



TIME or ME and IT

'Indoors' with the RLPO

Kenneth Hesketh reports on his time as the RPS/PRSF Composer in the House.

I write in the wake of a double success for the RLPO and Ensemble 10/10 at the RPS awards, a moment in time I could enjoy and feel relaxed about 'my time with the Phil'. Time hasn't always allowed such moments of calm and reflection during my stint 'in the house', but the last two years of the RPS/ PRSF/ RLPO residency proved to be incredibly rewarding and precious.

Whilst Composer in the House, I've not only had the opportunity to take part in programming, educating and (vicariously) performances of a major symphony orchestra (and attendant performing groups), I've composed, listened, spoken, interacted, and learned from the people 'front and centre', as well as the people behind the scenes, the heads of departments, people on the reception desk, tech. crews and box office workers. All were helpful and amazingly resourceful, even if time was always at a premium. The residency put a mirror to my own strengths and weaknesses as well, and I am, of course, still digesting the impact of it all. It was not without a moment or two of frustration, but needless to say, the experience has been a far cry from the 'ivory tower' image usually associated with the role of a composer. To be honest though, this 'tower' has been a ruined metaphor for a long time, as composers regularly show great flexibility in making their work accessible without compromising or dumbing down, thereby making new music relevant to audiences in their own individual way. The RPS/PRSF scheme was devised to facilitate this situation, and whilst there are other residencies, positions and associations connecting composer with performer with audience, it's certainly one of the most rewarding.

It has amazed me how much gets accomplished, day in day out, in the relatively little time available to those who have to make it happen and at the standard to which it is achieved. I'm also cheered by the surprising open-mindedness of a large part of the audiences with their response not only to my new works over the last two years, but to all work that was new, unfamiliar or just straight-ahead demanding. The RLPO and Ensemble 10/10 are past masters at eking out every minute of rehearsal time to ensure performances of a consistently high artistic level, making each new work a welcome addition to a programme and not just an unwanted guest (the particular concern of many a composer!).

I believe the players would also agree with me on the subject of shortness of time - they're busier now than ever, thanks to their own success (both live and recorded) and the guiding hands of conductors Vasily Petrenko and Clark Rundell (to name but two of the conductors I have worked with during this time) and, behind the scenes but equally important for artistic vision, Executive Director Andrew Cornell. I do wish there had been more time to get to know the players better, but then, getting to know a whole symphony orchestra of people takes more time than envisaged. That they are first-rate musicians and performers I learned in the first week however.

Lest this report seem merely a list of frantic goings-on, I should say that there HAS been time to chat to and hear feed-back from audience members (who come from far and wide to the Phil these days), as well as youth, amateur and community performers, visiting international musicians all taking part in the year-long City of Culture celebrations and beyond.

Writing a total of twelve new works for the various instrumental and vocal combinations the Phil had to offer (on top of work for other organisations as well) made sure I crammed as much in to every minute of the residency as possible. There were also pre-concert talks, programming meetings, panels and lectures at the RNCM and Liverpool University (where I'm now an honorary professor) making this an incredibly rich and varied time, if a somewhat exhausting one with a few sleepless nights thrown in. The new University appointment is an exciting extra benefit to arise out of the residency and will allow, I hope, the connection between me and my native stomping ground to deepen further.

Time ebbs and flows ("like the sea, like time" to quote Pablo Neruda, and the title of my own chorus and orchestra work for many of the varied forces at the RLPS), and my time as Composer in the House made me revisit much of my own past; there have been many 'Madeleine' moments which impacted my work much more consciously as a result.

May be reaching my 40th year during the residency - around the time of my BBC commission at the Proms 2008 - heightened my appreciation of time's passage. Whatever the reason, being at the centre of things in the city's musical life has deepened my compositional and emotional connection to Liverpool and the North-west, encouraging me to find time to allow a stay 'in port' (if not a ferry across the Mersey).

I wish the next incumbent of the scheme (and the next orchestra) as much time as possible to accomplish all the goals they set themselves and enjoy the many challenges and opportunities of being 'in-doors' as Composer in the House.

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