

Programme notes by the composer continued

Ash – for oboe, clarinet and bassoon

This is a recent work, and the second part of a projected cycle for three woodwind instruments, the aim of which is to explore certain materials and textures occurring in the natural world. If one ponders awhile on the other titles – ‘Moss’, ‘Chalk’, ‘Flint’, ‘Scree’ and ‘Ochre’ – it becomes clear that the collection of short pieces should make for a haptic experience. The musical response to ash as a substance is, I hope, truly ‘ashy’, i.e. ‘ash-like’. But let me cite here Gerard Manley Hopkins as he elucidates his joint concepts of ‘inscape’ and ‘instress’: “There is one notable dead tree . . . the inscape markedly holding its most simple and beautiful oneness up from the ground through a graceful swerve below (I think) the spring of the branches up to the tops of the timber. I saw the inscape freshly, as if my mind were still growing, though with a companion the eye and the ear are for the most part shut and instress cannot come.”

Ash is cast in a neo-classical mode. This short, avowedly Apollonian movement recalls, with its only mildly dissonant sevenths and ninths, middle-period Stravinsky. The musical language is that of ‘white note style’, i.e. strictly diatonic, but admits limited chromaticism consistent with other modes.

By employing two double reed winds (the oboe and the bassoon) and a single reed one (the clarinet) wonderful timbral possibilities open up, these enhanced by the use of ‘Stimmtausch’ – where high and low registers are exploited and the three voices exchange roles in order to duck and weave above and below each other. All in all, this music is much more dulcet than one might expect if the score were to be rendered at the piano.

There is many a lyrical moment: a key centre emerges about two-thirds of the way through, but this does not act as functional tonality would, just a fleeting reference to a bright and bucolic tonic triad with an added sixth. The ending is harmonically ambivalent, the clarinet and bassoon pitting dislocated fifth and sixth degrees of a major scale against themselves to produce constant minor sevenths and major ninths as the oboe holds a long, high pedal note.

Parley – for flute and oboe

This is but a short conversation between the two instruments. Some of the time the duelling figures are wholly consonant, admitting a plethora of pregnant sixths, on other occasions the two advocates are more het up, and a kind of wrong-note dissonance enters the fray.

The original title was *Valse Triste*, but having recently renamed two other works – *October*, for oboe, clarinet and cor anglais is now *Elegy*, and *Scherzo*

for clarinet solo became *Diatribes* in my catalogue – I seized the chance to employ another word, parley, in order to collect some not too disparate pieces which include *Soliloquy* for solo flute and *Soliloquy* for solo oboe under the mantle of human verbal communication.

Elegy – for oboe, clarinet and cor anglais

An elegy, as a reflection on a death, or on a sorrow more generally, is a form of lyric poetry. And this kind of mournful poem, usually written in remembrance of a lost one and read at a funeral or cast as a lament, tells the story of an individual rather than the collective story of a people, this latter being found in epic poetry. Generally, an elegy describes three stages of loss: first there is grief, then praise of the dead one, and finally a sense of consolation.

The musical response presents these aspects within a clear ternary form: ABA. No sooner has the opening, strongly lyrical idea returned after the more contemplative middle section, than we encounter a brief new cadence figure, which appears thrice. This elegy, at least, is a miniature.

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