

MUSICAL *Opinion*

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Stephen Montague at 80 – concert tribute

Two world premieres and riveting performances of orchestral-choral works painted a vivid and varied birthday portrait of American-born British composer Stephen Montague at a capacity filled St John's, Smith Square, London, on 16 March 2023. '*Snakebite: Stephen Montague at 80*' offered an exhilarating snapshot of works spanning four decades by a original musical personality renowned as a foremost ambassador of new music at the cutting-edge of contemporary experimentalism, and for the wider community.

Composer Stephen Montague

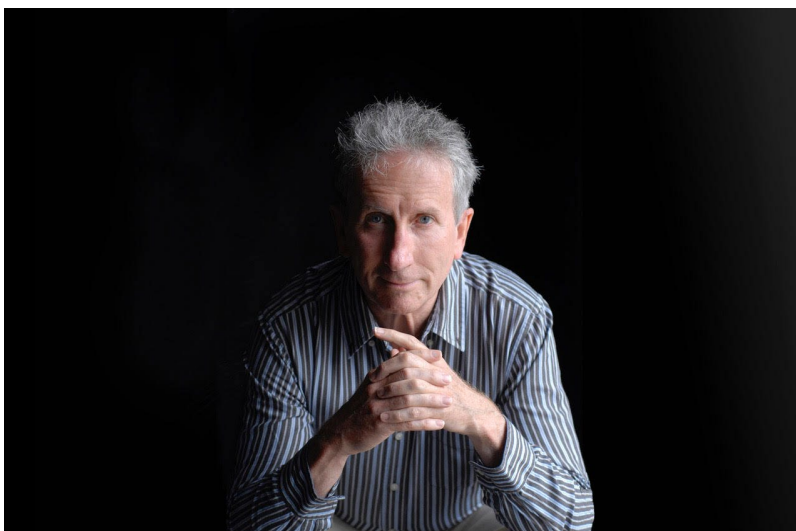


Photo: Kate Mount

The concert opened (and closed) with characteristically zany Montague-esqueries: seemingly standing up to introduce the programme, the composer himself took to the microphone and addressed the audience, “Good evening Ladies” and weeeishoosh.... a high-pitched shriek emanating from the loudspeakers with ear-splitting feedback threatened to mar the entire evening – until, after repeated attempts, Montague took control and with his hand movements guided the feedback sounds, theremin-like, into lusciously lyrical melodies, a brilliant ‘coup

de theatre' which had us the audience, mesmerised. The sustained electronic sounds then led directly into the first of the world premieres, the *Introit St John's* (2022), performed by the vast combined forces of Southbank Sinfonia Brass with the Trinity Laban percussion and

**Montague performing *Introduction*,
Calgary, Canada 2013**



Photo: Barbara Richards

CoMA, and Kentish Town Cantorum (Montague lived in Kentish Town 1974-2007), conducted by the young Greek conductor, Augustina Kapoti. Reworked from an earlier fanfare, we enjoyed the seemingly innocuous ceremonial work, alternating percussion outbursts and smoothly harmonious brass chorales with somewhat unusual yet beguiling harmonizations. Was this a deliberate pastiche, one wondered? And then, on each repetition of the chorale something odd happened, an accent here, a wrong note there, gradually the harmony was skewed, what had been pleasantly artful now flowed into amateurish bungling and dissonant angularity. I was not the only one in the hall laughing out loud, as it was genuinely funny, of a comic idea that would not have been out of place in the classic Hoffnung Festivals of the 1950s.

Certainly, Montague's work thrives on the well-timed sonic-theatrical gesture, and few composers, if any, may claim the distinction of having written a *Horn Concerto* for klaxon horn soloist and an orchestra of vintage automobiles, a Requiem using fog horns, or a *Concerto* for piano with an ensemble of 8 motorcycles, brass and percussion premiered at Brands Hatch Race Track with the 2007 World Superbike Champion as soloist! Indeed, his cutting-edge experimentalism, engages, excites and delights at every turn. His soundscapes,

***Bike Concerto* for 8 motorcycles, symphonic brass & percussion
James Toesland, piano soloist
Stephen Montague, conductor
Hyde Park, London 2007**



Photo: William Bennett

often coloured with unconventional instruments like toy pianos, music-boxes, wine glasses or a 2000-year-old Celtic war horn, are inspired by musical heroes of the American experimental movement, Ives, Cowell and Cage. For whilst London-based since 1974, Stephen Montague was born in Syracuse, New York, then studied at Florida State and Ohio State universities, before a period in Warsaw as a Fulbright scholar (1972-74). In the 1970s he was composer for the Strider Dance company, since when he produced a string of award-winning works for dance including the Birmingham Royal Ballet commission for Sir David Bintley's *The King Dances*, nominated for the 2015 Critics' Circle National Dance Awards, which toured the UK twice and was filmed for BBC-TV; in 2019 he was Artistic Director for the Merce Cunningham Centenary at Florida State University. As a virtuoso pianist, Montague is credited with the European premiere of Henry Cowell's *Piano Concerto*, and in the 1980s formed the duo 'Piano Plus' together with Philip Mead; his substantial keyboard oeuvre includes *Southern Lament* (1997), written for Stephen Kovacevich, and his complete works formed the focus of the 2009 'Wiener Musik Tage' in Austria.

Montague also has produced a substantial output of chamber music includes *The Silk Road East of Samarkand* (2004) for cello (Yo-Yo Ma) & small percussion, commissioned for the 2004 Proms, and the prize-winning *String Quartet No 1: 'In memoriam'* (2002), for live and pre-recorded electronics, a personal tribute to two composer friends Barry Anderson and Tomasz Sikorski, which alludes to their music. And there is a serious strain to many of his large scale works as well, reflecting an individual postmodernism. Works of the 80s and 90s, such as *At the White Edge of Phrygia* (1983), and *The Creatures Indoors* (1996) for instance, show an appealing blend of post-minimalism and experimentalism, extending the techniques of Reich, Riley and Glass, while his use of American folk music permeates both *Snakebite*

(1995) and the eclectic *Piano Concerto*, premiered at the 1997 Proms, both composed for the Orchestra of St. Johns where Montague was Associate Composer during 1995-97.

So it was fitting to hear *Snakebite* here performed superbly by the Southbank Sinfonia conducted by Texan Rob Smith. The work is divided into two sections framing the snake's bite itself, which Montague depicts in a shrieking orchestral outburst and silence. The orchestral texture builds up to a climax with folk-influenced fiddling melodies spiced by the players hissing and using *col legno* to depict the rattlesnake. Following the 'bite' the pulse slows, evoking the 'plains Indians' method of survival by slowing their heartbeat. Impetus is retrieved with a new violin theme, intensifying with propulsive textures and high pedal points to the climax.

The Southbank Sinfonia, conducted by Richard Heason, also brought vivid colours to the second premiere, *Beyond the Stone Horizon*, a 2022 symphony orchestra reworking of an earlier 2006 piece commissioned by the bookseller Julian Blackwell, who stipulated that the work should feature Bachian fugues, Brahmsian tonality and the Englishisms of Elgar and Holst. It was fun to be invited as part of the audience to hum together as an introductory gesture, the communal hum absorbed into the dissonant sonic membrane of the orchestra. In the tonal, film score-like discourse that evolved one could discern the commissioned ingredients: fugal strings, clarinet and horns over strings for the stirring progressions of Brahms's 4th symphony, and rarified harmonics echoing Holst's *The Planets*.

The centrepiece of the second half was Montague's *Dark Sun-August, 1945*, a substantial and serious work originally commissioned by CoMA in 1995 to mark the 50th Anniversary of Hiroshima. It is one of several large-scale orchestral works with purposeful themes, including

***Dark Sun- August, 1945* rehearsal, St John's Smith Square,
Stephen Montague, conductor**



the mini-violin concerto *Mephisto* (2006-07), the tumultuous *Chorale for the Cauldrons of Hell* (2005), for the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Poland also commissioned by CoMA, and *Wilful Chants* (2010) for BBC Symphony chorus, symphonic brass and 2 percussion commissioned by the 2010 Proms.

Dark Sun was here performed by the combined forces of the Southbank Sinfonia, Trinity Laban Conservatoire, CoMA together with the Centre for Young Musicians, Lambeth Music Service, and the Kentish Town Cantorum, conducted charismatically by the composer. It opens with a cataclysmic tutti and drumbeats that borders the thin line between music and noise. Soon the threnody of orchestral textures takes over, superimposed with WW2 period radio announcements from Japan, the USA and Britain, a chorale for brass which overflows into the orchestra, the evocative tapestry providing a soft accompaniment to a Japanese style melody on the flute. At a crucial moment, choral groups situated in the upper galleries on both sides of the hall intoned folk musics, songs and marches from different cultures, producing a neo-Ivesian, Cageian multi-layered collage, symbolic of the global nature of war and projecting with moving intensity the work's anti-war message. On this occasion Montague chose to frame *Dark Sun* with the theatrically effective contrast of two miniatures for Toy Piano performed by Xenia Pestova Bennett, *Almost a Lullaby* (2006) and *Mirabella* (1995), the brittle innocence of which clashed with the urgently explosive soundscape of *Dark Sun*, heightening its impact all the more. It offered a bridge to the brighter mood that followed the enthusiastic audience applause, where we were regaled with two wonderfully witty and totally Montague-esque (apparently unscheduled) tributes paid by the performers. Firstly, an oboist pretended to unsuccessfully play 'Happy Birthday' with a faulty reed – but then suddenly performed a fabulous beat-box version using a microphone that had everyone stunned! Next, the entire choral and orchestral forces joined together in their hundreds for a free-improv rendition of 'Happy Birthday' that created a cacophonous chaos worthy of the Master himself.

Extending the celebratory mood surrounding the live St John's, Smith Square concert to Stephen Montague's achievements in general, it is also salutary to remind oneself that he was a pioneer and prime mover in the world of electro acoustic music: a founder of Sonic Arts Network in 1980 and winner of international prizes in Bourges and Linz, his live electronics works include two string quartets and the dazzling *Vlug* (1992) for flute, as well as large-scale installations such as for Maurice Agis's environmental sculptures *Dreamspace* and *Colourspace*. Inspired by his direction, over the last 25 years, of some sixteen John Cage: Musicircuses involving between 200 and 400 performers, he has also composed his own site-specific works for massed performers, including: *Facing the Carnyx* (2006), for 70 masked musicians and Carnyx war horn, for the 150th anniversary of London's National Portrait Gallery; *Apparitions* (2008), an eerie late-night piece for Duart Castle, Isle of Mull and *Harmony of the Spheres* (2009) for the Royal Observatory, Greenwich.

Currently Honorary Fellow of Leeds College of Music and Trinity College of Music where he has been Professor of Composition since 2017, Montague has also held guest professorships at the University of Texas-Austin, the University of Auckland, NZ, and Florida State University, and has been featured as Portrait Composer in numerous international festivals. He was Chair of the Society for the Promotion of New Music (UK) (1993-97), and its Artistic Director (1998-9), whilst in 2016 he was Music Director for the Royal Opening of the Francis Crick Institute, London. In his spare time Montague is a keen cyclist and tennis player (the former Florida JC Tennis Champion): a reason, no doubt, to expect, in due course, a concerto

for double rackets and net! As Montague enters his ninth decade we may wish him continued creativity and success as an ambassador for contemporary music, in good health bringing stimulus and iconoclastic joy to performers and audiences live and virtual – for he’s truly a “jolly good fellow”!

Malcolm Miller