

BRITISH **Bandsman**

the leading international brass magazine

• issue 5752 • 11 January 2013 •

Finding a voice... creating a market

Inside the world of Peter Meehan

The battle for banding's biggest cash prize

New leadership for ABBA



Price £1.40

Finding a voice... creating a market

Paul Hindmarsh continues his occasional series of composer profiles in conversation

with Dr. Peter Meechan.

Pictures by John Stirzaker.

A conversation with composer Peter Meechan is always entertaining. He always has plenty to say on the current state of the band world (brass and wind) and on the activities of his composer friends and colleagues. At a brass or wind band event, you'll often be able to find him at the bar and enjoy his company. However, behind his natural and genuine bonhomie lurks a fierce intelligence and a creative drive that has seen him mature over the past few years into one of the most interesting composers writing for bands on both sides of the 'pond'. When we met a few days ago at the Royal Northern College of Music (RNCM), he had just returned from five weeks in Canada and the United States. He had been in Saskatoon for the première of his latest wind band opus., following that

with some work as a visiting clinician and finally a visit to the Mid-West Convention and Clinic in Chicago, where much interest was taken in the new CD of his music, which Foden's Band has just released.

"When I'm in the States I like to stay away from the brass band side of things," Peter confessed, "but this year I took some of the new CDs with me and gave them out, saying that they are all available in wind band versions. A number of conductors came back the next day asking to buy the wind band versions."

Nuneaton born, Peter Meechan is 33 and already making musical waves, through the strength of his larger-than-life personality and the quality of his music. One of the reasons he moved up to Manchester some 13 years ago was to study at the RNCM. As a teenager he'd been impressed by the clarity and economy of the music of RNCM Principal in 1997, Edward Gregson, and particularly *Connotations*, which Peter still regards as being one of the finest pieces of brass band writing in the repertoire. It was as a second-year undergraduate when his fascination with brass bands was born. "When I was here at College, I'd be at the bar for a quick drink before going back to the hall of residence and there would be an infinite number of brass players around! One of those was Dave Thornton, and he asked me to write him something. Out of that came a whole series of euphonium pieces. Dave is a very practical person and I learned a lot through working with him."

Peter, also says that he gleaned as much about being a composer from long discussions, often late into the night, with other more established composers, like Gary Carpenter, as he did from his official teachers. "That's the best way composers can learn. This is my ethos in teaching now, that you should never teach someone to compose, but teach someone how to teach themselves to compose. However, what my official teachers did instil in me was a technical grounding and a discipline and that has stood me in good stead"

Peter Meechan describes himself as a 'social person'. He is gregarious, but also serious and professional in his approach to composition, so much so that he is now a full-time composer, with no regular teaching or lecturing commitments to

subsidise his writing. The journey from student to professional has been a long and carefully plotted one.

After his four undergraduate years came a Masters degree at Salford University.

"I undertook that at Salford, because I'd been asked by Professor Peter Graham to do some teaching, working about 15 hours a week. As I was working that number of hours, I was able to do a Masters for free!" Peter was also gaining valuable hands-on experience as the first Young Composer-in-Association of Black Dyke Band. Like all young composers, how to realise ambitions and establish a career and a presence was the challenge of his mid-20s. Peter chose to follow his Masters, which is all about consolidating technique, with a Ph.D., which for a composer is as much about finding a voice as it is about musical research, as Peter acknowledges:

"I didn't know what else to do! All composition is research in a sense, and as a composer you never really stop learning. Peter Graham encouraged me to do it, not just as a way of improving my writing, but giving time to establish myself, to meet the people I needed to meet. To put it bluntly, I did it for financial reasons too. As a Salford graduate I got a percentage off the next degree and as a full-time student, I was exempt from council tax. I was never going to get that kind of opportunity again. A doctorate is also an advantage when you are in America, where it represents a certain standard of achievement and expectation.

"I'd gone through my undergraduate studies not really feeling I was writing what I wanted to write. I was writing the music I was expected to write. When I was working for Black Dyke and for the Masters, I had other influences suggesting stylistic aspects. I realised that I needed more time to find what I really wanted to say. The Ph.D. gave me three years of freedom to explore my own creativity. In the submission you provide a written commentary alongside the portfolio. You are constantly referencing other sources and justifying what you have done. As it turned out, the portfolio I submitted was mostly of commissioned music."

Among the works Dr. Meechan submitted was the 2007 Scottish Open Championship test *Macbeth* and his acclaimed Trumpet Concerto *Apophenia*.

Rex Richardson's first performance of this virtuoso showpiece at the RNCM Festival of Brass with Foden's and Bramwell Tovey revealed, for me, that this young composer was self-confident and assured in his composing 'skin'. "It was first time I really remember thinking that I absolutely knew what I was doing when I was writing and was fully in control", Peter comments, "even when the music was taking me in a new direction." *Apophenia* effectively kick-started Peter's international career. Versions for orchestra and wind band have been launched and it's been recorded in two versions. "Rex Richardson's performance was the single most important performance of my career up to then. Bramwell Tovey said he wanted to get it to his mate in Canada - who happened to be Jens Lindemann - and the rest is history. He plays it everywhere and he's recorded it. I'll be over in Belgium for a performance in a couple of weeks." Peter finds writing for specific musicians particularly congenial, and in tuba player Les Neish, for whom he has composed two concertos, he found someone with whom he shared more than a love of music - and that is football, or to be more specific Liverpool FC. They were both at the Liverpool game at Anfield last week. "Les is such an easy-going, laidback guy," Peter says, "He's also one of the finest musicians I have ever worked with, and I've worked with some great musicians, more than I'd had ever thought I would at the age of 32-33. He's not just a great tuba player. He's a musical artist whose vehicle is this particular instrument. Working with Les is good fun, but also informative. Pieces can be improved when there's a trust between the composer and a performer."

Following three years of intense writing for his doctoral submission, Peter's musical language has taken on a rather different cast. The economy and precision of the approach, where every note counts, is undiminished, but a greater stylistic freedom is evident. When I first heard *The Legend of King Arthur* (the title track from Foden's Band's new all-Meechan CD), my immediate reaction was this is 'Queen' on brass band. "Part of that comes from the experience I gained through analysing what I had been doing and through performances by the likes



of Dave, Les and Jens, so that I feel now that I can write what I want with the confidence that it will work and be of a consistent standard."

I heard details in the Foden's recording that I hadn't noticed in live situations. Peter puts that down to the level of detail that the conductor, Michael Fowles, explored ("is there a better resident conductor in the country?" he adds),

duty to make the music communicate. I'm not talking about dumbing down here, but making sure, as part of the brief, that my music is understood. It doesn't mean that people would necessarily like the piece more, but there is a chance for it to be appreciated. *My Epitaph for Hillsborough* is an example of how a story behind will always capture more emotion from the audience than if the music was played

"I work hard, but can make a living out of writing, and my music is getting played."

the quality of the band and the skill of engineer Adam Goldsmith, who was also a fellow student at the RNCM. "Adam made the piece sound epic. There was an intentionally different sound on this CD than on the Foden's CD of the Year recording."

All of Peter's big wind and brass pieces have a story to tell. Within the limitations he has imposed upon himself, they are packed with images that suit the market in which he is working. "I'm not always writing for professional players, but for people who in some cases pay to play. They are going to band practice twice a week and perhaps giving a concert at the weekend. The audience is often made up of those who support their hobby. Therefore, I think the composer has a

without any story or just called *Epitaph*." Peter is currently Musical Associate of Foden's and clearly relishing the connection: "Working with Foden's is the easiest thing you can imagine. It's not just that the band can play, it's the attitude that goes with the skill! The best thing I can say about them is that they are the nicest people and the most open-minded musically that I have worked with in banding. Foden's programmes music by Andy Scott (Composer-in-Residence) and myself in its concerts - not just the arrangements but the original stuff as well. It maintains a high level of recording serious repertoire, and also a healthy attitude towards players. The band has made me feel 100 percent welcome. Those I didn't know I now count as friends.

Everybody seems to get on well and each member has a role to play, especially in events like the Manchester Cathedral concert last November."

For that concert Peter made a brass version of Fauré's *Requiem*, notable for its intimacy and authenticity. Of the other music on the superbly recorded and performed Foden's disc, *Apex* for trumpet/cornet and band has been one of Peter's most popular sellers and *Fire in the Sky*, a vivid tribute to his three musical 'gods' - Stravinsky, Miles Davis and Freddie Mercury - makes his assured mature voice accessible to bands below Championship level.

Some years ago, encouraged by Peter Graham, Peter Meechan made the decision to publish his own music, following his own example (Gramercy Music) and that of Philip Sparke (Anglo Music). "It was a commercial as well as career decision," Peter explains. "You are absolutely in charge of your own destiny, whilst retaining the copyright of your material. An author is not expected to release copyright, and I don't see why composers should give away theirs to a publisher when there are so many distribution deals that can be negotiated. It does mean that you have to invest some time in meeting people and setting up commissions and recordings, as there is no editor or promoter to take care of your interests, but I enjoy that side of the business."

Peter Meechan loves writing for brass bands. His expanding career with wind bands, which has included a four-year spell as Chair of the British Association of Symphonic Wind Bands and Ensembles, continues to add a significant international perspective. There are commission 'orders' in the book to take him beyond 2015. After a slow start, his publishing enterprise is also paying its way and more. "I enjoy the networking," Peter concludes. "I work hard, but can make a living out of writing, and my music is getting played. At worst someone might only play your piece once, but in the process you've made a friend. That can't be bad!"

Peter Meechan's *Fire in the Sky* will be performed by Foden's Band, conducted by Michael Fowles, on 26 January at the RNCM Festival of Brass.