

David Sawer – Drama in Music

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"A large part of his art is located in his often exquisite sense of timing."

It is the purity and precision of David Sawer's music that immediately capture the ear, the restlessly shifting, twinkling, swirling surfaces of his always glittering streams of sound.

Yet, after only a moment or two, one realises that beneath the immediacy of the changing surfaces of this music, in the darker, colder, more slowly moving water down below, there are strange shadows, shapes that remind us of a

different kind of meaning altogether.

The alluring purity of Sawyer's vision springs in the first place from the sharpness of his ear, and especially from the way in which he always voices even the most simple of ideas in ways that make them speak. Listening to these pieces, one is sometimes brought startlingly close to the sources of the sound, the grainy feel of bow on strings, or the flutter of breath and reed. This composer never lets the listener forget how music is played.

There is a striking purity also in the material of his music, in the melodic, harmonic and rhythmic tesserae of which it is made. When critics speak about Sawyer they sometimes invoke jazz and Stravinsky. But although it is easy to see how his music could not exist without these important inspirations, it really does not sound like them. If you cut open a single harmony in one of Sawyer's pieces with a knife, you would find a split second of cool transparency, much simpler than a chord by Ellington, Gil Evans or Stravinsky.

What shows us that Sawyer's apparent simplicity is less than simple is not the music's vertical sound in any given moment but the mercurial and unpredictable ways that this composer finds to make his very different ideas tumble breathlessly after one another.

“Sawyer himself has noted that his approach to composition is rooted in drama.”

A large part of his art is located in his often exquisite sense of timing. Things seem to happen in Sawyer's music in real time, as we listen to them, and almost never – as in the music of so many other composers of our day – because of the operation of some metamusical calculation beyond what we can necessarily understand.

And when one thing follows another, what comes next is frequently quite unexpected. So we end up listening as we listen to a story, straining our ears

forwards, wondering what will happen in a bar or two.

Sawer himself has noted that his approach to composition is rooted in drama. “I am a theatre person”, he says. And naturally he has written a good deal of music for the theatre. There is a full-length opera *From Morning to Midnight*, an operetta *Skin Deep*, music to accompany silent film, music to accompany silent theatre, music for actors and instrumentalists to play together.

But there are also many of his compositions that take elements of theatricality and reimagine them in purely musical terms. In his early orchestral piece, *Byrnan Wood*, such musical theatricality explains itself by being linked to an exceedingly familiar story from the closing pages of *Macbeth*. In other later works, including *the greatest happiness principle* and the exuberantly laconic *Piano Concerto for Rolf Hind* we are left more mysteriously to our own imaginative devices as the music enacts dramatic happenings to which we are given no such explanatory key.

It is a quality of drama that it resists confession. We do not go to *Hamlet* or *Othello* to hear about their authors’ private feelings, but to witness the clash and play of contradictory characters and forces.

This perhaps tells us something about the darker shapes and shadows below the surface of David Sawer’s music. When actors act, the meaning of what they do – the shapes and shadows, as it were – is found not in the person of each individual performer but in the “empty” space between the performers and behind them.

The bright and playful musical ideas that dance across the entrancing surfaces of so many of Sawer’s scores are like actors. And when we start to listen to them attentively, we begin to sense the darker world that lies behind them and beneath them.



WERKE

Rumpelstiltskin (ballet, for ensemble and six dancers) (2009) 1 1 2 1 - 1 1 0 1 - hp, vln, vla, vc, cb, duration: 70 min., prem. 14.11.2009 Birmingham, Birmingham Contemporary Music Group / Martyn Brabbins

Byrnan Wood (for orchestra) (1992) 4 4 4 4 - 6 4 4 1 - perc(5), hp(2), str, duration: 18 min., prem. 18.08.1992 London, BBC Symphony Orchestra / Mark Wigglesworth

the greatest happiness principle (for orchestra) (1997) 3 2 3 2 - 4 3 4 1 - timp, perc(3), hp, str(12 10 8 8 6),

duration: 12 min., prem. 06.06.1997 Cardiff, BBC National Orchestra of Wales / Mark Wigglesworth

Tiroirs (for chamber ensemble) (1996) 1 1 2 1 - 2 1 1 0 - perc(2), hp, pno, str(1 1 2 2 1), duration: 12 min., prem. 15.02.1997, London, London Sinfonietta / Paul Daniel

Songs of Love and War (for 24 voices, 2 harps, 2 percussions) (1990), duration: 12 min., prem. 07.12.1990, Frankfurt am Main, Ensemble Modern / Simon Joly