



On Buoyant Form — Issue 122, 1 June 2018

SPONSORED FEATURE — ANDREW DOWNES ORCHESTRAL MUSIC

Roderic Dunnett: Born in Handsworth, north west Birmingham in 1950, Andrew Downes studied composition at St John's College, Cambridge and later with Herbert Howells at the Royal College of Music.

Downes falls into a group of British composers whose talents are undoubted, but who have still to be allotted their properly appreciated place in the music of their native country, and to be fully recognised for their creative spark and individuality. His gifted contemporaries include notables such as John Casken, Judith Weir, David Matthews, Michael Berkeley, Philip Wilby, Robert Saxton, Simon Holt, Michael Finnissy, John Woolrich and Dominic Muldowney.

A few of that generation — Oliver Knussen for instance, or Colin Matthews and George Benjamin, have been treated as talents of the very front rank. But until the arrival of James MacMillan (born 1959), almost all these cogent figures are, well, insufficiently and only intermittently honoured, and on the whole less frequently performed in Britain or abroad. True, their new works are trumpeted and arouse some modest excitement; but regrettably revivals are few and far between.

This collection from 2015 puts Downes — at last, and deservedly — very much in the picture. As well as a double disc featuring four symphonies and two additional works, this box includes a DVD which contains a documentary film on Downes and on the making of these recordings.

Downes is a highly respected, original thinking composition teacher living still around Birmingham (having been head of composition at the Birmingham Conservatoire); but it is his own compositions that are given such potent readings here. The enterprising Czech ArteSmon label excels itself in serving up a clutch of gripping symphonic readings by the legendary Czech Philharmonic Orchestra under Ondřej Vrabec. They surely do him proud. His individual voice speaks loud and clear. [READ MORE ...](#)



Andrew Downes —
Czech Philharmonic Orchestra /
Ondřej Vrabec.
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OPERA VERSUS MAFIA — A CONVERSATION WITH FRANCESCO GIAMBRONE

Giuseppe Pennisi: In March 2018, the *New York Times* devoted an essay article to the fact that in Sicily, and most notably in Palermo, music, and especially opera, has become an important bastion against the mafia. I took the opportunity of my last visit to Palermo for the opening night of *I Puritani* — [read Revival or World Premiere?, 20 April 2018](#) — to discuss the subject with the Superintendent of Palermo's Teatro Massimo, Francesco Giambrone. I have known Mr Giambrone for several years, since he was the Superintendent of the Florence opera house and festival and, *inter alia*, he gave the audience a compelling production of Richard Strauss' *Die Frau ohne Schatten* — [read Difficult to Forget, 2 May 2010](#).



Francesco Giambrone, Superintendent of Teatro Massimo di Palermo. Photo © 2017 Rosellina Garbo



Teatro Massimo di Palermo. Photo © 2014 Rosellina Garbo



Teatro Massimo di Palermo's Sala Grande. Photo © 2014 Rosellina Garbo

Francesco Giambrone: It depends on the meaning we give to the mission of an opera house. I consider it not just as the place for high quality productions and performances but as a 'community theatre' with the purpose of creating and spreading culture for the social fabric of a territory; as such, *its purpose is to generate human capital, the main lever for development.*

He led me to the terrace at the top of Teatro Massimo with a birds' eye view of three different Palermos with clear cut boundaries; the old town with the Teatro Massimo at its center, the *art nouveau* districts built in the first half of the twentieth century, and the new unplanned areas made of cement blocks in areas that were previously orange groves.

FG: On one single night, 2,000 building permits were approved. Teatro Massimo was closed for twenty-three years for a so-called refurbishing; during those years, the mafia put its hands on Palermo. It was re-opened in 1997, after the mafia massacres against prominent magistrates and their followers, when eventually the citizens turned against the organized crime. But even before the Mayor re-opened the theatre, the school children rediscovered the Theatre through an educational project: kids represent both innocence and hope for the future.

FG: Recently, Teatro Massimo co-produced, together with Teatro dell'Opera di Roma, productions that, in minimized versions, travelling in a van, are performed in under-privileged, lowest income areas, where there is a lot of crime and drug dealing. One evening, the van was in the Zen district with a truck-reduced // *Barbiere di Siviglia*. At the beginning, only thirty children appeared interested; the women then came with their babies in their arms; then the men, and finally all the windows opened to enjoy something they had never seen before. They were all very attentive, almost enchanted. The head of the area police station said: 'for the first time in years in this square, there has been no drug dealing for two hours'.

The catchment area is not only Palermo but the whole of Sicily, also due to the dismal financial situation of opera houses in Catania, Messina and Trapani. There are two hundred and sixty performances every year. Some subscription series start at 5:30 or 6:30pm to allow round trips from other cities on the island; there are special series at 11am for young children. On average, the theatre's fill rate is eighty per cent.

CLASSICAL MUSIC NEWS – OBITUARIES

We mark the passing of Piet Kee, Dieter Schnebel, Glenn Branca, Jonathan Sternberg, Roman Toi, Wanda Wilkomirska and Herman Krebbers. [READ OUR LATEST NEWS ...](#)

SOMEWHAT DELAYED REVIEWS – MONTGOMERY AND DELLAL



Brilliant Variations
on Sentimental Songs:
Slipping Virtuosity
into the Antebellum
Drawing Room

Vivian Montgomery,
fortepiano

Pamela Dellal,
mezzo soprano



Endre Anaru: This is a charming program, of charming music, performed beautifully. Set out in a cunning fashion, well befitting the subtitle, the CD presents keyboard variations inspired by popular songs of the day.

Now, the 'day' referred to is the time period before the American Civil War (that refers to 1861 to 1865, for those non-Americans amongst us). The start date for the antebellum era is somewhat ambiguous, and can be stretched back to the 1790s, depending on whom you ask. Here we go as far back as a tune from 1787. No need to argue the point. The latest work played here was published in 1864. Such is the temporal ambit.

In her scholarly, but not dry, notes, Dr Vivian Montgomery argues that these piano works enabled female musicians of the day to extend their range:

The association with song was an entry point, for women amateurs, to a world of formulaic improvisation, composition, and accomplished pianistic artistry whose appropriateness for female musical activity was otherwise often questioned.

Indeed, women in those days were (musically and otherwise) relentlessly suppressed. But, I take Dr Montgomery to mean that by playing variations (not quite acceptable for women), based on 'sentimental songs' (altogether acceptable for women), the female artist could grow, perhaps aspire, and achieve artistic results.

It is difficult to credit any of the piano variations here with true musical greatness; though, none sink as low as some other dismal examples from the era.

But, I mentioned 'cunning' above. I refer to the CD's structure of source 'sentimental song' performed sumptuously by Pamela Dellal, followed by a piano variation played with radiant intonation by Dr Montgomery. This creates a beautiful effect. We hear what the composers *really* made into variations: viz, a musical production by a human voice. This is what the composers truly varied, not the harmonies, not the melodies, but the living, breathing fabric of song. The result is enlightening, for there are moments, even in the lowest level of the works, where the reason for the variation at all is found in the human voice, not merely the mechanism of the piano.

Some of the melodies will be familiar (excruciatingly so, in one case), and are still being performed. (*Of in the Stilly Night* was recorded by John McDermott.)

But, as for the piano pieces! Darkness shrouds them. [READ MORE ...](#)

CONCERT AND CD REVIEWS

This month, as usual, we have a selection of new concert and CD reviews by Roderic Dunnett, Gerald Fenech, Anett Fodor, Alice McVeigh, Maria Nockin, Geoff Pearce, Giuseppe Pennisi and Mike Wheeler. Please visit the pages below on our website to explore these reviews.

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ASK ALICE — ON TEACHING ADULT CELLO STUDENTS



“ Dear Ms McVeigh,

I am writing as I came across an article in *The Strad* from 2014. The title of this article was "How to teach adult string students.

I am an adult cello student, over the age of forty. I started a few years ago, and have been having problems finding a good cello teacher. The first I had was an easy-going chap who played pieces with me, but didn't focus on technical skills. The second most recent teacher is highly qualified with a masters in cello performance, but requires me to play to such perfection that I am feeling quite stressed. Frankly, I don't expect to be a professional. I just want to be able to play in tune and with others casually. I seem to have problems finding someone who can truly meet my needs.

I wonder if this is a common problem for adult learners? Is it harder to find a teacher as an adult?

Thank you for writing that article, albeit in 2014. It's been useful to read.

Kind regards
Hui Yin

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ALICE IN 'THE STRAD': HOW TO TEACH ADULT STRING STUDENTS

Alice McVeigh: Hi Hui Yin,

It's harder to teach an adult — but also *much* more rewarding than most kids, for reasons I mentioned in the article!

The trouble is, I think that many teachers have a set mindset and a routine of teaching that they fail to modify for adults. This is a shame, but understandable. You need to think 'outside the box' with fellow adults, and the grind of getting a living together makes this hard for many cello teachers to do.

You're not very old — I have a beginner in his seventies, and doing brilliantly!!! — and you've been unlucky twice.

But, unless you live in some very remote place, with a bit of determination you should be able to locate a teacher who can adapt to your needs, not just plow along the way s/he generally teaches (the



Cartoon of
Alice McVeigh.
© 2015 Pat Achilles

usual studies. The same old pieces.) Don't give up!!! Ask a few teachers for a sample lesson, go away and think about each of them, and then decide which is best for you, at least at the moment, remembering that, as you improve, you might need to move on.

Don't be shy about explaining that you want technical guidance as well as enjoyment from the cello, but that you don't have crazy expectations about achieving virtuoso status either.

Develop a clear vision of where you'd like to be in five years' time (in a local orchestra? Playing in your own quartet? Demonstrating in your kid's school?) and the amount of time you can realistically expect to put in a week. Communicate these clearly to possible teachers.

To me you sound like the ideal adult beginner: realistic — you'd be amazed how many *aren't* — clear-headed and committed, without being driven.

Good luck!!!!

More episodes of 'Ask Alice' ...

Ask Alice your classical music-related questions ...

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