

Metcalf and 'The Journey'

Author(s): Malcolm Boyd

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R.S.: *How does that affect the drama?*
 E.L.: I don't know that it does make it more dramatic – I simply wanted to create a 13-minute piece out of one short poem by Teresa Tanner.
 R.S.: *What is your attitude to tradition today? Do you see your works as being part of a tradition in terms of their musical language?*
 E.L.: Of course I do. Think of my age – when I was a student Brahms was considered modern! I remember setting the *Book of Job* in the style of Brahms – a composer I now passionately dislike. I prefer French clarity. I dislike German expressionism particularly.
 R.S.: *You feel part of the European tradition, then?*
 E.L.: Yes. I feel part of European culture, but it was the Purcell fantasias which started me off on the idea of serial music, rather than Schoenberg.
 R.S.: *I know that one of the large works you feel close to at a profound level is your 'Essence of our Happinesses' for tenor, chorus and orchestra, written in 1970. Time and the philosophy surrounding it is once more at the centre of your work.*

E.L.: I had been asked to give a talk to some students at the Royal Academy of Music. They said they were interested only in present-day music, in the music of 'now'. I went home and read one of Donne's 'Devotions' on Time, and *Essence of our Happinesses* grew out of it:

Before you sound that word, *present*, or that Monosyllable, *now*, the present and the *Now* is past. If this imaginary halfe-nothing, Tyme, be of the Essence of our *Happinesses*, how can they be thought durable?

Elisabeth Lutyens is 75 on 6 July. Her 'Six' op.147 had its première at the Purcell Room on 16 May, played by Lysis. Other premières in the coming months are 'Diurnal' op.146 (Medici Quartet, Bowden Festival, 24 June); 'Bagatelles' op.141 bk 1 (Michael Finnis, in a birthday concert by the Vesuvius Ensemble at the Wigmore Hall, 10 July); Concert Aria, 'Dialogo' op.142 (Eiddwen Harrhy, City of London Sinfonia, Cheltenham Festival, 12 July: City of London Sinfonia commission); 'Mine Eyes, my Bread, my Spade' op.143 (Ian Caddy, Delmé Quartet, Wigmore Hall, 22 July: Ian Caddy commission); 'Fleur de silence' op.150 (London Sinfonietta, Round House Prom, 2 August; and 'Rapprochement' op.144 (Lontano, St John's, 3 November: Lontano commission).

Metcalfe and 'The Journey'

Malcolm Boyd

John Metcalfe's first opera, 'The Journey', will be performed by the Welsh National Opera at the Sherman Theatre, Cardiff, on 12 and 13 June.

Of the three new operas sponsored this year by the Welsh National Opera, we have so far seen *The Servants* by William Mathias and *The Trumpet Major* by Alun Hoddinott. John Metcalfe, composer of the third, *The Journey*, belongs to the next generation. He was born in 1946 and educated at Dean Close School, Cheltenham, and University College, Cardiff, after which he went on to study composition with Don Banks and electronic music with Hugh Davies in London. In 1971 he became director of music at Atlantic College, near Llantwit Major in Glamorganshire, and he directs the associated St Donat's Arts Centre and the Vale of Glamorgan Festival, which he founded in 1969. Both the arts centre and the festival have in recent years developed a lively policy of encouraging performances of contemporary music.

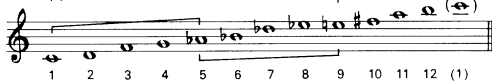
Although Metcalfe is not a prolific composer by the standards of Hoddinott or Mathias, his works are now quite numerous and cover a wide range, particularly in orchestral and instrumental genres. Commissions have come from most of the major Welsh festivals and from several

bodies outside Wales, including the Cheltenham Festival and the Gulbenkian Foundation. The works that immediately followed his year of study in London reflect above all an interest in experimental techniques and a delight in instrumental sonorities, including electronic sounds and what might be called 'sons trouvés' (like the musical boxes in *Episodes* for flute and harp, composed in 1972). Most compositions of the period up to about 1974 might be described as 'allusive', in the sense that seemingly disparate traditional and non-traditional techniques are brought together by reference to a central (not necessarily musical) concept or event. For example, in a Sinfonia written for the 1970 Llandaff Festival Metcalfe made the Beethoven bicentenary an occasion to re-examine 'the symphonic idea and its relevance to the present day', using parody techniques and taped material as well as the traditional symphony orchestra. The most ambitious and perhaps the most successful of these early works came in 1972 with *PTOC* (standing for 'Past three o'clock'), a multi-media piece for children on the subject of time and its measurement; it brings together, among other things, singing, dancing, narration, various clock sounds, the Westminster chimes, prepared tapes, and a parody of the slow movement of Haydn's 'Clock' Symphony.

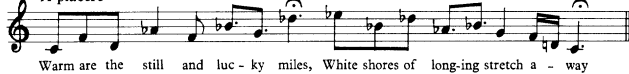
The score of *The Journey* is self-evidently the result of a close collaboration between composer and librettist, and the pacing of both dialogue and action seems, on paper at least, to have been beautifully judged. The music of each scene uses a different pan-chromatic scale of the type shown at ex.2a, while simple recurring ideas, such as the reiterated quavers when the four main characters are 'walking' and the tremolando minor 3rds for the storyteller's narration, ensure continuity from scene to scene. There is throughout a satisfying balance between narration and lyrical expansion; but what the score shows above all, perhaps, is that Metcalf has now developed his style to a point where it can serve a very wide range of expressive ends. In short, *The Journey* promises to be Metcalf's most impressive achievement so far. The music may not answer all the questions raised by the libretto, but it will be enough if it confirms that they are worth asking.

The collage method of these early works was certainly fruitful, but it depended for its success on a certain panache, and even on a degree of luck. If the allusions were mundane or too contrived, or simply not witty enough, the result might seem inconsequential or even tedious. Besides, this way of composing inevitably involved the drawing up of new parameters for each work, and it was not long before Metcalf began to feel the need for a broader compositional method which would allow him to decide *what* to compose without having to decide afresh each time *how* to compose. It was from the experience of *PTOC* that he found the way towards this. There the notes of the Westminster chimes had been repeated at different pitches to form a 12-note series, and Metcalf began to develop an interest in 12-note series that were symmetrical, like Webern's, but strong in tonal implications, like Berg's. This interest he developed in the Horn Concerto of 1973 (another 'allusive' work, exploring the instrument's associations with hunting) and in a set of Auden songs performed at the 1974 Llandaff Festival (but later added to). The series of this latter work is of a particularly satisfying symmetry, and suggestive of various harmonic and melodic possibilities (see ex.1a).

Ex. 1 (a)



(b) *A piacere*

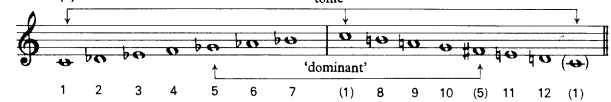


From the unaccompanied opening of the cycle (ex.1b) it can be seen how Metcalf uses the 12 notes more as a scale than as a row in the Schoenbergian manner. He went on from this to develop a system in which the 12 notes of the octave are set out in the form of an ascending and descending scale, with two notes repeated to act as primary and secondary tonal centres (a kind of tonic and dominant, though not necessarily a 5th apart). In this system the scale can be used for harmonies of varying complexity, from major and minor triads to densely chromatic

clusters, but the particular disposition of tones and semitones (and occasionally augmented 2nds) within the scale ensures that each piece has its harmonic – melodic identity. The totally chromatic scale has therefore a function comparable to that of the raga in Indian music, a feature Metcalf punningly acknowledged in the *Five Rags for Charlotte* (1976).

The last of these short piano pieces will serve to illustrate the workings of the system at a comparatively simple level. Its scale, or raga (ex.2a), is centred on C, with G flat/F sharp as 'dominant'. The notes numbered 2, 3, 4, 6 and 7 may be approached only from below, those numbered 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12 only from above; C and G flat/F sharp (nos.1 and 5) belong to both the ascending and descending scales so can be approached in either direction. The music may 'cross' from one scale to the other quite freely, but when it does the line will always change direction (see ex.2b).

Ex. 2 (a)



(b) *Allegretto*



Obviously this is a system even more conducive than Schoenbergian serialism to linear textures, and it is noticeable that with its adoption Metcalf seemed to lose interest in electronics, 'sons trouvés', and the aleatory techniques of his earlier works. In *Dyad* for string orchestra (1976), an important milestone in his development of the system, he made use of Baroque forms and textures such as the suite, chorale prelude, fugue and canon, and this work was one of a series of similar 'neo-classical' pieces which brought a new sense of purpose to his music, even if they tended at times towards a rather colourless academicism. For a time the system seemed to deaden rather than excite Metcalf's aural imagination, but he soon began to feel enough confidence and freedom to be able to find again the adventurous delight in texture and sonority that had characterized his earlier pieces. In 1977–8 he spent a year in the United States on a UK–USA Bicentennial Arts Fellowship and found in the teaching of Paul Fetler at the University of Minnesota the kind of stimulus and liberation that his music needed. It was in America that he wrote most of his first opera, *The Journey*.

The term 'opera' is, unfortunately, likely to raise expectations which *The Journey* does not set out to satisfy; certainly it is an altogether different type of opera from the Hoddinott and Mathias pieces which have preceded it this season. The two-act libretto, a skilful piece of work by John Hope Mason and an ideal one for musical setting, has been shaped to some extent by the *I Ching*, the

Chinese 'Book of Changes'; each of its seven scenes is headed by an appropriate hexagram, whose image ('Earth on the fire', 'Thunder in the lake', 'Fire on the mountain' etc) serves, in Mason's words, 'to relate inner states to external surroundings'. But the meaning of the action is not to be found in the *I Ching*, and the question 'What is it all about?' is likely to excite as much controversy and to elicit as many replies as when it was aimed at Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Four characters, two men and two women, step from an open book and proceed on a journey to some undisclosed (indeed unknown) destination. It is a journey of self-discovery, in the course of which their natures and relationships are changed through encounters

with others: a father and daughter, a man running from some dreadful disaster, another sitting beneath a tree (of life?), and the storyteller himself, who does not determine the course of events but merely witnesses it. His own reply to the same question is perhaps crucial to an understanding of the opera:

Sense belongs
To the one who senses it,
You whose sense it is.
It cannot be made
By someone outside
Like me.
It's up to you.

An opera on St Columba

A note from the composer, Kenneth Leighton

Kenneth Leighton's 'Columba' is to be given at the Theatre Royal, Glasgow, by the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama on 16, 18, and 19 June, conducted by Roderick Brydon and produced by John Lawson-Graham.

It is difficult to know why a composer chooses to write a particular piece, and he himself is often the least able to explain it. We are surrounded by commissions (probably too many, and for the wrong reasons), but being uncomfortable heirs to both the 18th-century idea of the craftsman and the 19th-century idea of the individual we are bound to opt out from time to time and acknowledge our debt to the Romantics.

Columba is well known in Scotland and certainly one of the biggest (in all senses) of the early Christians. His background is complex; Adomnan's *Life of Columba* (Adomnan was ninth Abbot of Iona and died in 705) is a series of stories and miracles which leave one somewhat puzzled as to the true nature of this remarkable man. My initial stimulus came from the landscape – a beautiful afternoon in 1972, while standing outside the abbey in Iona and looking over to Mull. The light in Iona of the far west is quite unique. The first act was composed during a winter (1975–6) in the Isle of Arran, not far from Holy Isle where one of Columba's many pupils, St Moluash, lived for several years; his name is commemorated in the lovely village of Lamlash. The short score was completed in 1978, the full score in 1980. It may all seem a rather strange choice, but such ancient subjects are often good in the artificial world of the opera house, and the poet Edwin Morgan immediately agreed that we should try to make him into a real human being in poetic and musical terms.

The acts depend very much on the settings, and the first, set in Northern Ireland in 561, deals mainly with the battle of Culdreihmne. It tries to bring out the fierier side of Columba's character, his anger, his slyness, his vindic-

tiveness, and also his sense of guilt and overriding sense of vocation. He was a strikingly many-sided man, 'fox' as well as 'dove', practical as well as religious, royal as well as devout – in fact a man of many parts who played a key role not only in the shaping of Scotland but also in the growth of European Christianity.

Act 2, which contains the most vivid and chromatic music, tries to give expression to the dramatic encounters between Columba, King Brude of the Picts and Brude's leading Druid, Broichan (or Foichan). There is here in the setting of Inverness a real clash between two ways of life; we were anxious to express the beauty of the Druids' nature worship. Broichan is a sort of Lucifer to Columba's Christ. There is also an appearance of the Loch Ness monster, who becomes a perfectly natural and appropriate part of the story. The main female character is an Irish slave-girl, Bridget, and the references to the ever-contemporary Irish problem became increasingly apparent as we went along.

The final act, set in Iona, contains the opera's most simple and lucid music. The light, the sheer beauty of the place and Columba's eventual peace of mind are the main themes. I suppose that the perennial themes of political involvement, guilt, expiation and above all healing vision were the main sources for both poet and composer throughout.

The music is composed straight through, with no recitatives but a mixture of arias and ariosos. The various choruses, and particularly the great choral contest between Christians and Druids in Act 2, are of crucial importance and the final act includes a number of passacaglias.

. . . and from the librettist, Edwin Morgan

In February 1975 Kenneth Leighton asked me if I would collaborate with him in an opera on the life of St Colum-

ba. After four months' background reading on Columba's life and times, I concluded that there was plenty of