Orion Series in Fine Arts presents

Michael Finnissy
composer, pianist

Tangos and Transcriptions

Monday, September 12, 2011, 8:00 pm
Phillip T. Young Recital Hall
MacLaurin Building
Free Admission

Also:
Lecture: Writing anything and everything
Wednesday, September 14, 2011, 4:30 pm
MacLaurin Building, Room B016
Free Admission

Program

Romeo and Juliet are drowning (1967 rev.73)

De toutes flours (1990)

There never was such hard times before (1991)

Gershwin Transcriptions
Love is here to stay (First version, 1975-6)
Please pay some attention to me (1998)

From ‘More Gershwin’
Swanee (1989)
Nashville Nightingale (1990)

Intermission

From ‘23 Tangos’ (1962-2000)
Nos. 1, 2, 9, 13, 22, 23

From ‘Verdi Transcriptions’ (1972-2005)
1 (Oberto, Act 2 - Sciagurata! A questo lido ricercai)
13 (Jerusalem, Act 1 - Non, ce bruit, ce ne’est rien)
20 (Il Trovatore, Act 4 scene 1 - Vivra! Contende il giubilo)
36 (Missa da Requiem - Requiem aeternam)
Biography

Michael Finnissy was born in Tulse Hill, London in 1946. He was a Foundation Scholar at the Royal College of Music, London, where he studied composition with Bernard Stevens and Humphrey Searle, and piano with Edwin Benbow and Ian Lake. Afterwards, he studied in Italy with Roman Vlad.

Finnissy created the music department of the London School of Contemporary Dance, and has been associated as composer with many British dance companies including London Contemporary Dance Theatre, Ballet Rambert, Strider, and Second Stride. He has taught at Dartington Summer School, Winchester College, the junior department of the Royal College of Music, Chelsea College of Art, and is guest lecturer at many colleges and universities. He has also been musician in residence to the Victorian College of the Arts, the City of Caulfield in Australia, and the East London Late Starters Orchestra. In 1999 he was made Professor of Composition at the University of Southampton.

Finnissy has been featured composer at the Bath, Huddersfield, and Almeida festivals, and his works are performed and broadcast worldwide. In February 1999 a festival at Harvard University, Boston, was devoted to his music, and several world premières took place at the 1999 Music Factory Festival in Bergen, Norway. As a pianist he is particularly associated with the commissioning and performing of new British work, including that of Elizabeth Lutyens, Judith Weir, James Dillon, and Howard Skempton. Performances continue to flourish worldwide and January 2008 saw the revival of his major orchestral work Red Earth! by the BBC Symphony Orchestra, chosen by Judith Weir to form part of her BBC composer weekend.

Finnissy’s work is notable for its dramatic urgency and expressive immediacy, generosity of spirit and the through-going manner in which he continues to expand and enrich his musical idioms. He is a unique voice in British music who has also been a major influence upon several successive generations of younger composers.
Programme Notes

Composing also involves a good deal of transcribing. Transcribing and focusing thought, and then trans-scribing (writing or performing through) an exploration of that thought which has now been made sound, and which alters and threatens to disappear with each passing moment.

To learn about composing I have frequently used found materials – material found in other music: many different types of folk music and art music. My aesthetic background is in visual arts, so I am actually alluding to Marcel Duchamp (Readymades aided, 1913 onwards) and Picasso (his series of 347 Gravures, 1968) based on Velasquez. Although, as it happens, Bach also appropriated foreign styles (French, Italian and even English) and borrowed materials from other composers, as, openly or covertly, do almost all writers. Bach was also teaching himself about, and exploring and altering a range of other music. He could scarcely have imagined how much music we have access to, and – as composers – with which we have to compete for attention.

Romeo and Juliet, as they appear in the ‘symphonie dramatique’ by Berlioz, drown in music drawn from the lake in Berg’s ‘Wozzeck’. This was my first acknowledged and specific ‘transcription’, as distinct from the routine absorption of musical influences. There are also elements of ‘cultural critique’, metaphor and irony.

‘De toutes flours’ is based on Machaut, exploring ‘antique’ modalities almost entirely on the white keys of the piano.

‘There never was such hard times before’ commemorates the death of Cornelius Cardew, taking an industrial and urban folksong of the mid-19th century as its principal material.

As I had no qualifications when I completed my college studies, I jobbed around for many years, as a pianist for dance classes, and occasionally working in bars – playing requests. My parents had liked Gershwin’s music too, and these ‘arrangements’ are about that type of appropriation called ‘jazzing’.

The first version of ‘Love is here to stay’ was not initially intended for the piano, the later (published) version also includes Gershwin’s verse, and irons out much of the dissonance.

‘Please pay some attention to me’ derives from a melody given to me by the piece’s dedicatee (Richard Rodney Bennett). This melody is only ‘attributed’ to Gershwin, and I encouraged it into a slightly uncomfortable tennis match with Arnold Schoenberg.

‘Swanee’ and ‘Nashville Nightingale’ come from a set of pieces called ‘More Gershwin’, slightly more extended settings than the earlier cycle of ‘Gershwin Arrangements’.

My ‘dancing years’ were mainly spent accompanying classical ballet and Martha Graham technique, although I also enjoyed playing for Matt Mattox in jazz-dance.

Somewhere in these experiences the Tangos were born, a miscellany of compositional experiments and gifts for friends, they are not transcriptions and they are not in chronological order.

No. 1 is dedicated to Belkiss Carneiro de Mendonca, whose expertise and wide knowledge of Brazilian tango gave final impetus to the assembling of this cycle.

No. 2 was written for my composer friend Laurence Crane, in August 1999.

No. 9 was written as a 1998 valentine for my partner Philip Adams, and uses some material from a tango he wrote as part of a CoMA summer-course.

No. 13 was written as a 40th birthday gift for Andrew Law, for some years the promotion manager at United Music Publishers.

No. 22 is dedicated to my composer friend Salvatore Sciarrino, ‘en souvenir d’estime, Mai 1999’, it begins with some material from Busoni’s ‘Kammerfantasie über Bizets Carmen’ (the Habanera).

No. 23 was written for Jutta Avaly, in thanks for her support as director of UMP.

The main repository of my thoughts on transcription is the large-scale (roughly three hours long) cycle of pieces called ‘Verdi Transcriptions’, a commitment to which extended over thirty-three years. The entire piece journeys from a kind of self-portraiture, albeit preoccupied with discoursing about Verdi’s music, towards much more obvious, historically inflected, portraits of Verdi.

All but three of the thirty-six sections take a single aria or ensemble from a Verdi original, the twenty-eight operas and some of their variants, the String Quartet and the Requiem Mass. The three exceptions take two moments, and combine them.

[MF]