

The work of British composer Mark Anthony Turnage

By Barbara Slaughter
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Every year BBC Radio 3 presents a weekend of performances by the BBC Symphony Orchestra and Chorus at the Barbican Centre in London to celebrate the work of a particular composer. In recent years, Kurt Weill (1990-1950) and John Adams (1947-) have been featured. This year the BBC's choice was the British composer, Mark Anthony Turnage. Seventeen of his works were performed, included choral and orchestral music, chamber works, two operas and a song cycle, as well as four film scores.

Turnage gave several talks about his work and there were two jazz concerts, featuring compositions by some of his "musical heroes" including Miles Davis (1926-1991) and Duke Ellington (1899-1974). Most of the concerts at the *Momentum* weekend were broadcast on Radio 3. The performances, which were consistently excellent, revealed that here was a serious composer whose music, especially in the field of opera, is bold and exciting.

Turnage was born in Corringham, Essex, in 1960. He inherited his love of music from his parents, both of whom were musical. His father, who worked as a clerk for Mobil Oil, played the piano and sang, and his mother played cornet in a brass band. He had piano lessons from the age of six and soon became obsessed with the instrument. In a recent interview, he explained that his parents were both very religious and the piano became a private world into which he could escape.

From an early age, he attempted to cut his own path in music, trying his hand at both improvisation and composition almost from the beginning. His musical diet consisted of late 18th and 19th century composers. He had no access to the pop music enjoyed by most children of his age, which his mother thought was "evil." His school friends nicknamed him "Wolfgang," because of his enthusiasm for composition.

Turnage developed his musicianship from the age of 10 through obsessive listening to Radio 3, becoming familiar with works by composers like Luciano Berio (1925-), Carl Nielsen (1865-1931), Gyorgy Ligeti (1923-), Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) and Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975). At 14 he was accepted by the Junior Department of the Royal College of Music (RCM), where he soon began to study with the young and gifted composer Oliver Knussen (1952-), who has remained a friend and mentor until the present.

Whilst at college he became interested in jazz. He said he was surprised that there was a whole art form he had previously known nothing about. "I realised there was a bigger world out there." At the time, "melody" was frowned on at the RCM. Students were encouraged to write "atonal" music—that is, music that uses the 12 notes of the chromatic scale with no tonal centre. Thus, Turnage lived a schizophrenic life, composing atonal music by day and listening almost exclusively to jazz at night. This was a key time in his musical development.

His early compositions were influenced by the strictures of the RCM. Very rhythmic music, such as that of Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971), was discouraged, and Turnage has said it took him a long time to write four straight crotchets (quarter notes) in a bar. "I had a hang up about

everything having to be distorted, of having to use lots of layers and irrational rhythms." With Knussen's encouragement, he began to find his own compositional voice, breaking from the limitations of serialism, the form of atonal music developed by Pierre Boulez (1925-) and Karlheinz Stockhausen (1928-).

Andrew Clements, in his worthwhile commentary on Turnage's work, suggests that "because, to a large extent he was self-educated musically, he also carried no preconceptions, and felt no pressure to conform to the stereotype of the young composer." This meant that he had the freedom to draw on much broader influences than many of his contemporaries. His work is strongly influenced by jazz musicians, especially Miles Davis, whom he considers the "ultimate composer."

The BBC weekend offered a unique opportunity to experience the wide range of this relatively young composer's work. Turnage confessed he approached the event with some trepidation, afraid that by performing his work side by side some dreadful "sameness would be revealed." In fact, this was not the case. The juxtaposition of so many of his works revealed a real process of development in his musical creativity.

He first emerged on the European musical scene with the opera *Greek*, which premiered in 1988. He said that initially he had an aversion to opera, seeing it as a somewhat ossified form of music, and said rather tongue in cheek that he had agreed with Boulez about the need to "burn down all opera houses." However, in 1983 he won a scholarship to the Tanglewood Summer School, where he met the composers Gunther Schuller (1925-) and Hans Werner Henze (1926-). Henze, who has himself composed 11 operas, recognised that Turnage had a real capacity to write for the theatre. Demonstrating tremendous confidence in the 25-year-old, who up to that point had never written a piece more than 15 minutes long, Henze commissioned him to compose an opera for the first Munich Biennale in 1988. Turnage said he almost refused because he was "terrified" of the commission, but he finally agreed.

His influences in writing the opera were Britten's *Billy Budd*, Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* and Michael Tippett's (1905-1998) *King Priam*.

Turnage made a daring choice of subject, basing his libretto on a play by Stephen Berkoff (1937-), a contemporary reworking of the Oedipus myth. The opera is set in the 1980s in the East End of London. The plagues that beset the city are unemployment, racism and police violence. Turnage told the *Contemporary Classical Music Weekly* that it was too facile to simply describe *Greek* as "anti-Thatcher." He said, "It came out in the early days of the Thatcher government but it was about more than the political thing... It was about race, greed and lots of other things. The police were particularly out of control in that period."

Greek combines the jazz and classical traditions, through which Turnage establishes his own voice. Like other composers, he uses the natural cadences of speech in his music. The opera contains both sung and spoken dialogue, and is far removed from any form of naturalism. The stylised spoken dialogue, with its exaggerated intonation of "cockney

defiance,” becomes another aspect of the music. It moves from the rhythmic cacophony of the football chant through snatches of jazz and rock to passages of real lyricism. There is very little conventional “melody” in the opera, but the words and music are so wedded together that a remembered phrase can recall the way it was shaped. *Greek* was a great success in Munich and won the BMW award for best opera.

Turnage’s second opera, *The Silver Tassie* (2000), was on a much larger scale, with 20 soloists and a male voice choir. It was written whilst he was Composer-in-Association at the English National Opera (ENO) and was premiered by the company at the London Coliseum in 2000. Because the ENO is a permanent company, Turnage was able to compose the opera with particular soloists in mind, which he said was a great help. In its later compositional stages, the opera was developed in workshops with company members, a method that he said was very rewarding. What came out particularly clearly during the weekend was that Turnage was a composer who thrived on collaboration with other artists, poets, playwrights and musicians.

The Silver Tassie is based on a play of the same name by the Irish playwright Sean O’Casey (1884-1964), first performed in 1929. The opera won the Olivier award for outstanding achievement and has been acclaimed as one of the best new operas of recent years. Turnage described it as being about “public grief.” It explores the impact of the First World War on a working class family in Dublin.

Turnage explained that from his early childhood his grandfather often talked to him about the horrors of the First World War. This experience had a profound effect on him, and he has written more than one work on the subject. He visited the battlefields of the Somme several times as he was writing the opera, in an attempt to make a material connection with that period.

The title of the play is taken from a poem of the same name by Robert Burns. The traditional melodies that are used in the opera—the setting of the Burns poem, the song of the young stretcher-bearers and the dance music of the final act—are seamlessly integrated into what is largely an atonal score. Much of the vocal line is unaccompanied, linked by passages of orchestration, which carry the action forward and give “space” for the singers to live and breathe in a natural way. The characters are much more subtle and developed than in *Greek*, which tends towards caricature.

In the first act, Harry Heegan, the handsome young soldier, is on leave from the front with his faithful comrade Barney and Teddy Foran, a neighbour. Harry enters with his sweetheart Jessie, who is bearing the “Silver Tassie” of the title that he had just won for his prowess on the football field. He expects and receives the admiration of his family and everyone else. At the end of the act, the three soldiers unwillingly join their ship to return to France.

The second act is very powerful. It takes the form of a long lament, sung by the battle-weary soldiers. Towering above them sits the mysterious figure of “The Croucher,” whose sonorous bass voice is a terrible reminder of the death that faces them. At the end of the act, the German army breaks through. The officers cry “To the guns!...He that can run, walk or even crawl!” and the soldiers are forced over the top.

Harry, the joyous youth of the first act, is gravely injured in the battle, and the final two acts see him returned to hospital in Dublin to a completely changed world. Barney, who was overshadowed by Harry at the beginning of the play, has won the Victoria Cross for saving his comrade’s life. But Harry is now confined to a wheelchair, and Jessie, his darling sweetheart of the first act, rejects him and instead turns to Barney. The most heart-rending moment of the whole opera is when Harry is reminded that Barney saved his life and cries out in anguish, “My life! What life? Christ Almighty, for ‘saving’ my life!”

Eventually, Harry and his neighbour Teddy Foran, who was blinded in the war, have to somehow reconcile themselves to their broken bodies and their shattered lives. For the rest, they sadly accept that life continues.

At the *Momentum* weekend, the opera was presented in a film version performed by the ENO, with the original cast from the London premiere. Even though it lacked the immediacy of a live performance, it was a most powerful, humane and moving work that deserves to become part of the operatic canon.

Turnage’s work tends to be rather dark: “It is not intentional, but it always seems to come out that way.” His music is full of brooding and melancholy. He says that in life he is an optimistic person, but not in art. When asked what made Miles Davis’s music so special, he replied very simply that it was the element of “melancholy.” He says, “I struggle to move from darkness to light, but I don’t always manage it.”

The composer explained how he uses extra-musical sources of inspiration in his orchestral compositions to spark off the creative process, although his work is not usually programmatic in character. “I have to have a colourful title to get the piece going. Pieces where the titles were problematic have not turned out to be that good.”

Three Screaming Popes was inspired by a triptych by the painter Francis Bacon, which made a deep impression on him. From the title, I expected a manic and distorted work, similar to Bacon’s distorted images. There were many strident and discordant passages, but in the context of the work as a whole they seemed entirely appropriate.

Blood on the Floor, the nine-movement suite for jazz trio and large ensemble that opened the weekend, was also inspired by a Bacon painting. Turnage said the picture conjured up musical images that stuck in his head. The *Momentum* Programme explains that the theme of the composition was an exploration of “aspects of urban alienation and drug addiction.” It includes elements of jazz improvisation and has a tremendous sense of the rawness and complexity of the modern city.

The second movement is a tender melody on soprano sax with guitar accompaniment entitled “Junior Addict.” It was written after Turnage received the terrible news that his younger brother had died from a drug overdose. “Elegy for Andy,” the sixth movement, is based on a melody he played at his brother’s funeral.

Momentum, the work that provided the title for the weekend, was commissioned by the BBC and first performed in 1991. It also involves an attempt to integrate the jazz and classical traditions, to which Turnage is very committed.

During the weekend, the composer explained the difficulties he experienced in attempting this. Initially, he was nervous about providing real scope for the jazz musicians. “I was too conservative about what I allowed. I found it very hard; at first every dot and dynamic was there. But I have learnt to give them more freedom.”

Although Turnage had been struggling to introduce the jazz idiom in his work, he didn’t work with jazz musicians until 1996. “I didn’t think I could do it.” Today he collaborates with a particular group of talented soloists. One of them, Peter Erskine, played with Weather Report. Dave Holland was bassist in the Miles Davis quintet from 1967 to 1971 and played on the *Bitch’s Brew* recording. John Schofield played with Davis between 1983 and 1986.

The Game is Over, also a commission from the BBC, had its world premiere at the final concert of the *Momentum* weekend. It is beautiful setting for chorus and orchestra of a poem by the Austrian poet Ingeborg Bachmann, which I found particularly moving. Although there is no reference to war, it has resonances of Wilfred Owen’s poem “Strange Meeting.” With its recurrent phrase of “Dearest brother, my brother,” it is full of surreal images, telling of two men who fly together out of the valley of death.

In an interview, Turnage said that perhaps it had been unconsciously written for his brother Andy, but it has wider significance. The interviewer referred to Beethoven’s theme of brotherhood in his *Ninth Symphony*, but Turnage said he didn’t want to be too specific as to what the work was about.

It is not easy to give a real impression of the scope of the composer's output—most of which was unknown to me before the *Momentum* weekend. There is an emotional depth to his work, which goes beyond his undoubted natural talent and professional training. He has a highly developed musical sensibility and, because he is very truthful in his approach to composition, he expresses something that is happening beneath the surface of society.

What Turnage describes as “the darkness” in his music derives from his struggle to give expression to the tragedy that the vast majority of people experience in modern life. This is why he turns for inspiration to the First World War and other themes of alienation and oppression. It is why he is drawn to jazz and the music of Miles Davis.

In his struggle to integrate jazz influences into his music, he is turning back to the 1920s when Stravinsky, Weill and others were experimenting and exploring new forms to give musical expression to the period in which they were living. Turnage is similarly struggling to take music forward at the beginning of the 21st century.

He said somewhat ruefully that he is much better known in Europe, especially Germany, than in his home country. The BBC should be congratulated for providing an opportunity for the work of this important composer to be heard by a wider audience, both in live performance and on the radio.

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