

George Benjamin Interview

George Benjamin – Composer and Conductor

It's one of the later orchestral concerts in the Southbank and Philharmonia's massive celebration of Olivier Messiaen's Centenary. It's one large and very extraordinary piece of Messiaen, surrounded by, actually, just two pupils. Xenakis, a work of my own, which Pierre-Laurent [Aimard] chose and then a work that Messiaen hugely admired by a composer whose music he always loved, Ligeti.

The program starts with the Xenakis. *Pithoprakta*, a 1950's work of really, revolutionary originality. It's very, very, very strange music, it's very rarely played. In some ways this is Xenakis' most radical, single piece and it's a complete success I think. A piece that was influenced by the Xenakis, in its notation and in its great subdivision of all the strings is Ligeti's *Atmospheres* which is just a little bit later.

It's famous to people for having been used very remarkably in Kubrick's 2001. Mainly an extremely soft, slow moving piece. The first page is just one huge, clustered chord lasting maybe a minute or more and the music drifts without any sense of traditional melody or harmony and above all, no sense of pulse. Through a sequence of very subtly moving textures, which change register in a very smooth way, almost like lava or plasma.

My work is a piece that cost me many years of work because the whole idea behind the piece is, I hope, a lightness of touch and to treat the orchestra as a vast chamber resource, rather than a massive, huge, monolithic object. On the wall here I've got a picture of, people don't know what it is, but in fact it's a flock of starlings, about a million of them and they make these incredible shapes. Sometimes splitting into 3 or 4 or 5 balletic forms, then reforming into a single, tight ball, then splitting out into strata and I saw that in Rome while writing this piece and in a way the form is a little bit like that. Every now and then, it crystallizes into an extremely simple musical object, with a pulse, with a sense of melody, with a very simple sense of background, with regular harmony and then it drifts apart and splits into sometimes, very diffracted and very complex multi-coloured textures and then in another couple of minutes later or three minutes later it will reform into a similar object, related to the one before but in a different place.

The concert ends with a very important work of Messiaen and his most experimental orchestral piece, *Chronochromie*. Written at the beginning of the 1960s, when he was still, in a way, the focus of the international avant-garde, in his class in Paris.

It's a climax of his experimentation into really rather esoteric ways of composing, using complex rhythms, super-imposing complex durational streams of rhythms and juxtaposing those with grand collage of birdsong from all round the world.

Well all his students will probably say the same thing, that he was wonderful and inspirational and subtle and passionately involved and loved teaching, and had a lot to give, huge amount to give, very original. There wasn't the slightest trace of academicism in his teaching. Everything was a discovery and everything was done because he loved it. So it was completely, completely thrilling as an experience, I was sixteen, I was terribly young so it was really amazing.