COMPOSER-IN-THE-HOUSE

From *Clockwork*, an opera inspired by the award-winning novelist Philip Pullman, to *Names of the Dead*, a response to the dead of the war in Iraq; from *New Cabaret Songs*, following in the tradition of Brecht and Weill, to the *Matins for the Virgin of Guadalupe*, a tribute to the disenfranchised, the music of Stephen McNeff, the BSO's new Composer-in-the-House, offers a rich vein of creative imagination.

The Composer-in-the-House scheme is the innovative brainchild of the Royal Philharmonic Society and the Performing Right Society Foundation which was launched last year with funding from the two organisations, and also in partnership with BBC Radio 3. The BSO was delighted and proud to be the first orchestra that the RPS and PRSF approached to host the scheme and Stephen McNeff's two year appointment starts this September, although, as you'll gather from this article, he's already hard at work!

Stephen has built up a body of work across many genres, but has particularly become known for his work in music-theatre since the interaction between drama, music and text has been a major compositional impulse for him. Examples are his work for Unicorn Theatre, which specializes in children's theatre, for which he wrote the music for the company's adaptations of Beatrix Potter stories such as *Jemima Puddle-Duck & Friends*, and his community opera, *A Thousand and One Nights*, which was commissioned by the Anvil, Basingstoke.

McNeff's inspiration often comes from literary sources too, for instance the *Matins for the Virgin of Guadalupe* written for Patricia Rozario, and another genre that he's made particularly his own is the wind orchestra and concert band with pieces like *Ghosts* literally travelling around the world.

In the last year he's become known to a wider public through his most ambitious stage work to date, his opera *Clockwork,* a further commission by the Unicorn Theatre. It received glowing reviews, toured the country (including the Lighthouse, Poole) before playing to three weeks of sold-out houses at the Linbury Studio, Covent Garden, and was nominated for a British Composer's Academy award.

But where did all Stephen's creativity start? Although he was born in Belfast in 1951, he grew up in Swansea and it wasn't until his early teens that an interest in music suddenly emerged through watching Ken Russell's television film on Debussy. 'It made a profound impression on me', he says, and thanks to a charismatic music teacher at school his evident emerging talents were nurtured. He started composing in those years as his natural means for artistic self-expression. After school he studied composition at the Royal Academy of Music (where his contemporaries included Peter Rendle, the BSO's co-principal oboe) and to earn some money he began to work backstage in West End theatres which led to his fascination for theatre and stagecraft.

This activity led to his first encounter with the BSO, for when working on Jimmy Tarbuck's summer season in Bournemouth, on his night off he went to a BSO Sunday evening summer concert at the Winter Gardens.

A succession of jobs in the west country with theatre companies followed, when he gained a huge amount of practical experience, writing and directing music for productions as well as conducting musicals such as *Anything Goes* at the Northcott, Exeter. All this put him in good stead when he co-founded SW Music Theatre which toured all over the south and south-west of England. However, funding such an enterprise was never easy and new opportunities beckoned in Canada, where he was composer-in-residence at the Banff Centre for the Arts and then artistic director of Comus in Toronto. When he returned to the UK, he settled again in the south-west, and worked on post-graduate studies in music and theatre at Exeter University. In 1992 he moved to London where he lives with his wife Charlotte, a sculptor, and ten year-old daughter Bridie.

The concept that the Royal Philharmonic Society and the Performing Right Society Foundation developed for the Composer-in-the-House scheme was one where the composer would have a far closer partnership with the musicians of the orchestra, the principal conductor, the programme planners and the audience, than in a conventional residency.

not in an ivory tower

Andrew Burn introduces the BSO's new Composer-in-the-House STEPHEN McNEFF

It was to be much more than just composing works for the orchestra; rather it would be a two way process of discovery and development and McNeff clearly relishes the vision. He's intensely excited at the prospect of working closely with the players and Marin Alsop, and the opportunity to compose for the BSO is providing for him 'a release of creativity', enabling him to 'think and dream in the technicolour possibilities of the orchestral palette.'

McNeff clearly views the post too in the tradition of the Kapellmeister where the composer didn't 'write in isolation in an ivory tower', and if there's an occasion where a piece of music is wanted, then he's happy to provide it. Indeed such is his enthusiasm that he's writing a piece for the BSO summer concerts well before the official starting date of his new post. It's a short, snappy, upbeat overture-like work titled *Reeling*. Beyond this in the first year of the relationship, we can look forward to *Heiligenstadt* which Marin conducts in the Poole series on 9 November (as well as in Bristol and Basingstoke), a new version of some of the songs from *Matins for the Virgin of Guadalupe* for voice, strings, harp and percussion, which the composer himself will conduct in the string ensemble concerts in Newton Abbott, Andover and Bradford on Avon on 2, 3 and 4 November respectively.

There will be a piece for the Christmas concerts; and Kokoro will be performing his *Windroschen* and his *Hegley Songs* (29 October and 28 January). Finally on 4 February Marin will conduct the première of *Secret Destinations*, as the opening item in a concert planned as part of the RPS/BBC Radio 3 Encore project which will also feature works by two composers resident in Dorset, Jonathan Lloyd and Sir John Tavener.

Apart from all this he'll be giving pre-concert talks and working on education projects and the latter has also led to a new piece, *Bitterne Variations*, commissioned separately by the BSO's Education Department and Southampton Music Services for the Mini BSO, the Orchestra's main education ensemble, which will form the starting point for a composition project with secondary schools in the city. Alongside his BSO activities he will also be finishing a young people's opera for the Royal Opera House based on Michael Morpurgo's novel *Gentle Giant* which receives its première in February 2006.

What can listeners expect when they hear Stephen's music for the first time? Four elements in particular strike me: a penchant for melody, harmony that has tonal roots, vivid rhythmic energy and an ear for instrumental colour. And all this is combined with a clearly focused, practical musical mind.

His own musical tastes are broad including Kurt Weill and Harrison Birtwistle and when posed the question who would be the three composers from the past who he would have loved to meet, the answers come without hesitation: 'Bach because he was a practical working musician; Monteverdi, the man who invented opera and made it work, and Verdi a composer of the theatre who involved himself in the real world'. Being 'involved in the real world' is undoubtedly central to Stephen McNeff's philosophy as a composer as I think the coming months will show.

