# *Luke Bedford – Burning lens and magnifying glass*

"Composer in residence" at the Wigmore Hall: Luke Bedford

Luke Bedford will receive a composer's award from the Ernst von Siemens Music Foundation this June. As part of the foundation's commitment to young composers, a portrait CD will be released by col legno. Markus Böggemann took this opportunity to look closer at some of Bedford's works.

What are a composer's tools? If we take the question literally, the answer is still "pencil and paper," although obviously we now have the computer, which is playing the role the piano had in the 19th century." However, looking at the question in a broader, metaphorical way as one addressing the individual peculiarities of musical thinking and the ways of realising it, it becomes clear that every composer would carry his own, customised toolkit with him.

In Luke Bedford's case, the kit's many items would include a burning lens and a magnifying glass, since his compositional approach consists of the particular interconnection between focus and enlargement. On the one hand, his music features concentration on detail and a marked interest in distinct gestures, whereas it attains its specific sonority by enlarging and multiplying those gestures and transferring them to the instrumental and vocal forces. By engrossing himself in a particular detail, Bedford can unfold large-scale textures and combine opposing dynamics – an idiosyncratic trait which permeates his music.

That is immediately apparent with his 2008 ensemble piece By the Screen in the Sun at the Hill on the Gold; a simple arpeggio figure dominates the music's entire contour and progression – the figure's multifarious, multilayered rhythmical variants generate colour fields, now shimmering, now shaded, before the figure ultimately loses its already labile physiognomy, turning into noise and finally vanishing.

The piece was the result of a musical reflex from a four-week stay in Johannesburg, where Bedford took part in the "into □" Project hosted by the Siemens Arts Program and the Ensemble Modern. Its title evokes an unusual location (a deserted drive-in cinema above Johannesburg, on a slag heap 50 metres high) and the impressions it made, perhaps giving rise to parallels between exploiting musical material to exhaustion and the ravages left from ruthless mining.

Apart from such more or less specific associations, Bedford's music is also fascinating in terms of how he deliberately reduces his stock of materials; he opens up the potentials of the fundamental gestures and motifs to their core, and he does not shy away from probing down into their very bones.

Further regarding the material forming the basis of his compositional process, a scrap from the store of handed-down tradition may well become an element in the work. Thus the orchestral emphasis in Outblaze the Sky (2006), scored for large forces, is an outgrowth from the potent admixture of a quasi-Mahlerian sonic scenario, its calculated blur extending over several parameters at once. The instrumental colour, harmonic scheme and the temporal structure meld into a complex unity, the elemental difference between the horizontal and the vertical, line and chord vanishing in music dominated by Klangfarbe, approached with an intensity devoid of subject.

The events in this work and some of Bedford's other pieces are directly derived from the instrumental forces; they are like a laboratory in which he tries out new sonic possibilities while, at the same time, providing stimulus

and layout for the dramaturgy of his compositional processes.

Just as characteristic – if not more so – as the correlation of formal and sonic dimensions, however, is that the processes thus designed in Bedford's music are not agonal or cataclysmic; the paradigm of his formal thinking is not the finality of the drama, but the principal incompleteness of the self-transcendent developments, as in the way that pieces like Chiaroscuro and Outblaze the Sky do not actually close; they stop. They make no pretence to any tonality; instead, they stage sonic events which seem to exist beyond their own limits.

This formal thinking results in a play of options of nonlinear, multidirectional processes. Thus the structure of Man Shoots Strangers from Skyscraper (2002) draws on Luis Bunuel's film Le phantom de la liberté, which investigates precisely those options. Just as the film seems to aimlessly follow various characters (instead of subordinating them to a linear plot), Bedford's music seeks a directional change motivated by the slightest impulse, making the form seem like a space encompassing options, like an almost unintentionally perambulated series of tangents, variably arrayed.

Behind such an idea of formally discrete association – and the notion of superordinated processes in which the music participates rather than dominates – we find the omnipresent utopia of a musique informelle – yet, on the other hand, Bedford finds stimuli of a formal and dramaturgical nature – as he himself admits – in comedy shows, with their juggling of several plotlines. In both cases, the objective is the same: the greatest possible design flexibility while simultaneously maintaining maximum contextual interrelation of the design thus shaped.

This is an endeavour which arose long before the 20th century, of course; in a certain sense, the question of how to achieve that objective already determines the high-carat, ars subtilior Hall of Mirrors in the 14th century, on which Bedford based his song cycle Or voit tout en aventure (2005–2006). Divested of their original musical context, they function in Bedford's composition as linguistically foreign and yet, from the thematic viewpoint, curiously familiar messages from the past, gathered together in music at once remote and incisively intense.

By contrast, adaptation of specific ars subtilior techniques is of lesser importance, even if, as in the third piece, Nos faysoms contre nature, the simultaneity of competing rhythmic subdivisions does allow a glimpse of thinking in terms of temporal proportion. Instead, trans-parametrical thinking predominates once more; note how, in the cycle's first pieces, the fully-orchestrated pitches of the song melody subsequently add up to form

accompanying chords, thus interlocking sound and line.

Finally, sonic capacities also define the newest piece on the new CD, Wonderful Two-Headed Nightingale (2011), a double concerto for violin, viola and small orchestra; although the instrumentation is modelled on Mozart's KV 364 Sinfonia concertante, the piece otherwise goes very much its own way. The solo instruments' open strings generate the basis for the work's harmonic scheme, essentially founded on added pairs of fifths (some of them using quarter-tones later on as the music progresses). But above all, the work's instrumental characterisation also yields up a dramaturgical one, lending new finesses to the concept of concertising.

In line with its title and its allusion to the Siamese twins who, in 19th-century England, appeared as a singing curiosity attraction, the two solo instruments begin as a closely attached couple, their musical passages almost always parallel. Their vain attempts to disunite or unify result in veritable, highly energetic musical theatre, wherein the dramatist and – not least – comedian in Bedford's persona come to the fore; as with his other works, the manifold tonal shading and the brilliant Klangfarbe on the surface and the cool illumination they radiate ensure its immediacy and its captivating power.