

Michael Finnissy profile

Marking a composer's 70th birthday year might ordinarily be an occasion for consolidation, reflection and retrospection. Even if we assume said composer remains active, prolific even, it would be reasonable to expect an increased knowledge and familiarity with the composer's musical language proportional to the increase in size of output, recognition and greater maturity of voice. In Michael Finnissy's case, however, though the corpus of works has indeed continued to expand at a consistent pace (currently approaching 400 in number), those things that sounded so radical and unfamiliar to audiences in, say, the 1970s, remain unsettling today, resisting complacency of listening and engagement. Furthermore, Finnissy would appear to actively work against recognition, familiarity and trends of categorisation and redundant labelling, though these are most often based upon superficial features of his music and (especially) notation. The music is consistently strange, but its strangeness is different from one piece to the next. And rather than alienating the listener, Finnissy's work invites us to engage at a deep level – musically, of course, but also with culture: our culture, and its changing peculiarities, trajectories and disturbances, as well as the cultures of other places and peoples. It challenges us to question what we know and how we relate sounds, things, events and people.

Through the diversity of techniques, influences, instrumental forces, size and types of ensemble which typify his output, a remarkably consistent artist is revealed. Underlying his music is the singular figure of Finnissy himself – a composer of great curiosity, both reflectively and passionately engaged with the world around him, seen and unseen: the world at his doorstep (such as the north Norfolk coast where he now lives, or the South London of his childhood) to the world far beyond, such as Iran, Korea, North Africa, the folk music of which (and of many other nations and regions) features in his music, refracting what he sees and experiences through the inner world of the artist. Like his father before him (who, whilst working for London City Council, photographed the changing London landscape in the post-war years), Finnissy is a documenter. His output could be likened to a history of the composer in sound (to paraphrase the title of his longest piano work) but though we learn something about the man, his work is not autobiographical. Instead this work of documentary, like all good histories, reaches outwards, reconfiguring received knowledge such that what we experience and hear causes us to reflect and respond. Though it is almost certain that the volume of references, quotes and allusions that form much of Finnissy's musical content (taking in a huge range of western art music, from Bach and Beethoven to Busoni and Bussotti, alongside popular musics, folk and jazz, and indigenous musics such as those mentioned above) will not be recognised as such by all listeners, they work alongside the titles, the melodies, textures, ruptures, juxtapositions and superimpositions, explosions and periods of stasis to reflect and enact the messy, contradictory, complex theatre of our time. The resultant music is exhilarating and perplexing, immediate and elusive, terrifying and tender.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that Finnissy is not only a documenter of the world around him, but he is active in changing it. His influence has been especially strong upon younger composers, many of whom have benefited from his insightful and to-the-point remarks in workshops and masterclasses. His activities as a pianist and conductor of numerous composers' music (in particular we should note his championing of women composers), his work as a teacher (currently Professor of Composition at the University of Southampton), and his advocacy of British and of new and provocative music (including his consistent championing of the work of CoMA) across the globe, have greatly impacted musical culture in the UK and abroad.

Michael Finnissy's *Andersen-Liederkreis*, given its premiere performance in this year's hcmf by Juliet Fraser and Mark Knoop, is part of their programme 'Palimpsests' – how multiple histories, places near and far, musics and stories interact and leave their mark could not be a more fitting metaphor for the richness of activity in Finnissy's music and for the extent of his influence upon new music today.