

“Theatre inspires me”

David Sawyer on drama and theatre in his music in an interview

by Sarah Laila Standke



David Sawyer

You have always been very interested in drama and theatre and this has been an inspiration to your music. Where did your interest come from?

Sawyer: It started already when I was a child. I was given a model theatre by my

grandfather. It had painted scenery, flats and characters on moving sticks. I performed plays where I would do all the voices and sound effects, and sometimes I would play the record of an opera, *The Magic Flute* for instance, build all my own sets and perform it along to the record. Later I performed some of Kagel's works as a student and was involved in some operatic productions like Birtwistle's *Gawain*.

The connection between drama and music is quite evident in many of your works, for instance in the ballet Rumpelstiltskin for ensemble and six dancers which was premiered by the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group under Martyn Brabbins in 2009.

Sawer: Yes. I used the term ballet provocatively. *Rumpelstiltskin* was not composed as a ballet for classically trained dancers. It was originally conceived for performers who fall in-between the category of actors and dancers. It's a piece for music and movement in the tradition of pantomime and dumbshow. The gestures in the music are closely related to what the performers are doing on stage, adding a visual dimension to the music. There is no text: I wanted to see how you could tell a story through just music and movement. I wrote precise stage directions in the score: these were then transferred by the director into a visual vocabulary, and onto the dancers by the choreographer into a movement vocabulary.

For me theatre is all about rhythm, it is about how you go from one moment to the next, or how long you give somebody to do something. What I found exciting in the rehearsal room with the dancers was that they were counting all the time. So, rhythm is a very useful tool for me to create material, cutting things up or expanding them, adding, subtracting units of time. It therefore felt natural for me to write a piece for dance.

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Why did you pick the story of Rumpelstiltskin in particular?

Sawer: It is one of my favourite Grimm fairy tales. The idea of straw turning into gold is a very musical one – transformation and change. And then the final dance of death at the end. When I was writing, I thought: this is all about a miller boasting that his daughter can turn straw into gold. The idea that you set this lie into the world and then it ends in somebody's self-destruction at the end seemed quite a strong story.

The Rumpelstiltskin Suite was premiered in April. This was your second premiere out of three this year. Let's talk about your 2013: there was the premiere of your work Flesh and Blood with the BBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by Ilan Volkov in February at the Barbican. This was not a music-theatre piece, but it has theatrical – or dramatic – content.

Sawer: Yes, I call the piece a dramatic scene. I specifically wanted to write a piece for mezzo-soprano and baritone soloists and orchestra. And rather than the soloists being just voices, I wanted them to be characters, real people in the context of a concert hall. When I was working on my operetta *Skin Deep* in Leeds the assistant director said that I should look at the work of Howard Barker, the playwright. I met up with him and discussed various themes, one of them being 'love and war'. He came up with the idea of a young soldier saying farewell to his mother which I found very strong. Barker then wrote the text and I just went deep into it. As I was writing, I realised that it would add a certain tension if the two singers were in costume – her looking like a real mother, and him looking like a young soldier, in uniform.

The piece goes through a series of rituals, it should feel like they've done it before, they get through their whole emotional life together in these 25 minutes, in order that it is complete by the time he is sent off to war, ultimately to be killed. The title *Flesh and Blood* implies that it is the mother who makes the ultimate sacrifice, rather than traditionally the soldier, because she is left. It was important to me that the orchestra had a major voice, that it wasn't seen as an accompaniment. The orchestra is an extension of their thoughts. My original image for the opening is that he is in uniform, he's just graduated, or he's coming from a parade. His mother sees him for the first time in uniform, and that is a shock and a surprise and this creates all these other thoughts as well.

Your third premiere is going to be a work for music theatre called The Lighthouse Keepers, which will be performed in July again by the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group. In this you also have two main figures. This time it's a father and a son, in Flesh and Blood it was a mother

and a son. But in The Lighthouse Keepers it's two actors, not two singers.

Sawer: Yes, that's right, there's no singing in it. I wanted to write a piece where the rhythms of speech are notated in the score. *The Lighthouse Keepers* is based on a French play written by Paul Autier and Paul Cloquemin for the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol in Paris at the turn of the 20th century, a tiny little theatre which presented shows which were basically designed to shock and terrify the audience. The original play was translated and I asked the playwright David Harrower to make an adaptation. There is an ensemble of nine, the same instruments as in *Rumpelstiltskin* apart from the three bass instruments, because the two male characters will occupy the bass register of the sound. The actors will read the play as though they are recording it for radio. The theatre will be in the audience's imagination – hopefully.

What's the story about?

Sawer: Going back to the original it's quite poetic: father and son are trapped in this lighthouse. It's not the age of mobile phones, they can't get any outside help. The son has been bitten by a dog and is not able to turn on the light of the lighthouse. There is a ship approaching the rocks which is in danger of crashing – and then this all cumulates into a moment at the end.

Why didn't you want singing in The Lighthouse Keepers?

Sawer: That's a good question. I think that just technically I wanted to write something which was spoken. I suppose it's closest to Sprechstimme, but it's not performed by singers, it's performed by actors speaking.

You probably know that there is a silent film based on this very story by Jean Grémillon called "Gardiens de phares" from 1929. As soon as I read about that film, I immediately thought of your work "Hollywood Extra", which you composed to accompany a silent film. Does your work The Lighthouse Keepers have anything to do with the silent film by Grémillon?

Sawer: No. I found out that there was this silent film made in the late 1920s which is set in the original lighthouse. It's a famous lighthouse on the north coast of the Bretagne, very far out to sea and very isolated. I contacted the Cinémathèque Française and they sent me a copy of the film. I don't think silent films were ever meant to be silent, they were just waiting for sound to catch up with film. That period of French film is very Impressionistic, it seems to be the equivalent of Debussy in music, there are a lot of elements of the sea and weather in this film.

The Life and Death of 9413 – a Hollywood Extra was a short avant-garde film, made in America in 1928, directed and designed by French and Hungarian - emigrants. It was an attempt at making a Hollywood film in the expressionist style, and it was a complete failure. It doesn't have a happy ending. I was asked by the British Film Institute to write a score to go with the film, and that was a technical challenge, to try and hit visual cues spot on with the music. It's exciting when the music is live, because you bring the film to life, the audience can see the connection between something that's fixed – the film – and something that is being created live – the music.

We've talked about the inspiration of drama and theatre in your music. How exactly is this inspiration reflected in your compositions?

Sawer: I suppose it gets me writing. I don't think I could write a purely abstract piece of music. It doesn't mean that the audience need to be aware of the narrative or story all the time. I write a piece of music, but I think it's about what you don't say. In theatre it's what you leave out and that's where I feel you can communicate with the audience because then the audience come towards you. When I'm writing music it helps me to think of it as a live experience, that an orchestra and musicians are performing live to an audience, so the audience are involved in that space. It is not like watching a film or listening to a CD of music where it is all given to you. I really am aware that we are in a theatre and of all the gestures that the musicians make – I think of them as I am writing every note: I sense what a trombone will physically have to do to make that sound, or how the strings will look when they are playing. So, that's an inspiration to me a lot of the time. That will help me generate material. Many of my compositional decisions are dictated by theatre, by what is lying underneath the surface.