



When Worlds Collide, The Music of Nigel Clarke

Brass Band Buizingen, conductor Luc Vertommen, with Harmen Vanhoorne (cornet), Glenn van Looy (euphonium) and Frank Renton (speaker)

88931-2

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Between 1994 and 1997, Nigel Clarke was Composer-in-Residence of Black Dyke Band. James Watson engaged the young composer to challenge his band with fresh musical adventures and Clarke achieved this in a series of bold creations, one of which is included in this terrific double album. The ghostly woops and wails that open and close his Euphonium Concerto, *The City in the Sea*, reveal Clarke as an instinctive creator of mood and atmosphere. This difficult work - for soloist, band and listener - paints a vivid picture of Dunwich, once a major port town on the Suffolk coast, which was all but engulfed by the sea in 1326. The music contrasts lean, almost terse, counterpoints with evocative wisps of tuned percussion. Glenn van Looy matches the work's first soloist, Robert Childs, in his attention to the detail of the hugely demanding solo part.

Listening to the three test-pieces he has composed more recently for Brass Band Buizingen (BBB), it's clear that his harmonic language has softened a good deal and his palette of colours has become much richer and subtler - the impact no doubt of his highly regarded work in films. Clarke is based in Brussels these days, and the close 'bespoke' connection between composer, conductor and band is amply evident throughout. We hear the Shakespeare-inspired tone poem, *Swift Severn's Flood*, in a pulsating live recording from the 2009 World Music Contest in Kerkrade. The music depicts a bloody battle on the banks of the Severn in a series of scenes founded on a relentless march. It's strong, noisy stuff, full of rushing semi-quavers and surges of energy, performed with panache and admirable concentration.

There is more time for repose in *Earthrise*, which Clarke composed for BBB to play at the 2010 European Championships in Linz. Inspired by one of Williams Anders' iconic photographs of the Earth taken from Apollo 8 in 1968, the music contrasts the excitement and expectation of the first moon landing and the return, in music of breathless virtuosity, with a 'floating' middle section in which time and gravity appear suspended, as the whole band engages firstly in a group cadenza and then in a 'timeless' melody against the backdrop of tuned percussion - magical.

The title track, *When Worlds Collide*, is the most challenging of the test-pieces for the listener. In attempting to recreate the 'atmosphere and sentiment of the American 1950s 'sci-fi' movies', Clarke has created a soundscape of 11 short sections that rush by at lightning pace. Without any 'visuals' the experience borders on the confusing, although Clarke does not want the piece to sound 'safe' but full of fun, which he certainly achieves. This wacky work benefits from a clear studio sound. Harmen Vanhoorne's much-admired performance of Clarke's dashing concerto, *Mysteries of the Horizon* (already reviewed on his solo album) and the short, colourful overture, *Tilbury Point*, are included for good measure.

Conductor and composer could not have wished for more committed and focussed performances from the band. The scene for each work is set by lines from Shakespeare (for the opening item) and by evocative poems specially commissioned from Martin Westlake. Frank Renton's delivery is an added bonus.

Paul Hindmarsh