



FASTER THAN A SPEEDING BULLET TRAIN

There's no disputing that your catalogue of wind and brass music has been one of the most far-reaching of all composers in the genre. Tell us a little about your journey to this point as a musician.

I started off as an academic disaster, leaving school at 16-years-old. It was only years later that I found that dyslexia lay behind my bad school results and sometimes disruptive behaviour. I had, however, been in my school brass band and played weekly with Margate Silver Band, so I could at least play the cornet. I joined the Royal Marines Band Service as a junior bandsman and subsequently did my adult service in the Army, firstly in the Staff Band of the Royal Army Medical Corps and then in the Band of HM Irish Guards. I owe the military so much for helping me to be involved in music today. I am still in touch with so many of my past colleagues and have done several recordings in recent years with Lt. Col. Chris Davis, including one disc for Naxos and a film score with the London Symphony Orchestra. Whilst still in the Irish Guards, I passed the audition to study composition at the Royal Academy of Music in London and Paul Patterson became my main teacher. My whole life changed

Brass Band Buizingen has just celebrated the music of Renaissance man, Nigel Clarke, with the release of BBW's CD of the Month last month - *When Worlds Collide*. Fellow composer, Tom Davoren, caught up with Nigel - one of the most prolific and creative contemporary composers - over lunch in Brussels

at this point, and I had the thrill of meeting and observing so many great composers from Olivier Messiaen, Elliott Carter and Sir Michael Tippett, through to György Ligeti and the film composer, John Williams. It was a seminal time and, at the end of my studies, I was awarded The Queen's Commendation for Excellence (the Academy's top award). I eventually left the Army to take up a one-year position at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts and, thereafter, I was lucky enough to enjoy various posts at the RAM and later also at the London College of Music.

Whilst I was still at the Academy, James Watson became my mentor and one of my biggest influences. He was a great inspiration to me when first writing for brass band because he always asked me to compose music that would challenge his band in every conceivable way. My Euphonium Concerto, *The City in the Sea*, written nearly 20

years ago for Robert Childs and Black Dyke Band, fell very much into that category. Since then, I have worked in many different genres of composition including chamber music, brass and wind band, and large orchestral film scores. How lucky is that?

Whilst that's very humble of you Nigel, I'm sure that a great degree of dedication and natural talent has played its part. As composers, we all have our reasons for doing what we do; what does composing mean to you?

I deeply love music and cannot imagine life without it; beyond my family, there is nothing more important to me. Another truth is that I'm trying to prove to myself that I am better than my early school years suggest! I treat every new piece that I write as if it were the last piece that I might



Nigel Clarke (far left) with fellow composers, Martin Ellerby (centre) and Peter Graham (right) on graduation day at Salford University



Nigel Clarke

ever produce - you can never make assumptions about the future!

How has your life as a musician impacted your writing? Are there any extra-musical experiences that enter your compositional consciousness?

I am very practical as a composer and love to collaborate with other musicians, writers and artists. When I did my Doctorate at the University of Salford, collaboration was the kernel of my thesis. Apart from the stimulation of working with others, I like to collaborate on subjects that interest me.

Given the variety of your musical landscape, does your output fall into different developmental categories? Is there anything in particular that influences the way in which you work?

I certainly divide my composition career into different categories: i.e. chamber and orchestral music, brass and wind music, and film and commercial music. I have funded the music that I want to compose through my work in the area of film music. This has given me tremendous freedom and has meant that I have not needed to over-write in any given genre to simply survive. It's a pity that economic reasons force so many composers to write many times for the same combination of instruments.

My approach to composing has been strongly influenced by a long-term collaboration with the violinist, Peter Sheppard Skærved. We met as fellow students at the Royal Academy of Music and, over many years, have come up with new innovative techniques and colours in the various pieces that I have produced for him. This long-term exploration of colour has also been vital to my writing for virtuoso brass players. Indeed, I would say that I write for brass as if they were string instruments!

Let's delve a little deeper into your methodology as a composer. Can you tell us a little about the creation of a new piece

I always write in relation to a subject that interests me and musical ideas will often flow from the given theme. For instance, in my first wind orchestra composition, *Samurai*, I based the work around Japanese ritual drumming. My latest work for brass band, *When Worlds Collide*, recreates the atmosphere and sentiment of the American cult 'sci-fi' movies of the 1950s. This gave me the opportunity to compose quirky 'B' movie sounds into the piece. I love to research and expand musical projects in different directions, so in

recent years I've commissioned Martin Westlake to create poetry to accompany many of my compositions.

I also love collaborating with conductors and musicians, and find that my best work comes from this collaboration, usually with colleagues that I have known for many years. A perfect example of this was my work with James Watson and Black Dyke Band, and today I'm also very proud to be Associate Composer to Brass Band Buizingen and its conductor / Artistic Director, Luc Vertommen. Luc has always given me much freedom to experiment with his band, which is very open-minded. I'm sure the band and Luc feel just as much involved in the creation of the work as I do.

What, if anything, do you perceive to be the most difficult thing about composing?

Everything, from start to finish! For me it is also important to achieve the highest quality when editing my scores. I know that it's not fashionable to care about this, but I regard it as just being professional and perhaps also a touch therapeutic!

Is there a particular piece of yours that stands out as a personal favorite?

Probably this would be my Violin Concerto, *The Miraculous Violin*. It ticks all the boxes of what I want to achieve in composition. I'm also very proud of its première recording on the Naxos label.

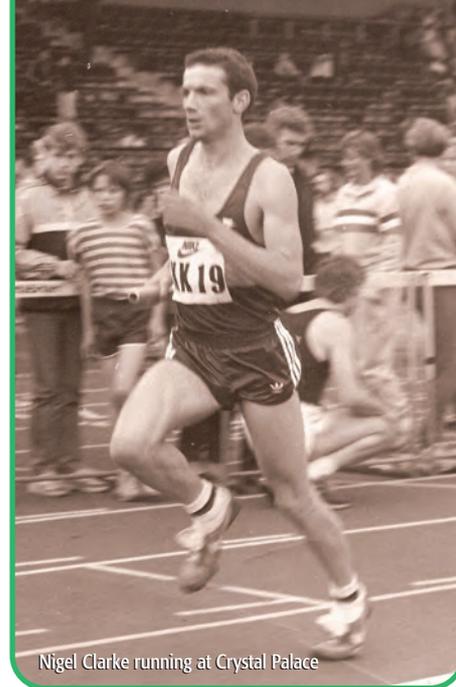
We have talked a lot about your concert music. Can you tell us a little about working in music for the moving image?

I think that musicians and composers alike often misunderstand what it is to write for film. It's far less creative than you might think, although it certainly involves a whole range of musical skills. It's more the work of an artisan than an artist because it involves a great deal of compromise and organisation. So many people involved in the film will comment upon and influence the content, and sometimes even the orchestration and the very sound of the score! On the other hand, it can be immensely satisfying when you achieve a synergy, and see and hear the finished product, especially when it involves a large-scale orchestra like the London Symphony Orchestra and a top-flight recording studio like Abbey Road. This interview is far too short to answer this question in any depth. What I can say is that it's much harder to write a piece of concert music that can stand up on its own two feet without the aid of moving pictures. In recent years, I think film scores have become far less engaging than the music produced by the older generation of film

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Nigel Clarke at a film music session



Nigel Clarke running at Crystal Palace

composers (e.g. Erich Korngold, Bernard Hermann and John Williams).

An intriguing answer and perhaps the subject of another interview!

Do you find working in one genre more stimulating than another?

I would hate to be a composer who only works in one genre and would find that limiting. I think one genre can bring something new to another, so working in the film music industry has certainly had an effect in other aspects of my work and vice versa. A change is as good as a rest!

You currently live in a beautiful townhouse in Brussels. What led you from the UK to live on the Continent?

This is a very simple question to answer. I divide my time between London and Brussels, spending a lot of time on the Eurostar because my wife, Stella, is a European civil servant in Brussels. I'm very proud that my two sons, whose first language is English, both speak and write French and are very European in their outlook, though they still support English football teams!

Are there any British composers, who work in a band medium, that you admire?

Martin Ellerby has to be top of my list because he's a composer full of integrity and invention. No composer in modern times has done more for the brass band world than Philip Sparke - a one-man tour-de-force. Peter Graham is another composer that I admire, who has contributed so much to the movement and whose generosity to other composers is limitless. The younger generation of composers is making its mark also along with you, Gavin Higgins, Simon Dobson, Lucy Pankhurst, Paul McGhee and Peter Meechan.

Your career affords you the rare opportunity to view the brass band movement from both sides of the fence! As someone with an objective view, what are the 'pros and cons' of today's British brass band scene compared with what you may have experienced elsewhere in Europe?

I have to say that I have very little experience of the British brass band movement these days, so I am not necessarily the best person to ask. All I know is that there is some very creative work going on outside of the UK. An example of this is the band for which I am Associate Composer, Brass Band Buizingen, which is currently Belgian National Champion and came fourth in the European Championships this year playing *When Worlds Collide* as its Own-choice piece. Luc Vertommen is an innovator, whilst still understanding the tradition from which the movement emerged. He is always supportive of my work and trusts me when I present him with crazy ideas for a piece. The Belgians, Glenn Van Looy (euphonium) and Harmen Vanhoorne (cornet) are both examples of significant talents outside of the UK. I'm also aware of innovation happening in Norway, Switzerland and now in France. The UK needs to stay on its toes!

What do you do when you are not composing?

Up until recently I was a serious runner and, in my younger days, ran for Belgrave Harriers - one of the top athletics clubs in the UK. Unfortunately I need to have a knee operation at some point, which means my exercise is limited at the moment. For me running was always an excellent opportunity to 'think out' and solve compositional problems. I was always competitive, but only with myself. I used to say in jest that 'I was the fastest

composer in the world' so, if Martin Ellerby, Philip Sparke and, dare I say, you Tom, who are much younger than I, want to challenge me to a race, my spikes are nearby!

I remember talking to you about this in Brussels; the only running that I endorse is towards loved ones or away from danger, so I'll leave your generous offer to Martin and Philip! When we spoke last you mentioned that you are in the middle of several composing projects. What are they?

I have three big projects coming up over the next few months. I am to be a guest conductor at the Hong Kong Band Directors Association and, in September, I will conduct a concert of mostly my music, including a première. In October, I am going to have a large-scale string orchestra work performed by the ensemble Longbow, directed by Peter Sheppard Skaerved. Over the last 18 months, we have jointly developed a project about Dover's multi-layered, peaceful and often turbulent nautical history. This is my first collaboration with the writer, Malene Sheppard Skaerved, who has produced some evocative words to go alongside my piece. My third project this autumn - as Composer-in-Residence to the Marinierskapel der Koninklijke Marine (Marine Band of the Royal Netherlands Navy) is a work called *Storm Surge*. It's a sound representation of the lethal storm flood that took place in 1953 in the English Channel, where more than 2,500 perished in the UK and the Low Countries, including 1,836 people in The Netherlands. The concert will take place in Rotterdam in November to mark the 60th anniversary of this tragic event.

On a more general note, what do you think the future holds for you as a composer?

To seek out uncharted waters. ■

To learn more about Nigel's music go to www.nigel-clarke.com