

Mythologies and Mad Songs: composer Geoffrey Gordon in interview, by Colin Clarke

Previously, I interviewed composer Geoffrey Gordon around a disc of his music on the BIS label (*Fanfare* 43:6). Absolutely up to the standard of that release, this new offering on Orchid Classics presents a sequence of works of huge ambition and scope. Gordon's music is incredibly impressive; it is a wonder he is not yet a household name, at least in Classical music circles.

CC: *We move now from BIS to Orchid Classics—I have to say the Orchid recording quality is exemplary throughout—especially impressive as one performance is live from the notoriously difficult acoustic of the Royal Festival Hall in London! Dave Rowell as engineer I know, but not the producer, Alexander Van Ingen. How did you all achieve this depth and clarity of sound?*

GG: Hard work, all around – and I agree, the results are impressive. Really good team. *Were you involved in the recording process?*

I was! From start to finish. I wouldn't have it any other way. It's always a thrill to be in the room when your works are coming to life.

The orchestra for three of the four works is the BBC Scottish Symphony—one of the finest of the BBC orchestras in the UK. I think back to two significant Proms in recent years in which they featured: a terrific Beethoven Ninth Symphony (Ryan Wigglesworth, July 2023), and Kurtág's Endgame (same forces, August of that year). What is your relationship with this orchestra?

I agree, just a stunning orchestra! Thrilled to have this chance to work with them, and I hope it won't be the last time. This was my introduction to the BBC Scottish and I must say it was a privilege—we could not have made a better choice.

Mythologies and Mad Songs – care to explain the title? Is there a Maxwell Davies echo here? Well, I guess any time you mention mad songs, it will conjure Maxwell Davies, right? But no.... not a reference, thinly veiled or otherwise. It's really just a summation of the I think quite magical inspirations behind the works on this disc.

What marks this disc out as special is that all works were part of a sudden burst of creative activity of some three years' duration. Was there any particular catalyst, external or internal, that fired you up?

As I mention in the liner notes, the catalyst to a large degree was the commission from the Philharmonia (shared with the Minnesota Orchestra and the Malmo Symphony) to write *Prometheus*, the live premiere of which is on this disc. That was a thrill and an honour and it was also my first opportunity to work with the extraordinary Martyn Brabbins, who conducts all the works on this recording.

*The orchestra is certainly on fine form for PUCK, a piece inspired by a painting held in the National Galleries of Scotland: David Scott's Puck Fleeing from the Dawn [1837, note to self: [this one](#) as Nat Galleries website down). Part of that painting forms the disc's front cover. You say not only did the painting have an impact on you but it also allows the imagination to roam to what might have happened after the curtain comes down. Written in 2017, the work is brilliantly orchestrated and truly fantastical in nature. There is a creative effervescence about it. Perhaps you can speak a little about what you imagine happens after the curtain on *Midsummer Night's Dream* has fallen?*

Well, if I did that, there would be no need to listen to the piece, right? The quote which I've included with the score –

*And we fairies, that do run
By the triple Hecate's team,
From the presence of the sun,
Following darkness like a dream,
Now are frolic*

... says it all, in any case. I reckon it was a pretty exuberant frolic.

There is an elemental aspect to your writing in PUCK (and its brilliant colours are perhaps reflected in the title's capitalisation) and a sense of urgency, too. Fairies are often thought of as light, benevolent beings—and perhaps that is one aspect of Puck, in his cheekiness—but a wider reading of the mythology literature reveals a darker side to fairy lore. Was this an aspect of your inspiration here?

Absolutely—the score has a dark edge under all the fizzy magic. I hope that's apparent. As you say, fairy mythology is quite clear – these are not exclusively benign beings. Which is fortunate, because the textures of light and dark are what makes this music interesting, I think.

Mad Song (for English horn /cor anglais and orchestra) moves us from Shakespeare to William Blake. Blake's Mad Song was probably first published in 1783 and is an expression of the angst of a Romantic soul. Your sound worlds are similar between PUCK and Mad Song, but this is more lyrical, it strikes me, with moments of real beauty (and is there a Stravinsky quote in there?). To my ears the cor anglais (English horn) has a haunting one forever associated with Wagner's Tristan. What, though, caused you to have this as the solo instrument?

Well, I do love Stravinsky. There is no direct reference but I cannot deny—nor would I wish to—the influence. The choice of the cor anglais was a crucial one. That instrument— often thought of as noble and romantic, which it certainly can be—can also be throaty and dramatic and thrilling. I tried to expose those qualities, and I think Dimitri's performance proves it's all true.

Your three movements all are headed by quotes from Blake. Certainly the first, in its scoring and instrumentation/orchestration, plus the odd gesture for wind, seems to illustrate the lines 'The wild winds weep. And the night is a-cold' ... Why Blake and why this text?

It's an extraordinary text. I love Blake and what composer could ask for a more visceral or compelling text?

The even more musical nature of Blake's text in the second verse seems very apposite. 'With sorrow fraught / My notes are driven' and yet there are silvery notes of hope from the percussion. Do you see this as a slow movement or as just a contrastingly-coloured panel of the work?

Well, I think it can be both. I wanted to observe the (historic) structural nature of the concerto, especially given the late 18th-Century text...but I also wanted a musical landscape that was both contrastingly-coloured and fully reflective of the words.

There is a primal edge to 'Like a fiend in a cloud of howling woe' the third section/stanza. What is the intent here?

The intent is to find the fiend in a cloud of howling woe and make him sing.

I was struck with a poetic parallel between Blake's phrase 'I turn my back to the east' and John Donne's wonderful poem [Good Friday, 1613. Riding westwards](#)? Is there a parallel to be made (the protagonist in Donne is riding away from the cross and so, by extension, is Blake's)?

Well, I think the comparison can be made—it is fascinating to me that soon after this recording was finished, I set a selection of the Holy Sonnets of John Donne for baritone and piano for the 2024 Oxford International Song Festival. Sometimes these connections are in the stars.

Moving now to ICE—aut inventiam viam aut fasciam, with its almost apocalyptic brass (a processional somewhere between Birtwistle and Ustvolskaya?)

Apocalyptic is the right word. I'm sure Peary and Shackleton would agree!

I love the inspiration here, and how your simple title sums it up. Would you care to explain the background and how that relates to the title, especially the Latin part? Plus, there is a quote by Ernest Shackleton that is relevant here?

I have long been fascinated by the polar explorations and somehow it always seemed both terrifying and heroic—and the history of those explorations would, I think, confirm that analysis. These were extraordinary people doing seemingly impossible things. I love the Shackleton quote because it goes straight to the heart of what these explorers believed and I believe it is what drove them to such unfathomable lengths. The Latin quote—and I love that it is in Latin because it

somehow seems appropriately timeless—summarizes the determination of these explorers: find a way or make a way. With that imagery in mind, the music comes naturally.

Also, Vaughan Williams' Sinfonia Antarctica—'a score that somehow sounds cold' as you put it. Yours does, too, but it also sounds with primal power—was part of this a depiction of the power of Nature Herself?

Yes, absolutely. I'm glad mine sounds cold too! Music can do that—which just adds to its magic.

Why capitals in both titles for PUCK and ICE?

Just a personal idiosyncrasy, I suppose. There is no profound underlying meaning—I am aware that this presentation creates an added kind of focus on a particular word, which in this case is not unintentional.

On now to the final item, Prometheus, and a change of orchestra—the Philharmonia, an orchestra with a rich history. And over to Kafka, too for this piece for bass clarinet and orchestra. This was recorded at the Royal Festival Hall—this is the live premiere?

Yes, that is the live premiere! The world premiere—and it is a testament to both the orchestra and the recording engineers that it is such a gorgeous performance and recording (if I may be allowed to express an unbiased opinion!).

Can you explain how you have structured this piece? (the four versions of the Prometheus legend).

I literally followed the structure Kafka provided. Sometimes we do not need to reinvent the wheel ... we can just climb aboard.

The trajectory of the four legends—your chosen order—moves from the eternal repetition of the first (the eating of the liver which is eternally renewed) through to the wary, meaningless and implied forgetting of the legend. Can you describe how you set each version, and how they form an over-arching structure?

This is a big subject—a massive subject and an ancient one, obviously. This work felt symphonic to me, and I wanted to present it in those terms. It was a fitting coincidence that Kafka had chosen to provide these four very evocative legends. They provide a kind of outward structural form which fit my vision of this as a symphony. The movements share themes and my intention was to drive the work straight through to the fade to black conclusion (as one critic put it). If you trace the music through the full length of the work, I think you will find that it has at the very least symphonic intentions. I hope that's clear, in any case.

Absolutely! Another excellent soloist; Lauren Ben-Simone on bass clarinet. What is it about the sound of the bass clarinet that appealed/fitted this piece for you?

Lauren is an extraordinary musician and his performance is blinding. Really brilliant throughout. And I would say I chose the bass clarinet for many of the same reasons I had chosen the cor anglais for *Mad Song*—this is an instrument capable of so much more than it is generally asked to do. An exceptional range both in terms of pitch and dynamics, the bass clarinet can whisper and scream, everything I needed in this piece. It's all there.

The menacing nature of the second version (when Prometheus becomes one with the rock) seems particularly powerful, those subterranean sounds onwards the very end presumably implying the chthonic?

Yes.

In the case of the BIS disc considered previously, the cello protagonist was a narrator in the broadest sense. But what would you say is the function of the soloists in the two pieces on this disc (Mad Songs and Prometheus)?

Yes, my cello concerto (Cello Libris on the BIS label) is cast as a kind of soloist as protagonist in that work. I suppose the same can be said here of both works—less transparently in *Mad Song* than in *Prometheus*, but both are the voices of the works which inspired them.

The album is memorably titled Mythologies and Mad Songs —it's also about Myth and Magic, isn't it? The eternal transformation of flesh wounds in Prometheus, Puck's impish magical tinkering...

Yes, it is. That's it exactly.

What's next on the recording agenda for your music? Also, what are you composing currently?

I am glad you asked —and I wish I could be more forthcoming! But many of those plans — and there are many! —will need to remain closely guarded secrets for the moment. I can say there will be a second recording of Prometheus out next year —orchestra and soloist to be announced when the time is right —as well as both chamber music (my Clarinet Quintet and several works for solo violin and viola) as well as some vocal music. We also have another orchestral disc in the offing which will include a work recorded in Glasgow with the BBC Scottish orchestra and Martyn Brabbins at the time the *Mythologies and Mad Songs* works were recorded, as well as some additional works, including a world premiere. We will also be releasing the world premiere of my oboe concerto, *Creavit Deus Hominem*, commissioned and brilliantly premiered by the Frankfurt Radio Symphony Orchestra. In terms of what I am writing now, I have just completed a massive new work for choir, orchestra and clarinet soloist commissioned by Radio France which will premiere in 2025 with Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, conducted by Mikko Franck, and I am just now starting a new work commissioned by WDR Symphony Orchestra Köln, based on Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*. So it's back to work for me!

GORDONPUCK¹. *Mad Song*². *ICE*³. *Prometheus*⁴. •¹⁻⁴Martyn Brabbins, cond; ²Dimitri Mestdag (Eng hn); ⁴Laurent Ben Simone (bass cl); ¹⁻³BBC Scottish SO; ⁴Philharmonia O • ORCHID CLASSICS 100305 (70:27) ⁴Live: Royal Festival Hall, London, 10/03-04/2019

The music of Geoffrey Gordon has a dual axis: on one hand, it is visceral in impact, immediate; listen further, and there are myriad gifts below the surface. A good example of that is the first piece here, *PUCK* (2017). There is a primal energy to much of the writing, married to a sense of unstoppable movement; the very first gesture could easily be construed as post-post-Mendelssohn in its fleetness, a Modernist whisp. The subtitle of *PUCK* is “fleeing from the dawn”. All becomes clear when one examines the front cover of the disc, a detail from an 1837 oil painting by David Scott that certainly focuses on the spirit's darker side. Hecate, the Triple Goddess of the Crossroads, is invoked in the Shakespeare quote that accompanies the score; a liminal Goddess, her presence seems confirmed by the music's inherent mystery. The performance here, by the BBC Scottish SO and Martyn Brabbins, is phenomenal. It seems completely in tune with Gordon's score at all times, supported by an equally fine recording.

Quotations pepper the score of *Mad Song* (for English horn and orchestra, 2020). The generating poetry was William Blake's poem of the same name, a reflection of Romantic poetical angst. The English horn is clearly that poetical protagonist. Originally commissioned by the Antwerp Symphony, the premiere featured the current soloist, Dimitri Mestdag, who is as eloquent as they come. The piece is expertly composed, not least in the glide between first and second movement (“Lo to the vault Of paved heaven”) and the subsequent change of territory to one of interior musings coupled with something of a sense of awe. This is the longest movement, and allows space for the creation of a dark world in which the soloist spins his thread. The quickening of incident for the finale (“Like a fiend in a cloud with howling woe”) ushers in a shimmering space, the orchestra underpinning and illuminating the soloist's line via the most imaginative and effective scoring. Never once in this performance does concentration drop; placement of soloist and orchestra within Orchid's sound image is impeccable. And with a final upward gesture, it's over.

Written in 2019, *ICE* also comes with a quotation as subtitle: “aut inventiam aut faciam” (I shall find a way or make a way). The quote is from the explorer Robert Peary (who is accorded the honour of the first successful journey to the North Pole, in 1909). This was Peary’s eighth attempt. And his success (he made it back, too) links him with fellow explorer Edward Shackleton (a journey to the Antarctic begun in 1907). Although Shackleton was just 97 miles short of his target, the two are linked by an unquenchable spirit of adventure. A sense of rawness here goes hand-in-hand with a spirit of optimism, with an overarching striving for the Beyond. There is another quotation here, by Shackleton: “We had seen God in His splendours, heard the text that Nature renders. We had reached the naked soul of man.” The conjuring of an Arctic, icy world is superbly done by Gordon, and the BBC Scottish players react accordingly, the music glinting in the sun. Gordon’s real achievement is to offer a prolongation of this frozen world for just a touch under 18 minutes: the work’s trajectory is gripping; the piece is not just about “frozen” sounds but also considers the awesome grandeur of Arctic/Antarctic landscapes.

Scored for bass clarinet and orchestra and written in 2018, *Prometheus* once more has an external literary inspiration, but here it is dual: the Greek legend in the first instance, and Kafka’s take on that tale. The performance heard here is of the Royal Festival Hall premiere, and all congratulations to Engineer Dave Rowell and Producer Alexander Van Ingen for mastering the well-nigh insuperable Southbank acoustic. Commissioned by the Philharmonia and performed by them (the Minnesota Orchestra and the Malmö Symphony were both in on the act), this performance carries real documentary weight. Each movement title begins with “According to the ...” and then the number of the legend: the first, the legend of the continually-renewed liver, eaten every day by eagles; the second, in which under the rain of beaks, Prometheus presses himself into the rock, until eventually rock and man become one; thirdly, all was forgotten over the course of thousands of years, and finally, everyone grew weary until the event becomes obliterated. One can perhaps hear the pecking in the shrill repeated notes of the brass in the second movement, against which the solo bass clarinet rails. Laurent Ben Slimane is a brilliant soloist; he seems as one with the Philharmonia and the credit for that must surely go to Brabbins’ direction. The desolation of the “forgetting” movement is palpable; it also contains a long cadenza, an exposition of maximal virtuosity from Ben Slimane. The finale, the longest movement, is the depiction of weariness but yet not smooth entropy: the trajectory has jagged peaks and even (it strikes me) outbursts of panic.

A most remarkable disc from a composer who really should have greater exposure. The standard of performance is stratospheric; the musical invention just as much so. Recommended.

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