Particle Partita* for solo violin – with a sonic time-line of the history of particle physics.

These ‘fusions’ of disciplines, the bridges between study and practice are an essential part of the composer’s quest for new ways of forming. Parallels can be found between

the linear and pointillist textures, forms, and motifs in his music with the writings and paintings of Klee and Kandinsky. During his period as first Composer in Association with the BBC Singers (2002-5), Cowie produced a string of large and small-scale pieces that moved through landscapes and natural habitats all over the world. *Gaia, INhabitAT, Lyre Bird Motet,* and *Bell Bird Motet* are classic examples of a music that engages all of the senses with a profound respect for the power that nature has to move us.

Cowie was the first Granada Composer/Conductor with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra between 1982/4. This led to many conducting dates with other orchestras including the BBC Northern Symphony Orchestra; the BBC Singers, ABC symphony orchestras of Sydney, Adelaide, Queensland and Tasmania and the Seymour Group and the Australia Ensemble. He was the first Composer in Association with the BBC Singers between 2003/5 and first Artist in Residence with The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) for the same period. His work for television has included a major film on Edward Lear for Granada TV and his acclaimed BBC2 TV film *Leonardo* of 1986. He has also written and presented major radio series commissioned by ABC FM Australia as well as for BBC Radio 3 and 4.

Major public lectures include the Gertrude Langer Memorial Lectures in Australia, and the Kate Springett Memorial Lecture in London as well as a Ruskin Lecture at Oxford. He has been invited to give keynote lectures and recitals all over the world. As a visual artist he has had over 40 one-man shows in important galleries in the UK, Germany, USA, Australia and New Zealand and his paintings and drawings are in public and private collections in 19 countries.

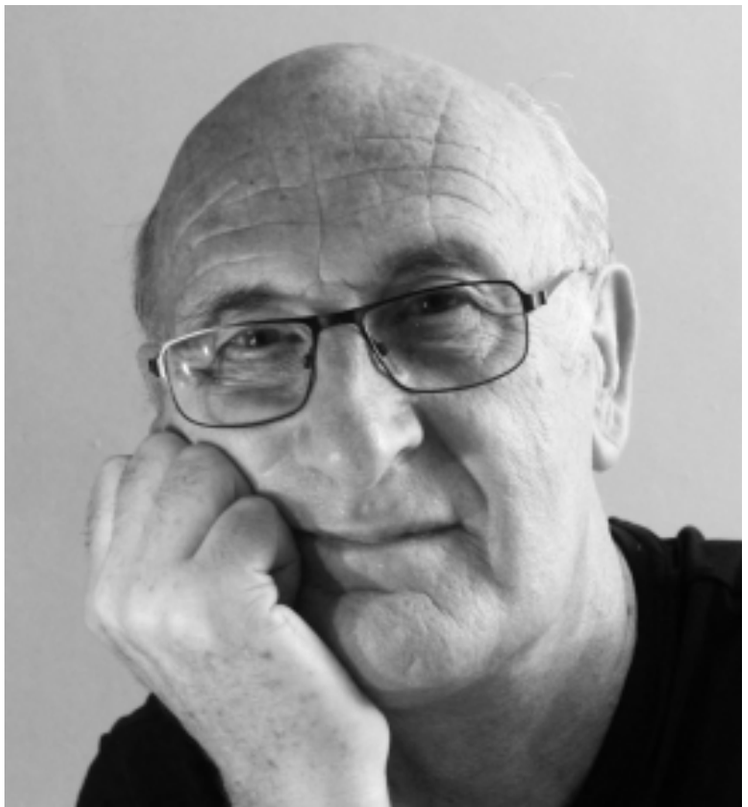
Other musical honours have included a Gulbenkian Award to study at The Royal Ballet; The Radcliffe International Composer’s Prize and a Chopin Fellowship to study with Lutoslawski in Poland. Cowie acknowledges Alexander Goehr as a major influence (as

Cowie's professor and teacher) on his life and work- an acknowledgement that continues in a warm and ongoing friendship.

As an academic, Cowie has held major professorships in two Australian and one British University as well as Visiting Professorships in Germany and the USA. He has two doctorates – a Ph.D which includes studies in physics, mathematics, music and fine arts and was awarded the first Doctorate in Music (D.Mus) from the University of Southampton for his work as a composer. He was awarded a Leverhulme Emeritus Fellowship for inspirational visits to Africa and California, both leading to major compositional outcomes concerned with bringing music to the world that *'warns of the dangers to the wild and living world through the continuing destruction of it at the hands of humanity'.*

Cowie's reputation continues to grow world-wide, and new recordings emerge with high praise and appreciation. His collaborations with major soloists and chamber groups are also enlarging and deepening. He still regards the human voice and the chamber-music mediums as the *'the most fabulously rich and varied palette of possibility in the expression of emotion and sensation'.*

He lives and works – harder than ever – in south Cumbria with his visual artist wife, Heather Cowie.



www.edwardcowie.com

Edward COWIE

The Pianist

Philip Mead studied at the Royal Academy of Music, London, and was an international prize winner in contemporary music. He has since performed at many festivals in Britain and overseas and has recorded for many radio stations. He had his own series on BBC Radio 3 exploring some hidden pathways in piano music.

He has been actively involved in contemporary music for many years and has given some important premieres. He gave the first London performance of the later Stockhausen Piano pieces, works by George Crumb, and Messiaen's monumental series of piano pieces called *Catalogue d'oiseaux*. In 2004 he gave the first British performance of Henry Cowell's *Piano Concerto* with the BBC Symphony Orchestra broadcast on BBC Radio 3 and BBC Television after having performed it at the Lincoln Centre, New York with the American Symphony Orchestra in the Bard Festival. He has been at the forefront of developing a repertoire for electronics and piano, working with such composers as Jonathan Harvey, Denis Smalley, Javier Alvarez and Horacio Vaggione and has toured them extensively. *Tombeau de Messiaen* by Jonathan Harvey has now become a contemporary classic and is performed by many pianists round the world. His CD of the works of Stephen Montague called *Southern Lament* was awarded the International Piano Award for best contemporary CD of 2006.

Since 1997 he became very interested in the possibilities of expanding the repertoire for brass and piano and has commissioned new works by composers such as Diana Burrell and Martin Ellerby, many of which are available on disc.

As part of his commitment to contemporary music in 1988 he founded the British Contemporary Piano Competition held every 3 years until 2014. He also founded a contemporary piano department at the London College of Music which dealt exclusively with 20th century/contemporary music. He has organised festivals of the works of George Crumb (1997) and William Bolcom (1998) in London, and has organised 6 complete performances of Bartok's *Mikrokosmos* most notably in 2014

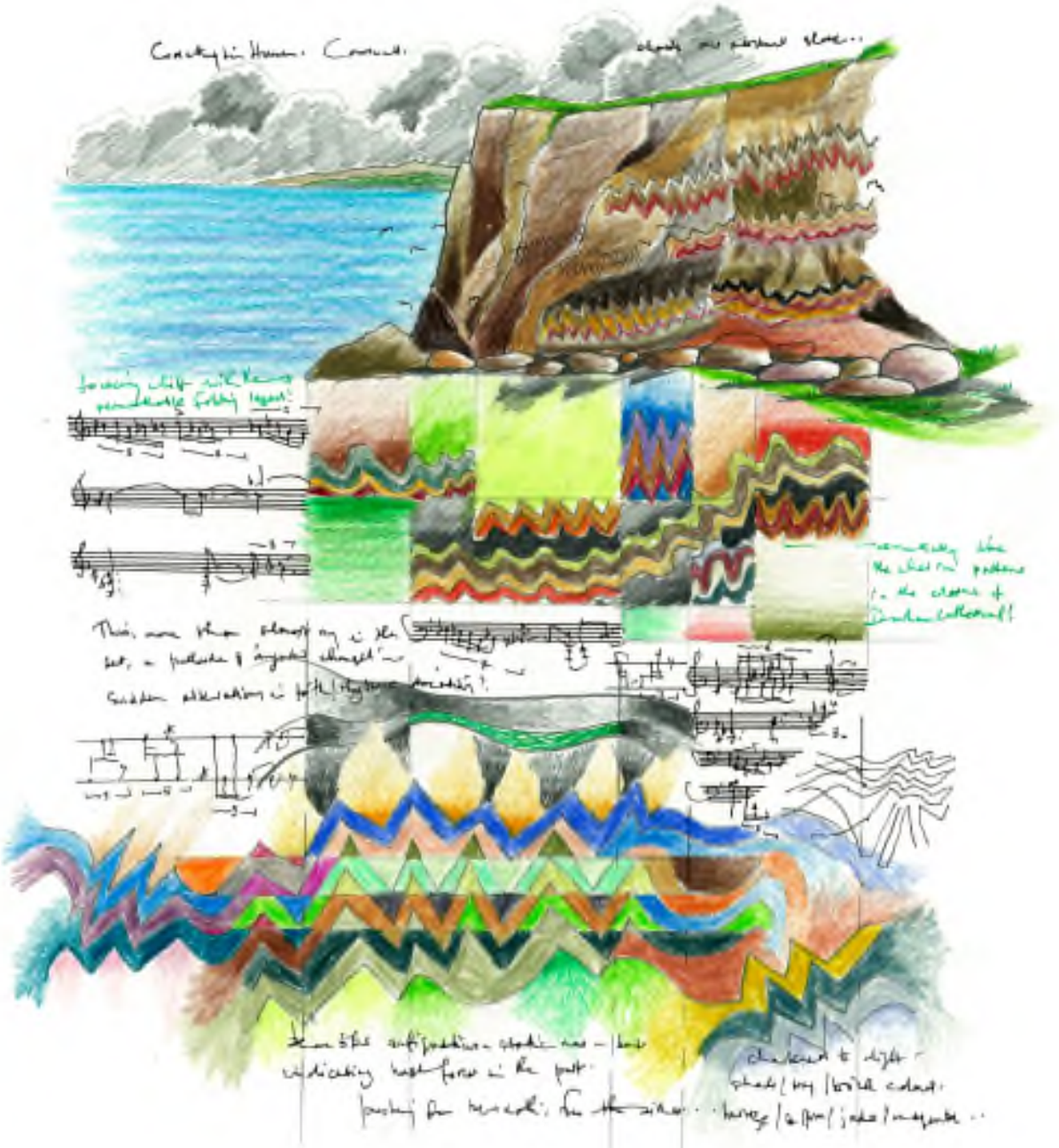
with 140 pianists from around England each playing one movement which raised £3500 for charity.

He has been awarded honorary degrees by the London College of Music and the Royal Academy of Music, and life membership of the European Piano Teachers Association for services to contemporary music. He conducts and directs the St Augustine's Singers which have performed works by Edward Cowie, and the St Augustine's brass.

Philip now lives in Cambridge, England, is a visiting professor of the University of Hertfordshire and teaches privately in his own studio.

www.philipmead.com

Philip MEAD



24 Preludes. Book 3. No 14.
Clachrington House. Cornwall.


24 Preludes. Book 4.
No 20.
Blueberry Beach
Bush Fires . N. Queensland . Australia.

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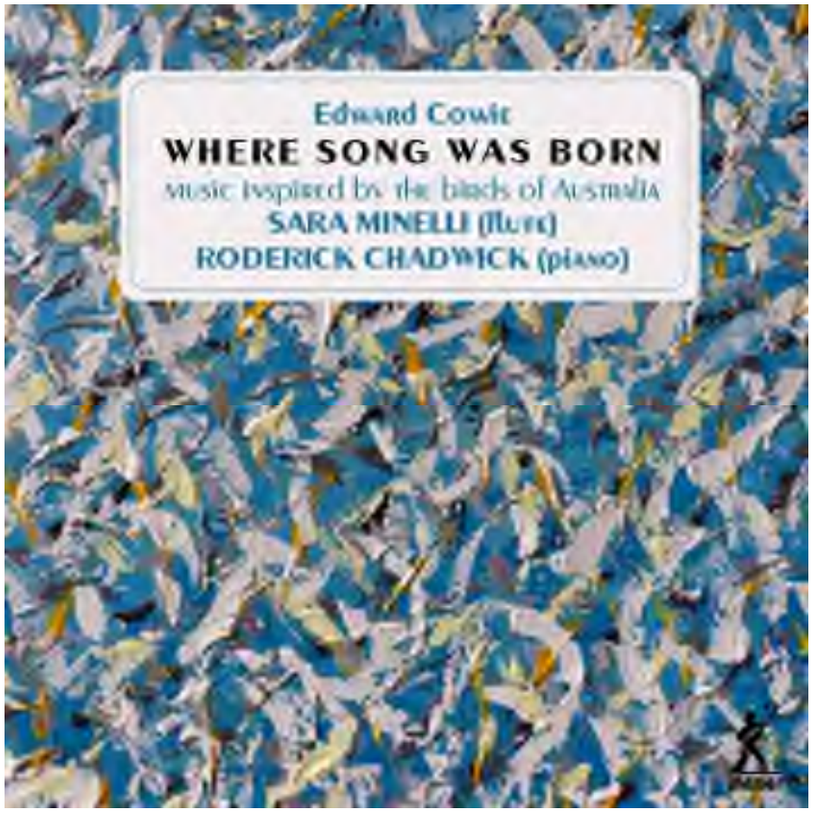

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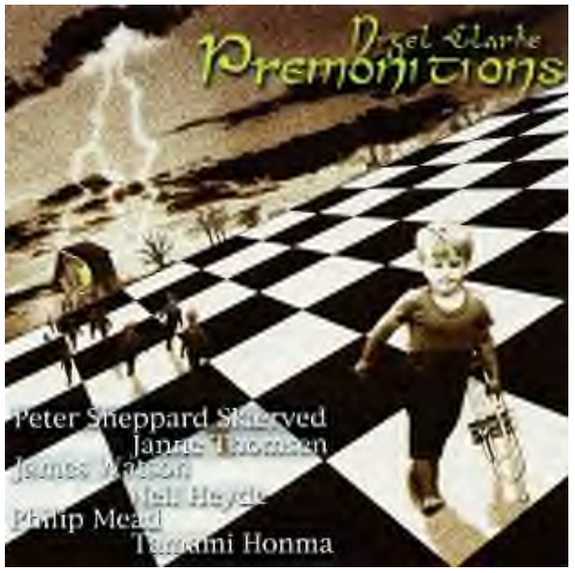

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The composer’s sketchbooks

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