

The Essay: BBC Radio 3 'Inspiring Women'

I once said that composing was like breathing: the essential rhythm of my life. But inspiration is very different. I can choose to inhale extra deeply, but I can't choose to be inspired, anymore than choosing to inspire someone. It's involuntary; you can't summon inspiration, but later, you may recognise that it has visited. The most poetic description is Hildegard's: she was 'a feather on the breath of God'.

I owe a great deal to the people who've inspired me, but I was seldom aware of it at the time. My mother, the composer Elizabeth Maconchy, remains a great inspiration; but as a child, I took her completely for granted. I thought that composing music was simply a natural thing to do. It certainly never occurred to me that it was an unusual activity for a woman; her closest friends were the Welsh composer Grace Williams and the Irish composer Ina Boyle.

It was only when I was an undergraduate at Oxford that I began to see things differently. We had to read enormous tomes, all written by men. In Bukofzer's 'Music in the Baroque Era' I read in a footnote that the first opera-ballet was composed by Francesca Caccini. I thought, hang on! if this was a first, why is she just a footnote?

Inspiration is very different from influence. I'm influenced by music of many kinds, and in all sorts of ways, technical ways: how my students use spectral harmony, how Mozart uses vocal tessitura or lays out registral space, how large rhythmic structures underpin Javanese gamelan.

The inspiration that came from my mother, much as I now love her music, was about *being* a composer: her independence, her energy and the standards she demanded of herself. Her career began brilliantly and ended with honours, but when I was young she was often overlooked and patronised. Yet she didn't waver in her tenacity and absolute commitment to her work.

In the evening my parents always listened to the Third Programme, another inspiration. I remember when I was very small our ancient wireless was replaced by a radiogram. I thought that inside this handsome cabinet was a tiny man, alive, talking and putting on records; I imagined him wearing what I, a country child, called 'a London suit'. Later I asked my mother his name and she said 'Alvar Liddell'. But I heard it wrongly, and for years I thought it was Alvarly Deo – the BBC as the voice of God.

Composing for me is a very solitary act, and yet music is a social art. So when I think about inspiration I think of the performers I've worked with. I love rehearsals: nothing beats hearing music brought to life. In 1973 I wrote a big orchestral piece for the Proms, *The Hidden Landscape*. At the BBC Symphony's first rehearsal, I was so thrilled that into my head came the whole of my next orchestral piece, *Columbia Falls*, for the CBSO.

That was marvellous, but there are more modest inspirations that are no less important. After I left the Royal College of Music in 1969, I was freelancing, and did some teaching at Morley College. For a year I played in an improvisation group that met every week, and we had an active music theatre group that gave endless opportunities for exploring stagecraft. That had always been part of my life – as a child I wrote plays and directed my friends in them – but now I had the opportunity to explore the relationship between music and physical gesture.

Those explorations have continued to bear fruit ever since, from *Antiworld*, which was staged in 1972, to *Tokaido Road*, which Okeanos premiered at the Cheltenham Festival in 2014.

I also became increasingly fascinated by exploring the continuum that leads from the speaking voice to the singing voice. I was hugely struck by the Korean medium of *P'ansori*, which I heard performed both here and in the States. These long music dramas have just two performers: a drummer, and a single female singer who plays all the parts: a young prince, an old king, a wicked step-mother, or whatever. She uses a vocal range of a couple of octaves, and her voice can do anything. It sings, it sighs, it calls, speaks or whispers. *P'ansori* was both an influence and an inspiration, and it led later to my monodrama *The Old Woman of Beare*, for soprano and ensemble. I wrote it as a concert work, which is how it's always been performed here; but when it was done in Korea, it was staged.

I've been composing for at least half a century, so inevitably the musicians who have inspired me are too numerous to list. But there are standout names, people with whom I made music early on and have become lifelong colleagues. I think of the soprano Jane Manning, for whom I wrote the solo scena *But Stars Remaining* in 1972; or the conductor Odaline de la Martinez, who has championed the premieres and recordings of many of my works. The clarinettist Ian Mitchell, director of Gemini, who has been committed to programming my music for over thirty years.

An unexpected encounter came in 1982 when I met the late John Edward Kelly, a virtuoso saxophonist. I didn't want to write for sax, and kept resisting the invitation to meet. Eventually I gave in, and we met in the basement of Novello's offices in Soho. A carpenter was at work, drilling shelves, *fortissimo*. We politely asked for a break so John could play for me; no answer, another drill *crescendo*. Finally it transpired that the carpenter was deaf-mute; with smiles all round he cut the drill and John began to play me the most beautiful microtonal melodies. I was hooked, and went on to write him a concerto, as well as a work for the Rascher saxophone quartet and a solo piece.

My friendships with composers have nourished me across the years. My teachers, Jeremy Dale Roberts, when I was a teenager, and Earl Kim, when I was on a Harkness Fellowship in the States. They *lived* music, they illuminated music for me as no academic ever has. And then at Dartington summer school I met the composers who became my closest friends: Gillian Whitehead, Erika Fox, Janice Hamer. And closest of all, at the spnm Composers Weekend of 1972, I met my future husband, David Lumsdaine. With David it's not only been a profound musical journey, but also the shared delight of our explorations in the natural world.

One of the big changes in my lifetime has been the advent of women in powerful positions in the musical world. I owe a big debt to such people, because of my eight operas, five came into being because of enlightened women.

I'm thinking of Irene Macdonald, who introduced me to the poet Kevin Crossley-Holland and commissioned our children's opera *The Green Children* for the 1990 Kings Lynn Festival; Jules Wright, who commissioned and directed *Blood Wedding* for the Women's Playhouse Trust; Sheila Colvin, at the Aldeburgh Festival, where *The Wildman* had its premiere in 1995.

Moving on, my church opera *Light Passing*, was staged in the beautiful mediaeval setting of St Margaret's Walmgate, in York, thanks to Delma Tomlin, Director of the National Centre for Early Music. In 2011, Odaline de la Martinez commissioned and conducted *Dream Hunter*, first touring it and then bringing it to London.

Most recently, I've been working with Kate Romano, musician and entrepreneur extraordinaire. Kate brought to fruition one of my most fulfilling collaborations, the music theatre piece *Tokaido Road, a Journey after Hiroshige*. These people I've named are inspiring women indeed.

I can never resist writing for singers, but it's the collaborative nature of opera as a medium that I love. Some of my happiest times have been working with librettists and directors. It's not always plain sailing; I designed my first opera, *Dawnpath*, to be staged in the round, but the premiere was given in a proscenium arch theatre, and so, though very well played and sung, it didn't work.

The three productions since have all worked beautifully, directed respectively by Rebecca Meitlis, Carmen Jakobi and Caroline Clegg, all directors whom I've been fortunate to work with on my subsequent operas. I think they understood *Dawnpath* in a way the original all-male team didn't, and I remain a bit suspicious of all-male or all-women teams: a mix is better.

Talking about men and women in this way can be dangerous: you can't combat sexism with sexism. But it was important to me in the nineteen eighties to campaign for a better deal for women composers, because that decade – Margaret Thatcher's decade – was a bad decade for women. My contemporaries and I had had such fantastic opportunities in the sixties, but now, for our students, the openings weren't there.

We are still in an age of transition in 2016, so the need to create change still matters to me; the world of new music is so small that power lies in very few hands and unwitting complacency or prejudice often creep in. Still, right now there are lots of gifted composers who are female and getting work, and I rejoice that there is so much activity and success in this new generation.

There's a special inspiration, too, in following the careers of my former students. Teaching composition has something in common with raising a child: it's about giving people confidence to be themselves. Not in the sense of ego-building, quite the opposite: developing the confidence to be fiercely self-critical and win through to find their own voice, their own path.

It's a privilege to have taught, for example, Sadie Harrison, whose beautifully wrought music is inspired by her work with musicians from Afghanistan, or the Irish composer Grainne Mulvey, with her superb, wild orchestral pieces.

I've been lucky in my teaching opportunities. At Kings College London I had the chance to design a composition department from scratch, and later, when David joined Kings, we had a job share, which was ideal. Being invited to take the Chair of Music at the University of York meant leading a department full of remarkable composers and performers, a place unique for its emphasis on the *making* of music.

Teaching summer school in Ireland for over twenty-five years I've been able to witness the development of an amazingly vital new music scene. And throughout my career I've been involved in organisations that exist to support new music; that kind of commitment has always been important to me.

It's not only people who have inspired me; much of my music has been inspired by places. Mostly, I've lived in cities; in London for years, and now in York, where I live by the river Ouse – well, almost *in* the Ouse. Usually, though, I hear the first glimpses of my pieces when I'm out walking, far from a city. It might be an empty strand in Ireland, it used to be the North Norfolk coast; sometimes it's my favourite haunts in the high Pyrenees, in Catalonia. Gradually I sense the sound world and the shape of the music that is to come, which I'll discover in detail when I'm back indoors.

Poetry has also informed the way I compose; it offers me a different way of seeing the world. I love Kathleen Jamie's work for that reason. Or these lines by Anne Ridler:

*Only the other side of pain
Can truth again be all I speak
Or I again possess
A saint's hilarious carelessness.*

Those lines are from a long poem she wrote after the birth of her son. They resonate with me because after my son was born I had such a fruitful period of composing: the cantata *Stranded on My Heart*, and chamber music, including my clarinet quintet, *Invisible Places* - works that must in some way reflect my joy at having a child.

Poetry can also trigger a very direct response, leaping off the page and into music. That was how I first encountered John Fuller's work in the 1980s; since then we've worked together on song cycles, on our opera *Dream Hunter* about a Corsican *mazzera*, a young woman who can foresee death; and right now I'm setting words from his poem *The Siege* for a big work for Rachel Nicholls and the BBC Symphony Orchestra.

People, places, poetry: but every day, music. Playing a Bach invention or a Schubert song; making music with my son or listening to a brand new piece by a colleague. It's music itself that creates that essential breathing-in which we call inspiration.