

# septembr



METIER

G E O F F R E Y P O O L E

## THE IMPERSONAL TOUCH

The piano is my instrument, the one I have improvised on as far back as I can remember. Yet it can be the hardest instrument to compose for - so many ghosts of Beethoven and Chopin and jazz are poised there inside the fingers, ready to steal the show the moment your attention is turned. One of the ways I like to dispel those old ghosts is to think of the piano as a set of drums. That was the strategy in my piano piece *Ten* (1981) and it half applies in *The Impersonal Touch* (1995). That is to say, it applies to Piano 2 who sets off to explore some rather elusive 13/16 drumming riffs in an "impersonal" and almost minimalist way. But Piano 1 (in this case played by the composer) introduces a totally different attitude, impulsive with fleeting cascades and ricochets, lullabies and reveries that progressively destabilize the drumming patterns and provoke interaction. What ensues, in both parts, is unpredictable and complex, leading to a strenuous confrontation and an ethereal summation.

As an introduction to my music, this piece illustrates a larger point. It is characteristic that a cool strategy is offset by an often contradictory emotional tone: and yes, I am always fascinated by the drama of bringing incompatible things together and seeing what happens. When Mozart was asked the secret of good music, he said "if all is well here, here and here," (he pointed to his head, heart and ear), "then everything else will take care of itself". It doesn't of course. But what interests me is musical situations where the clear head and the pure heart find themselves, as they inevitably do in our fractured world, at odds; let them be articulated and mediated by the intelligent ear.

## SEPTEMBRAL

The 1993/94 season of *New MusICA* began with the London premiere of my concerto *Two Way Talking* for Ghanaian drummer (Kwasi Asare) and five ensembles - a big, extravagant theatrical sort of piece, which paraded a fertile enthusiasm for Africa and succeeded in making a "big splash". To complete the Poole portrait concert and a BBC broadcast, London Arts Board had funded a new commission, *Septembrall*, which I intend as a tribute to Gemini's director Ian Mitchell on bass clarinet.

At the time, this nuanced and emotionally complex movement was overshadowed by its brasher companion. Only in later American and British performances of the 1998 revision did it fully win the confidence of audiences and critics. Yet from today's perspective, *Septembrall* could be said to have solved the problems of stylistic integration that had been raised and dramatised in *Two Way Talking*. It works with the grain of European instrumental sound (where modernism often worked against it); it creates an individual soundworld and argues in aural rather than formal terms; it balances a full-blooded

expressivity and wide-ranging melodic lines with intricate rhythmic activity at the surface; and it unfolds as a chain of characterised tableaux in open form. In all these ways it seems to set the agenda for my subsequent music, both in the chamber music on this disc and in the larger works *Crossing Ohashi Bridge* and *ch'i kun* for string orchestra (1995, 1999) and the Hallé's gamelan concerto *Swans Reflecting Elephants* (1998).

The title *Septembr* will hopefully evoke a Keatsian image of the "season of mists and mellow fruitfulness". (A secondary implication is aural, sept timbres.) Yet under the surface the Autumn equinox is the critical moment when lengthening night starts to outweigh the bright of day, ripeness hurtling towards oblivion. The entwining of beauty and danger was something that one could not avoid experiencing in Kenya. *Septembr* tests our perception of exactly where a thing turns into its antithesis, caught up in a relentless torrent of events.

### **STRING QUARTET No. 3**

The Lindsays. I have heard them play literally hundreds of works, and have never failed to be enthralled by the experience of music lived on the edge, where it matters. The relationship began in 1978 with my piano quintet *Harmonice Mundi*, and deepened with the string quartets of 1983 and 1990, so I was delighted when Keele Concerts Society approached me with a commission for my third quartet to celebrate their Thirtieth Anniversary in 1997. The possibility of a festive piece crossed my mind, but it seemed more genuine to respond to The Lindsays as I know them - as world-class Beethoven specialists possessed of extraordinary psychological acuity and the mastery of expressive tension across a large canvas. And to myself as they know me, probably as an instrumental sadist. The recording is of a live recital at Sheffield Crucible Theatre given during the Spring Festival 2000.

My Third Quartet sounds most unusual. From the viola's opening Bardic speech-rhythms, or the dark timbre of fifths on the detuned G and D strings of the second violin, to the exploitation of folk dance and the atmosphere of spells and magic, my aim was to conjure an imaginary "Old English" soundworld as far removed from the sound of the classical quartet as my sunny "Gambian" second quartet (recorded elsewhere). As in *Septembr*, this is both a new world and a homecoming (after modernism, after Africa), making use of overlooked possibilities within the nature of our instruments, as well as exploring (alongside *Rune Labyrinth*) Anglo-Saxon cultural imagery.

The nine sections are loosely based on the eight tides or three-hour zones of a Saxon sundial, such as the celebrated one built into the wall of St. Gregory Minster, Kirkdale in Yorkshire. The piece therefore traces a circular path from pre-dawn, through the energies of the day to a black if moonlit night. There is one telling intrusion: the noontide meditation

on the rune *Wyrd* (Fate). Suddenly in its mysterious counterpoints and *col legno* clicks we occupy the dial's centre, or Eliot's "still point of the turning world".

- I i) *Ofanverthnott* (Viola incantation)
  - ii) *Morgan* (Earth, horizon, shafts of light)
- II iii) *Dael-mael* (Dance of light and earthly energy)
  - iv) *Mid-daeg* (Development of Dael-mael)
- III *The Web of Wyrd*
- IV v) *Ofanverthdragr* (Heat, fantasy, instability)
  - vi) *Mid-atten* (Dusk, responds to Morgan)
  - vii) *Ondverthnott* (Darkness envelops)
- V viii) *Mid niht* (A brilliant 'cello-moon penetrates black cloud-strata skies)

## **FIREFINCH**

Alright I admit it. The "oboe and piano" combination had always struck me as an acoustic disaster. But with Jinny Shaw's performance of *Rune Labyrinth* (composed in 1997 for her music-theatre group *Okeanos*) I realised the problem lay with the repertoire where the piano is made to provide a polite mushy sandwich for the oboe's limply pastoral cucumber. In reality, the oboe and piano are very different creatures, and both very hard and sparky but lying along totally different axes. Imagine a little bird as against its thorny tree perhaps; or a shy and elusive bird to its would-be captor? Our garden at Kenyatta University was sometimes graced by an African Firefinch, often hiding but occasionally parading itself in brilliant vermilion plumage and full song.

And could it be captured?

Again, the form is sequential and open, the logic is dictated by the ear. At two points there is a chase, and the piece boasts a dawn chorus written in seven superimposed polyrhythmic voices (four on piano and three on the oboe). More generally one hears open spacing, luminous harmonic fields and unpredictable dynamics at the microscopic level.

*Firefinch* was commissioned for the present performers by Andrew Burn representing Chester Summer Music Festival 1999.

© 2000, Geoffrey Poole

**Geoffrey Poole** showed prodigious talent as both pianist and composer from childhood, along with a multiplicity of interests extending far beyond music which he retains to this day. Though he grew up on the Epping Forest fringe of London, Poole's family origins in Suffolk exercised a strong early influence on him. It was to the UEA that he went to study Music with Philip Ledger, and the translucent soundworld of Britten is a perceptible ingredient in *Wymondham Chants*, an early commission from the King's Singers, and still a regularly performed item in their international repertoire. Graduating in 1970 he continued studies at Southampton with Alexander Goehr, Jonathan Harvey and Ric Graebner. Passing up more study-grants, Poole opted for life-experience, combining composition with jobs as labourer, driver, computer programmer, reviewer and piano teacher while his own scores began to receive broadcasts, major performances and awards. He subsequently undertook further studies with Alexander Goehr at Leeds University.

Poole's wide interests and questing mind are reflected in the frequent renovation of his own technique and aesthetic. He admires the structural power of classicism but rejects academic forms; he accepts the imaginative quest of modernism while distrusting its narrowness; he takes an active interest in Asian and African ideas but feels a need to re-integrate them within Western performance, and he makes use of computer-generated sound transformations while retaining the ear as arbiter. If the resultant of these divergent vectors is an engagingly unpredictable career that has sometimes got in the way of ready marketability in an increasing brand-led market economy, it has also enriched an authentic and highly distinctive voice that has won many passionate adherents. Important formative experiences include working in the field of contemporary dance at the *International Dance Course for Composers and Choreographers*, 1980, a two-year residence in Kenya (1985-87), a visit to Singapore in 1994 and a Visiting Fellowship at Princeton in 1997-98. An article on his early music was contributed to *Tempo* No.145 in 1983 by Andrew Burn, and his own reflections on the compositional challenge of African music are published in *Composing The Music Of Africa* (edited by M. Floyd, published by Ashgate in 1998).

An inspirational teacher, Geoffrey Poole has held successive posts as Lecturer, Senior Lecturer and Reader in Composition at Manchester University since 1976. His new position is as Reader in Composition at Bristol University, a post taken up in January 2001. Active in many genres, his music has received numerous important commissions and broadcasts and is performed internationally.

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**Joanna Porter** is a gifted and versatile young pianist specialising in contemporary and collaborative musicianship. An outstanding graduate of Manchester University and a pupil of Renna Kellaway at the RNCM, she divides her time between concert commitments, the RNCM and Chethams School of Music. Her collaborator on this occasion is the composer.

**Gemini** is a leading British ensemble specialising in contemporary music and educational ventures. Its founder / director, Ian Mitchell, is highly regarded as an exponent of new clarinet music.

bass clarinet: Ian Mitchell

violin: Caroline Balding

'cello: Tim Gill

piano: Julian Jacobson

Hallé oboist **Jinny Shaw** is founder-director of Manchester-based music-theatre company *Okeanos* which has championed new works for oboe, harp, visual projection and dancers from Philip Grange, Beth Wiseman, Geoffrey Poole, and many other composers. Her pianist is **Anne-Marie Hastings**, of the Bishop-Hastings Piano Duo.

**The Lindsays** are a string quartet of international distinction perhaps best known for their recorded Beethoven interpretations. Engaged as Quartet in Residence at Manchester University since 1977, they have also made considerable contributions to the development of new work by numerous living composers. Peter Cropper's consistently imaginative and pioneering artistic direction has been recognised in a Royal Philharmonic Prize and the Creative Britons 2000 Award.

violin 1: Peter Cropper

violin 2: Ronald Birks

viola: Robin Ireland

'cello: Bernard Gregor-Smith

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## chamber music by

### Geoffrey Poole

- 1 **The Impersonal Touch** 9:40  
Joanna Porter and Geoffrey Poole - pianos
- 2 **Septembr** 16:40  
Gemini
- 3 **String Quartet No.3**  
The Lindsay Quartet
3. I i) *Ofanverthrott* (Viola incantation) 5:20  
ii) *Morgan* (Earth, horizon, shafts of light)
4. II iii) *Dael-mael* (Dance of light and earthly energy) 4:20  
iv) *Mid-daeg* (Development of Dael-mael)
5. III *The Web of Wyrd* 2:06
6. IV v) *Ofanverthdragr* (Heat, fantasy, instability) 4:06  
vi) *Mid-aften* (Dusk, responds to Morgan)  
vii) *Ondverthrott* (Darkness envelops)
7. V viii) *Mid niht* (A brilliant 'cello-moon penetrates black cloud-strata skies) 5:27
- 8 **Firefinch** 9:02  
Jinny Shaw - oboe, Anne-Marie Hastings -piano

Total Time 56:45

This recording was made in the recital hall of Manchester University on 25 August 2000 (tracks 1 & 8), the Vestry Hall in the London College of Music and Media on 26 July 2000 (track 2), and the Crucible Theatre, Sheffield on 20 May 2000 (tracks 3 to 7). String Quartet No.3 is a live recording.

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Cover image: Frances Watt

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