

Maxine Thévenot • In The Press

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JUDITH BINGHAM

By Maxine Thévenot

“JUDITH BINGHAM” is the buzzword of the moment in composition circles. Winning British Composer awards in 2004 and 2006, and winning the 2004 Barlow Prize for choral music, as well as being appointed Associate Composer to the BBC Singers in 2005, Ms. Bingham is constantly in demand, writing new works for the BBC Proms, the BBC Philharmonic, and the Leeds Festival Chorus, to name but a few. Continuing the trend across the Atlantic, Ms. Bingham has been asked to write an organ concerto for the 2008 AGO National Convention in Minneapolis. Born in the north of England and educated at the Royal Academy of Music, she has always made composition an important part of her life. At the Academy, she studied singing with Erich Vietheer and composition with Alan Bush, Eric Fenby, and, most importantly, Hans Keller, with whom she studied privately. When asked about her lessons with Hans Keller, Ms. Bingham said: “First, the lesson all teachers try to drum into their students—less is more! He would often use Beethoven as an example, early Beethoven being full of ideas whereas the later Beethoven only needs a four-note cell to create a whole piece. It’s so common when you’re young to throw away good ideas and not develop them. The second thing he said to me that I always remember is that you have to work towards spontaneity: he would cite the opening of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, and how long it took him to arrive at that idea. (I also think that Shakespeare did not immediately think of “To be or not to be.”) It took me years to really understand what he meant, but it was a profound thing to say. To me, it applies specially to the endings of pieces. The end of a piece is so important—if you get it wrong, you cancel out a lot of the good work in the rest of the piece; people take away a bad impression. I so envy those who do great endings—the Russians are particularly great at them, especially Rachmaninoff—the energy of the piece goes right up to the last note. It’s thrilling. I find that you need to allow yourself plenty of time to do the ending of a piece and not lose interest, and throw it away.”

So what has been the result? When questioned about her compositional style, Ms. Bingham feels that she doesn’t fit into one particular style. Words

like “atmospheric, emotionally intense, economical, formally logical and classically based, actorish” are her way of describing the uniqueness of her style. Growing up in Sheffield has left its mark on her work. “I think my music was initially very influenced by the acting I did in my teens in Sheffield—I was in a youth theater group at Sheffield Repertory Theatre, and I was completely stagestruck. I visualize my pieces when I write them, often as if they were dramas or films. If I have an individuality, then I think it comes partly from the harmonic language, which I am very aware of, and partly because I put layers of meaning into a piece deliberately: an easy doorway in is the program (I always write program music), and then progressively more unsettling aspects. I like to spellbind audiences, and one way to do that is with beauty.”

Singing and composition have always gone hand in hand for Judith Bingham. From 1983 to 1996, she was a regular member of the BBC Singers, Britain’s only full-time chamber choir. The impact of being a professional singer has also influenced her compositional process, especially when writing choral music: “I would say that singing has really influenced the way I write both consciously and unconsciously. My music is melodybased. I never understand how minimalists can write music without melody. I wait for it to happen! I always had a facility for writing melodies, and they definitely come in breath lengths, whatever I’m writing for. Breath informs everything—I admire musicians who can do circular breathing, but when they do I miss the expressiveness of breath lengths. I think I anticipate what singers will do, and that becomes part of the expression. There is a drama to breathing. Being in the BBC Singers was a huge education in notation, and the psychology of performing. You can really influence the tuning of singing by the way you notate the music; I think the reason that Howells goes out of tune so often is that the breath lengths are slightly too long and he writes all those flats and even double flats. If you’ve been in a choir, you understand how people help each other and also what it is possible to hear: a lot of composers do not understand that once you’re singing you can’t always hear everything. I do believe that every composer should perform, at least for a while—and not just the odd bit of conducting, but understanding how performers put themselves on the line for you personally, how vulnerable that is, and how much courage it takes—and technique!”

Ms. Bingham’s output ranges from orchestral and

choral works to scores for brass ensemble, band, and solo instruments. She has quickly become a major force in the organ world, too. All of Ms. Bingham's music has a strong visual or literary theme. What are the roots of this? "Well, we live in a very visual age, and I think if people find a program in a piece it gives them a way into the piece. As people are often nervous about new music, this can be very helpful. This is not always true though, and some people, especially men I find, prefer something abstract that they can hang their own thoughts on. Someone came up to me after a performance of my string trio and said he had been irritated by the program as it had stuck in his head and he hadn't been able to think of anything else! So not everyone likes it. I do it, though, because I always think in dramatic terms, and often have artwork or photographs in front of me when I write. Sometimes I have a dramatic idea in my head and will find pictures of actors that fit that idea. It is an intense way of working—every piece has its own enclosed world, and I find it difficult to go back to a piece later for whatever reason; it has become as inaccessible as a dream. I have favorite painters that I use regularly—Samuel Palmer (19th-century visionary landscape painter) and William Blake are two. Sometimes, if I have time, I'll do some artwork of my own to go with a piece."

Looking deeper into the themes she uses, subject matter such as alpine scenery and mythology seem to be recurring imagery in her work. Do they have some psychological meaning? "Certainly, alpine images have recurred right through my career and still do. The image of snow crops up regularly, and stuff to do with Englishmen in the Alps—Turner, Shelley, etc. Mountains occur quite a lot—there were some pieces about the Carpathian Mountains. It has a strong psychological connection for the element of impossible goals and an endless uphill-struggle comes to mind!"

Chartres, inspired by the impact of visiting the great French cathedral and the only largescale orchestral score not to be commissioned, finished in 1987 but not premiered until 1993, was a major turning point in Bingham's life and launched her career with major performances and commissions by the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra, the London Symphony Orchestra, King's College, Cambridge, the Three Choirs Festival, Westminster Abbey, St. Paul's Cathedral, and the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra. Did that long work inspire her to continue writing large-scale compositions? "At the time, no! I wrote it as an act of faith, and then could not get anyone to perform it. It depressed me a lot and I put it on a shelf. After it was performed, about seven or eight years later, I had a commission straightaway for another big orchestral piece, *Beyond Redemption*. But I never did anything

on such a scale again until I wrote *The Ivory Tree*, the dance-drama that was done in 2005. Orchestral pieces are a huge amount of work, and in this country it is hard to get multiple performances. I was very pleased that *The Temple at Karnak*, which is a concert opener, had about 20 performances as it was performed on three different tours. Orchestras seem to think that they have a duty to commission but no responsibility to the piece after that. It is impossible for an audience to really 'get' a new orchestral piece without several hearings. As rehearsal time is so short here, it is also much easier for the players if they can come to grips with a new piece over several performances. I am proud of Chartres and glad that I wrote it, even though there was no encouragement: at that time (the 1980s). People thought I was a choral singer who wrote a bit of choral music now and then. Nobody knew about all the stuff I had done in the '70s. When Chartres was finally performed, there was a kind of collective jaw-dropping, and my career took a big leap forward."

For 2008, Ms. Bingham has been commissioned to write an organ concerto, scored for organ and strings, for the AGO National Convention. What preparation over the years, in terms of experiences in relation to the organ, have there been? "I don't remember where I first heard the organ, but I was lucky to know David Roblou as a student, and he played the harpsichord and organ, and commissioned me to write for both. My student organ pieces are completely mad! They are covered in detailed registrations; I had not grasped the idea that all organs are different. But I always loved the instrument. The visceral experience of hearing organ music in big buildings is just thrilling for me. I understand that it is really daunting to understand how to write for the instrument, but I feel that students are really missing out if they don't. It's so versatile, and a great instrument to have as part of the orchestra—it can be a filler or completely overwhelm the texture. As the orchestra tends to be top-heavy, it is also very useful for its low notes. I still feel that I struggle to understand it, but I do accept now that you cannot completely control what will happen—you must hand that final chapter of the piece over to the performer. Like any aleatoric thing, that can be thrilling or awful! I really enjoyed working with Thomas Trotter (on *The Secret Garden* and *Ancient Sunlight*), as he had an amazing way of registering the piece, which produced wonderfully subtle blends of sounds, beautiful soft sounds. I wouldn't have a clue how he did it. I was in awe! It is a tremendous privilege for any composer to work with a great artist."

A large output of organ music has flowed from Ms. Bingham's pen, and one wonders which work she would consider demonstrative of this genre. "I

like Ancient Sunlight, but St. Bride, Accompanied by Angels has been played a lot, as has Incarnation with Shepherds Dancing. I think that Ancient Sunlight shows off an organ well, and I hope that it might be chosen to showcase a new or newly restored organ.”

How does she put together these works— is it an individual experience or does she like to work alongside the artists themselves? “I like to start off with my own vision and try to describe that sound verbally rather than being too specific. I try to make sure that what I’m doing is possible, manual-wise, then I generally hope that the organist is imaginative! I loved working with Robert Quinney at the fabulous organ in Westminster Cathedral. There have been some great performances from Michael Bawtree and Jonathan Vaughan, among others. I’m not sure I would be the best judge of what organ piece is the best!”

So, what of the organ concerto for the 2008 National Convention? Stephen Cleobury has been invited to perform it, which must have some impact for Ms. Bingham in her thought processes, but what other guidelines have been suggested? “Very few parameters: it will be about 15 minutes long, and is for organ and strings. I hope that this small line-up will make it practical for churches as well as the concert hall. I have been thinking about the performer, whom I know very well, and his character. I like to think of myself as a tailor when I know the performer I’m writing for. Tailors can, of course, make or break an occasion!” Any verbal clues as to how it will sound? “I think it will be a very English piece, with an English program.”

What of other works in the pipeline? “After the concerto, my Requiem for the BBC Philharmonic and Leeds Festival Chorus will be premiered. I’ve been thinking about this for months now. The initial inspiration for this piece comes from the Solemn Requiem Mass for Princess Diana that was held at Westminster Cathedral: the opening procession was one of the most moving things I’ve ever seen. I squirreled it away for further use!”

So what inspires you outside the musical sphere? “I’m a quiet person and I like reading, watching films, gardening, and lately genealogy. My idea of heaven is a big bookstore with a coffee shop in it.”

With that we leave Ms. Bingham to return to her writing desk (or maybe the bookstore) and eagerly await her forthcoming work. Audiences and performers alike have grown to become joyfully expectant of yet another new nugget of inspiration to emerge from Judith Bingham. Details of Ms. Bingham’s published works are available at www.editionpeters.com and www.maecenasmusic.co.uk.