

GORDON MCPHERSON

DETOURS

Psappha

METIER

DETOURS

In contemporary music we often seem reluctant to hold the mirror up to our own events and experiences, seeming more content or comfortable to search the world for drama, to explore Greek myth for narrative, or trawl anthologies of twentieth century verse for poetry to set, connecting up with "art" rather than the mundane and ordinary that screws up many of our days. In other words, never write about Brazil if you've never been to Brazil.

Detours concerns itself with personal memories and reflections concerning cars and it is very difficult to apologise for their confessional nature. The language of the five works draws upon musical loves and references from genres outside the classical canon. (This reminds me of something a fellow composer said recently which is probably relevant to the use of these references: In a talk I gave at a recent composition course, he intimated that in this "ironic" age it is very difficult to suggest the musical vernacular without it being misinterpreted as irony (either that or that dreaded misnomer "crossover"). This is indeed frustrating if the musical memories that fire your imagination are morning radio, punk, or the country and western boom of the early seventies.) Particularly in the first and third works, irony may perhaps be detected but the references here are meant to be, happily, real not ironic; annoying or unsuccessful perhaps but real nevertheless.

Echo's Tape (1998)

Many years ago after partaking of too much whisky I accidentally found myself in a rather beautiful stranger's taxi on the way to a party and rather than argue whose cab it was we decided to share it. Two years later, after a particularly awful relationship, we found ourselves in the same cab, splitting up for the umpteenth time. On the cassette was a country number sweetly sifting into all that wastful negativity and bile.

The car's registration code was E .

Memory Crash (1999)

In 1999, at a particularly fraught moment, my computer blew up. I thought that everything that had not been saved would be lost and in panic I drove the machine to the nearest computer hospital in Glenrothes.

The road there from Dundee is ancient and straight, kind of like the piece it inspired. There were very few corners to be taken and as such...

Only the Driver Deserves to be Saved (1998)

It seems important that no matter how fast things appear to be moving you should always try to be in control.

Lorelie (2000)

Before Christmas in 1997 I was involved in a car crash in Sauchiehall Street, Glasgow on a busy Saturday night. Thankfully I was not hurt although my car was almost written off. It had not been a good day, I had just split up with a flautist and Glasgow Royal Infirmary casualty department was not the best way to round it all off.

At the time I had been working on a short piece, *Lorelie*, and had been doing some research on the subject. What I had always expected to be a genuine Teutonic myth – the ancient German equivalent of the Siren luring sailors to their Rhine-soaked doom – turned out disappointingly to be nothing more than a nineteenth-century literary invention filling the void of history and myth with something that seemed to fit. The myth of the Lorelie seemed in fact to be exactly that, a myth. Fitting I suppose whilst trying to find inspiration from a more respectable source. I should have known better.

The melodic material for the work features extensive use of Bavarian herding calls using structural devices from the Hogschulle Frumentever manuals of counterpoint from c.1657. It centres around the flute.

Phoenix (1998)

The still underrated Jimmy Webb is one of those singer-songwriters that straddled the ballad and pop worlds without ever fully fitting into either. Generally regarded as one of the best post-war American song-writers, many of his songs have slowly become standards. 'By the time I get to Phoenix' was taken into the charts by Glen Campbell in 1967 and has been covered numerous times (perhaps most notably by the great Isaac Hayes in a glorious eighteen minute version - now that's brave).

The song was about the end of a love affair and an early morning journey from LA to Phoenix taken after the split. Later Webb admitted that it was an episode that actually happened, the difference being that it was a journey he never made, the song being more about something he would have liked to have had the strength to do than actually carry out. I was in a similar position once, the only difference being I didn't have a car. The piece remembers 3.00am in a Glasgow flat merged with a dream of the Californian plains.

Echo's Tape, Only the Driver Deserves to be Saved and Phoenix were commissioned by the Hebrides Ensemble with a financial subsidy from the Scottish Arts Council. They gave its première in the Queens Hall, Edinburgh in 1999. *Memory Crash* was written for Psappha and premièred by them in 2000 at the RNCM, Manchester. *Lorelie* was also written for Psappha and premièred by them in 2001 at the RNCM.

Maps and Diagrams of our Pain (1990)

Maps and Diagrams of our Pain was inspired by a long-standing fascination I have had with psychiatry, in particular the study of obsessive-compulsion disorders, a disease, wonderfully described by one expert as a "hiccup of the mind", which compels the sufferer to repeat seemingly meaningless acts and/or to think repetitive and disturbing thoughts. This would seem to suggest in obvious musical terms the use of something basic like ostinato, but no no no; I believe this misses the point of the particular pain of this disorder, in that each repetition of the action fails to capture the identity of the initial action which evoked the ritual. In other words, it is the fact that the actions are not repeated, or rather repeated imperfectly that creates the tension which is hopefully reflected in the work's struggle for a rhythmic and harmonic stability which is never quite achieved, even in the elongated coda.

The title is also partly an allusion to another form of obsession, one of dimension. The fear of small things seeming large, and large things looming small, microscopes and telescopes, the fact that one piece of paper the size of this page can contain both a map of the world and the schematic of a microchip.

Near the beginning of the work, as volume increases, more details emerge, details which encourage harmonic development. Structurally the work is the dialogue between these two obsessions and the self-generations that this dialogue produces.

Born of Funk and the Fear of Failing I - Born of Funk II - The Fear of Failing (2000/01)

Born of Funk and *The Fear of Failing* is not in essence a guitar concerto - such things are almost impossible to write. I have often thought the best way to listen to guitar is close up and intimately but this of course is not always too practical. As such, in ensemble pieces, the guitar becomes something else, and through amplification becomes something more akin to its electric cousin. This is not a concerto in the sense that, although the burden of movement and virtuosity is with the guitar, the whole piece works as chamber music where everyone follows the same programme - therefore no-one gets away with an easy time.

The title comes from a Jim Thomson novel - *King Blood*. Thomson has gradually become accepted as one of America's greatest writers - forging out a career writing pulp crime fiction with a particularly warped sense of morality. Much of his work now is known through the medium of cinema - most notably *The Killer Inside Me*, *The Grifters* and *The Getaway* (filmed twice).

The title refers to the actions of one of the book's protagonists whilst hanging around in a seedy hotel. Waiting to make his move, the sweatiness and nervous tension of his small movements come to the fore.

The phrase reminded me of the psychology of public performance, especially of concertos (have I mentioned this isn't a concerto); the strangeness of becoming removed from one's position on the stage and realising that the piece you are performing is slowly evolving before you as the performer gradually becomes spectator. It's a scary thing for any performer and I remember it only too well.

Anyway, I suppose the movements of this work are the wrong way round, in as much as the performer reaches this point at the beginning of the second movement - a point where all the confidence of the first movement is called into question.

Born of funk and the Fear of Failing was commissioned by the Dundee International Guitar Festival and was premiered at the Dundee Repertory Theatre by Allan Neave and Psappha conducted by André de Ridder in August 2000.

Gordon McPherson was born in Dundee in 1965. He studied at the University of York returning there for his Doctorate in 1988. His work has been performed and broadcast throughout the UK and abroad. His recent works include *On E*, commissioned by the Royal Scottish National Orchestra; *Detours*, commissioned by the Hebrides Ensemble; *Three Minute Philosophy*, commissioned by the Scottish Flute Trio and recorded by them with Tim Williams on METIER MSV CD92041; a third string quartet *The Original Soundtrack*, commissioned by the Salisbury Festival; *The Baby Bear's Bed*, recently premiered in Vienna and toured by Icebreaker; *Explore Yourself*, commissioned by the Brighton Festival; and two concertantes for guitar and ensemble commissioned separately by Bath International Guitar Festival – *Upbeat Destroyer*, premiered by the Composer's Ensemble – and Dundee International Guitar Festival – *Born of Funk and the Fear of Failing*. More recently *The Land of Cakes*, a three-act melodrama, in collaboration with the poet Don Paterson, was commissioned by the Dundee Repertory Theatre for their new resident-actor's ensemble.

McPherson's relationship with the Manchester based ensemble Psappha has been particularly long standing. In 1997 they commissioned *Moses*, which has subsequently been toured throughout the UK, broadcast and recorded, and in 1999 they premiered an added movement to the *Detours* cycle, *Memory Crash*, and also premiered *Saturday Leatherette*.

Recent work includes *The Waterworks*, a new large-scale music theatre work commissioned by the Paragon Ensemble concerning alien abductions using leaked CIA and NASA transcripts; a new orchestral work commissioned by the National Youth Orchestra of Scotland and the Royal Scottish Geographical Society; and a new large orchestral work *Zulus* commissioned by the BBC.

He currently teaches composition at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama where he is Head of Composition as well as lecturing in twentieth-century music and analysis at St. Andrew's University where he has recently been made an Honorary Lecturer.

Psappha

The leading contemporary music and music-theatre ensemble in the North of England, Psappha was formed in 1991 by its Artistic Director, Tim Williams, and has built up a repertoire of over 200 works and a reputation for outstanding technical and interpretational ability.

Psappha has promoted an annual series of concerts in its home city of Manchester since 1991, and in Liverpool since 1998. The ensemble has also performed at many leading UK music festivals, notably Aldeburgh, Cheltenham, Huddersfield, Bath, Buxton, Oxford, St. Magnus Festival in Orkney, the ISCM World Music Days in Manchester and the Henze Festival at the Queen Elizabeth Hall on London's South Bank. Psappha also gave the first ever public performance at Stormont Castle in Belfast.

Since its inception Psappha has commissioned works and given the first performance of many works by composers including Peter Maxwell Davies, Steven Mackey, Karen Tanaka, Anthony Gilbert, Rebecca Saunders, George Perle, Gordon McPherson, Paul Max Edlin, Paul Newland, Camden Reeves, Wang Sue-Ya, Ronald Caltabiano, David Froom, Theo Verbey, Cornelius de Bondt and Piers Hellawell.

In June 2000 Psappha gave the highly acclaimed première of a new music-theatre work *Mr. Emmet Takes a Walk* written by Peter Maxwell Davies with direction and libretto by David Pountney. The production won the Manchester Evening News Theatre Award for Opera 2000.

Psappha has toured to Australia, North America, France, Belgium, Holland, Ireland and Spain. Future plans include tours to Venezuela, Portugal, Czech Republic, Argentina, Switzerland and France.

Education projects are an important part of Psappha's schedule in both the UK and abroad – the ensemble has worked with a varied age range from primary school to university post-graduate students and was awarded the Swatch City Life Award for the Best Concert Series and Education Work.

In September 2002 Psappha became Artists in Association at Manchester University.

www.psappha.com

Nicholas Kok studied at New College, Oxford and at the Royal College of Music in London. Since May 1996 Nicholas has been Principal Conductor of the Sinfonia Viva.

He has worked frequently as guest conductor with English National Opera in productions of *Orfeo*, *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse*, *The Fairy Queen*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Così fan tutte*, *King Priam* and a double-bill of world premieres by Mark-Anthony Turnage. He made his Opera North debut conducting the world premiere of Simon Holt's *The Nightingale's to Blame*. Festivals at which he has appeared include Edinburgh, Orkney, Cheltenham, Huddersfield, Aldeburgh and the BBC Proms.

He has conducted many leading European orchestras including the Philharmonia, London Philharmonic, Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Royal Scottish National, Hallé, RSO Berlin and I Pomeriggi Musicali Milan.

In Stuttgart he conducted Purcell's *King Arthur* as well as *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* and *Hänsel und Gretel*. Future plans include a return to Stuttgart with *L'Italiana in Algeri* and *Semele* in Cologne.

Allan Neave is one of Britain's most outstanding guitarists. After studying at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama and the Royal Northern College of Music, he has achieved great renown and critical acclaim as a performer. He performs regularly at many of the world's leading musical events including the Sonorities, ICMC, Tychy, Bath and Cheltenham Festivals. He has worked with many influential musicians

and composers including Nikita Koshkin, Edward McGuire, Alasdair Nicolson, Gordon McPherson and James MacMillan.

Allan also founded the Dundee International Guitar Festival and has been its Artistic Director for the last ten years. He is presently a faculty member at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama and Napier University. Allan recently received the runner up prize in the Glenfiddich / Scotland on Sunday 'Spirit of Scotland' Awards 2000. These awards are set up to recognise individuals who lead the way in Scottish Culture. Allan recently gave his first tour of South America, which saw him perform at the ICPNA Guitar Festival in Lima, Peru.

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DETOURS

LIVE RECORDING

music by **Gordon McPherson**

performed by **Psappa** conducted by **Nicholas Kok**

Disc 1

Detours

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|---|--------------------------------------|-------|
| 1 | Echo's Tape | 8:50 |
| 2 | Memory Crash | 9:36 |
| 3 | Only the Driver Deserves to be Saved | 6:07 |
| 4 | Lorelie | 9:45 |
| 5 | Phoenix | 10:25 |

Total Time 44:43

Disc 2

- | | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|-------|
| 1 | Maps and Diagrams of Our Pain | 24:30 |
| | Born of Funk and The Fear of Failing | |
| 2 | I Born of Funk | 7:54 |
| 3 | II The Fear of Failing | 11:49 |

Total Time 44:13

Nicholas Kok – conductor (CD1: 1-5; CD2: 2-3)
Sue Frank – flute (CD1: 2 & 4; CD2: 2-3)
Ruth Davies – oboe (CD1: 1; 3 & 5)
Matthew Hunt – clarinet (CD1: 1-5; CD2: 2-3)
Ben Hudson – bassoon (CD1: 1, 3 & 5)
Lindsay Stoker – horn (CD1: 1, 3 & 5)
Richard Casey – piano (CD1: 1-5; CD2: 1)

Allan Neave – guitar (CD2: 2-3)
Tim Williams – percussion / cimbalom (CD1: 1-5; CD2: 2-3)
Liz Gilliver – percussion (CD2: 2-3)
David Routledge – violin (CD1: 1-5; CD2: 1-3)
Sarah Whittingham – violin (CD1: 1, 3 & 5)
Heather Wallington – viola (CD1: 1, 3 & 5; CD2: 2-3)
Jennifer Langridge – cello (CD1: 1-5; CD2: 2-3)



This recording was made in the Royal Northern College of Music Brown Shipley Concert Hall on 22 April 2001
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