



COMPOSING *WELTETHOS*:
EINE VISION IN MUSIK
JONATHAN HARVEY

Harvey has a truly global reputation, particularly for his work in the field of electro-acoustic music (he has been commissioned by IRCAM on eight separate occasions), and is considered one of the most skilled and imaginative composers using the electronic medium today (receiving the Giga-Hertz Award for life's work from a jury including Boulez and Rihm). He has also composed for most other genres, including large orchestra, ensemble and solo instrumental. He is particularly renowned for his choral music, much of which is suited for church performance, most notably his church opera "Passion and Resurrection". He is frequently featured at all the major European music festivals. Harvey was Composer-in-Association with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra from 2005 to 2008, for which he produced an orchestral triptych: "Body Mandala" (2006), "Speakings" (2008) and "... Towards a Pure Land" (2005), and he celebrated his 70th year between May 2009 and May 2010 with many dedicated concerts, new recordings, festival focuses and composer portraits. Recent commissions include two works for chorus and orchestra: "Messages" (2008) (Rundfunkchor Berlin with Berliner Philharmoniker, and Fundación Patronata Semana de Música Religiosa de Cuenca), and a full-evening commission from Hans Küng's Global Ethic Foundation for narrator, chorus, children's chorus and orchestra (also Berliner Philharmoniker). – Address: 35 Houndean Rise, Lewes, Sussex, BN7 1EQ, Great Britain. E-mail: jharvey@cumulusine.net

My stay at the Wissenschaftskolleg was brief, less than 3 months. This was because of an accident I had had – truly a composer's accident – falling off a stage at a rehearsal of my latest opera. My nerve damage became steadily worse during the stay and has only re-

cently, in July 2010, begun to show signs of recovery. This did not, however affect the intense pleasure and stimulation my wife and I experienced, far from it; Wiko was a wonderful distraction. We made lasting friends and stored in our minds influential memories of people, atmospheres, ideas. The aura of kindness and encouragement was palpable.

My work went well. I was (and still am) engaged on a huge “oratorio”, one of the most important projects of my life. This is how it came about.

One day in 2006 I got a call from the manager of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, Pamela Rosenberg. Would I write a 90-minute whole-evening work with choir for them? Yes, I said quickly, in case she suddenly changed her mind or had made a mistake. It was an idea of the most famous theologian in the world, she went on. He had approached them with a project that Simon Rattle and the orchestra liked, and he had asked them to find a suitable composer. That’s how they came to ask me.

I had worked with the orchestra the year before – Rattle conducted my “Madonna of Winter and Spring” – so I was full of memories and visions of that imaginative, creative, expressive playing so characteristic of this extraordinary orchestra. I already had a commission from the Rundfunkchor Berlin (using also the Berlin Philharmonic) for what turned out to be “Messages”, a twenty-minute cantata.

That was written and performed in 2007.

The theologian whose idea it was is Hans Küng. He has devoted his late years to international peace, arguing that at this point in time – so critical politically, with the unprecedented power of mass destruction, and ecologically, with the spectre of the elimination of the human species, no less – it is imperative to arrive at a global ethical consensus. There is no need to invent a new declaration, he argues; the major cultures of the world have proposed an ethical guide, on which they all broadly agree, thousands of years ago. The ever-nagging notion of “moral relativism” (all cultures have different and often contradictory customs and mores) is, on careful study, subsumed into an overlapping consensus without violation of cultural integrity. This is an important point, since all too easily the allegation can be made that the West, as usual in its history, is assuming global moral superiority. Hans Küng is very keen to emphasise that the message is not just for religious people but for all people and great care has been taken not to impose exclusively a Western morality.

The German text he gave me consists of a key summary of the teaching and context of Confucius, Moses, Hindu scriptures, Mohammed, Buddha and Jesus. Each of these six is

then quoted and commented on by traditional writings. Finally each of the resulting six movements has a refrain sung by a childrens' choir.

Wir haben Zukunft:

Wir Kinder haben Zukunft, wenn wir immer Menschen bleiben.

Menschen mit Vernunft und Herz. Etc.

It seemed to me important for the refrain to be sung by children, to avoid any hint of preaching in a text about ethics, and to dramatise the universal urgency. They want a future, like Strauss' unborn children in "Die Frau ohne Schatten", but in a more immediate and present way.

At the time of writing these words I have completed the first five movements; the whole work will have taken about two years when finished. Living for three months at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, I was able to listen to the orchestra and occasionally ask Simon Rattle about questions of balance.

The difficulties of writing for choir and any other forces are always great. Even if the composer knows how many are in the commissioning choir, he has no idea how strong their voices are, whether their forte drowns the woodwinds' forte, or vice-versa. All choirs are different.

The demanding nature of the text forced me to be direct. I felt little need for the ludic element, for ingenious pattern manipulations or clever timbral or thematic puns. Not to have this policy this would have been like the world leaders at the Copenhagen climate change summit scoring vote-catching points off each other while the children of the world sense their lives being thrown away. In this same way, my *Messages*, which set only the names of angels as text, was a good focuser. If one believes in the strength of angels to some considerable degree, any purely musical ambitions are impertinent. The responsibility this project of Hans K ung's demands is likewise almost awe-inspiring.

The only musical idea suggesting a specifically musical discourse of creativity that came right at the beginning was that of using two conductors. The play of simultaneously different tempo-worlds seemed a natural extension of the huge forces arrayed on stage.

The Confucianism movement, the first, uses complex time relationships in a manner inspired by contemporaneous music theory. Confucius also maintained that the moral effect of music is its value. The harmony, or should it be Harmony, between Heaven and Earth is what music makes clear. It is not about personal emotion but rather about how

earthly music reflects heaven. There are plenty of rhythmic “reflections” and imitations and very few “subjective” thirds and sixths in my music here, more fourths and fifths, and plenty of wooden percussion sounds. Wood is more suitable than skin, which invokes slaughter, and metal, which invokes industrialisation; wood is the most harmonious percussion element.

I always start out with sketches in words and notation stretching out months or years before the serious composition starts. Then I ponder the nature of the work, what I want to *express*. This is not necessarily manifested in images or energies that refer outside music, but very often, in a work such as this, it is. For the second movement, the image of Moses on Mount Sinai, communing with God and receiving the ethical precepts that were to change the course of Judaism and much of the world, was of striking drama. There were “thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud; so that all the people that was in the camp trembled.”

The ram’s horn, or shofar, is the most characteristic of the ancient Hebrew instruments still to be ritually used, and the idea of the trumpet/shofar announcing the ethical revolution haunted my mind and my scoring. The strong emotions of the Hebrew bible are at the opposite end to the objective philosophy of Confucius. So the music changes. There is also the passionate ghost of Jewish music, in the glissandi of the woodwind instruments, for instance. The echo of an otherness to the Western ear.

Once I have a musical idea, it imposes its own exigencies. I try to transform it and bring out its full range of ambiguities, without switching to new material. My instinct is that too many contrasts become tedious, but invention within narrow boundaries leads to structural depth, the goal of all music. If the “spirit has seized one” as Beethoven would have put it, then the invention will be wild, even if confined.

This Middle Eastern otherness is further developed in the Islamic movement, where the ancient technique of building modes from two tetrachords becomes a compositional strategy. There is a system of modulation from maqam to maqam, changing one tetrachord at a time. The tetrachords include microtones. So the modulations are very clear.

The dangers of a Westerner meddling in cultures he does not deeply understand become especially strong when setting the Qur’an. There is one passage where this is done, and I read and consulted widely on the long controversy concerning music and sacred Islamic practice. The Qur’an is inseparable from its recitation. And the recitation, being the voice of God as revealed to his Prophet via the angel Gabriel, must not be fixed, rather

it is the inspiration of the moment expressed by highly trained and devout people, following certain guidelines as to pauses and how to pronounce the vowels, etc.

As I am setting it in German translation, like the rest of the work, these restrictions do not really apply, and I followed my precept to be absolutely direct, setting the words for homophonic a capella choir, very soft and slow, with no “musical devices”. The text is beautiful, and I try to allow it to speak, without getting in the way. I had much help at Wiko both from expert Islam scholars and from the extraordinary efforts of the library.

The first image I had for Hinduism, the third movement, between Judaism and Islam, was of Nataraja, the dancing cosmic creator god, an aspect of Shiva. So this movement dances, and a high degree of colour arising from intense energy is here germane to the underlying meaning. The full organ (a powerful one in Berlin’s Philharmonic Hall) is deployed in tango with the full orchestra, negotiating complex rhythms.

But the other essence of Hinduism is inner control and the realms of meditation. So here is also meditative, inward, tranquil music, “chanted” by the massive chorus with closed mouths and slow yogic breathing rhythms.

And so for at least six more months my work will go on, finding image and lighting up an expansion, with these extraordinary texts that are so different from anything I have set before. Rather than being poetic or mystical, they are pragmatic, noble and ethical. The purpose has become social rather than aesthetic.

Without Wiko, such concentration would have been hard to achieve indeed.