

# CONTEMPORARY PIANO SOUNDBITES

## Composers in Lockdown 2020

### Duncan Honeybourne (piano)

*Contemporary Piano Soundbites* is a collection of solo piano miniatures composed during the 2020 coronavirus lockdown. Each piece received its world premiere in a video recording, posted online during the lockdown, and I invited donations for the Help Musicians UK Coronavirus Hardship Fund from those who enjoyed listening. This disc, recorded under conditions of social distancing once the lockdown had been relaxed, presents a representative selection from the online series. It celebrates the diversity of styles embraced by a broad cross section of professional composers working today, and it was an invigorating experience to record an entire disc of pieces which hadn't existed less than four months earlier! Especially stimulating and exciting is the juxtaposition of several leading senior composers with some of their most gifted and imaginative younger colleagues. Several young composers make their first appearances on disc.

Britain's professional musicians are facing unprecedented hardship in the current situation, and the Help Musicians UK Coronavirus Hardship Fund is helping many of the worst hit. By the end of May 2020, the Contemporary Piano Soundbites project had already raised over £2000 for the fund, being in the top 10% of Just Giving fundraisers nationally during the month of April 2020. The Help Musicians UK Coronavirus Hardship Fund will benefit further from the present CD and a series of concerts promoting the collection of pieces in different parts of the UK. The idea for the project grew from my own "lockdown" activities once my playing and teaching had ceased under the impending threat of the novel coronavirus. Following the onset of the "cultural lockdown" in March 2020, I began posting a daily video on the Facebook page of my Weymouth Lunchtime Chamber Concerts series.

My objective, as I stated in my invitation to composers, was fourfold: to imaginatively harness the zeitgeist of our present situation: to bring comfort and enjoyment to a large ready-made audience stuck at home, to aid musicians badly affected by the "cultural lockdown" and to add to the contemporary repertoire, creating an artistic keepsake of this extraordinary phase in our history. In issuing the invitation to composers, I suggested the following:

"Each piece may or may not be specifically stimulated by one or more aspect of the current international situation. This is entirely within the whimsy and choice of each composer kind enough to contribute a miniature!"

This brief has yielded a rich and imaginative range of pieces, including Francis Pott's lyrical *Poem of the Air*, John Casken's dramatic and melancholic *Tempus Plangendi* (a masterpiece from one of Britain's most established and acclaimed senior composers), Adam Gorb's hypnotic and mysterious *After the Darkness* and the skittish *Rona*, by young composer Zoe Sones, whose own Masters studies in composition have been disrupted by the pandemic.

My long-term plan is that, as well as helping our colleagues at a time of need, the collection will provide a snapshot of reflections and musings by some of the finest and most distinctive composers of our time at a unique and unprecedented moment in our history. I hope it will make for a refreshing, enriching, stimulating and quirky listening experience too!

**Duncan Honeybourne 2020**

The collection opens with a dramatic and evocative miniature by **John Casken**, Emeritus Professor of Music at the University of Manchester and one of Britain's most distinguished contemporary composers. The landscapes close to Casken's Northumberland home, with their changing colours and huge skies, have influenced his work and, when asked by the Cheltenham Festival to describe his music in five words, he chose the following: windswept; dreamy; turbulent; melancholic; painterly. *Tempus Plangendi* (a time to mourn) evokes the sound of bells:

*Tolling bells for those who mourn Ringing bells for a brighter dawn*

**Phillip Cooke and David Jennings** both studied composition with Casken at Durham and Manchester Universities. Cooke, born in Cumbria in 1980, is Head of Music at Aberdeen University; his "re-imagining" of the folksong *The Turtledove* is, he tells us, a "deconstruction...the essence of the song remains the same, but the mode of expression has changed". Jennings, born in Sheffield in 1972, lives in County Durham and his music features regularly in concerts and broadcasts. *Melancholy: A Fragment* is palindromic in its outer sections, and Jennings writes that the "overtly emotional" mood of the piece "documents my response to the sad state of events unfolding around me" at the end of March 2020.

**Marcus Blunt**, born in Birmingham and now resident in South West Scotland, has a distinguished profile in concerts and on disc. His finely-crafted *Prelude to Better Times* builds on a little tune that had, he told me, taken root in his mind in the early days of lockdown and refused to go away!

Devon-born **Clive Jenkins** has long been at the forefront of professional music in the South West of England, with many commissions and recordings to his credit. *Quicksilver* is a piece to savour, full of verve, wit, optimism and pianistic sparkle.

A highly personal harmonic voice is central to the music of the prolific **Francis Pott**, formerly John Bennett Lecturer in Music at St Hilda's College, Oxford, and Head of the London College of Music, University of West London. His lyrical *Poem of the Air*, prefaced with a poem by Longfellow, is warmly characteristic and inventive.

**John McLeod CBE** is one of Scotland's foremost composers and amongst the UK's busiest and most prolific. His works have won many prizes and have been commissioned, performed and recorded by leading international orchestras and performers. His brooding *Dark Waltz (Lockdown 2020)* is full of subtly shifting metres and textured dramatic power.

**David Lancaster**, born in Wigan, Lancashire, is Director of Music at York St John University. His music has won several major awards, and his works have been performed, recorded and broadcast internationally. The title of this piece was suggested by a line from Bret Harte's poem "*The Angelus*": Bells of the past, whose long-forgotten music still fills the wide expanse...

David explained at the time of writing: "For me, one of the effects of the coronavirus lockdown is a heightened awareness of the passing of time; sometimes each day can seem like an eternity, and the days before the lockdown – including the concerts I attended – now a very distant memory, although in reality they are still relatively recent. In "*Angelus*" I have attempted to create a sense of time passing slowly, within a miniature form."

**David Power**, born in London in 1962, was co-founder of the York Late Music Festival in 1991 and has been widely performed and broadcast, as well as curating many new artistic projects. *Joy* is a delicious moment of exhilaration, typical of Power's directly communicative voice.

**Sadie Harrison's** music has been performed and broadcast across the globe by many of the world's leading ensembles and soloists. The gently sophisticated *...in the air...* with its sinewy melodic lines and piquant harmonies, muses on the unseen, nebulous identity of the coronavirus, an invisible enemy that brought the world to its knees.

Lancashire-born **Simon Clarkson**, who studied with Kenneth Leighton at the University of Edinburgh, was awarded 6 prizes by the Royal College of Organists and was a finalist in the National Young Organist of the Year competition in 1985. He was Director of Music at Giggleswick School and is now Head of Academic Music at Sherborne Girls in Dorset. Inspired by Clarkson's lockdown walks near his home in Somerset, this pastoral reflection is inspired by Siegfried Sassoon's poem *Everyone Sang*.

**Adam Gorb** is Head of School of Composition at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester. His compositions have been performed, broadcast and recorded worldwide, and he has had concerts entirely devoted to his music in the UK, USA and Canada. Gorb's works have been performed at contemporary music festivals in Huddersfield, Cheltenham, Hampstead and Highgate, Spitalfields and Canterbury. *After the Darkness* is a pianistic jewel, contrasting a crystalline, bell-like higher texture with a warmer, more humane colour in the instrument's lower registers.

**Graham Fitkin** lives in Cornwall. He composes for concerts, dance, film and digital media and runs his own ensemble of 9 soloists. He has had commissions from the BBC Proms, Royal Opera House, New York City Ballet, Tokyo Symphony Orchestra, Ensemble Bash, Sacconi Quartet and many others, and his music has been extensively recorded. Taking its name from the "R" number, the coronavirus reproduction rate, *R Zero* pulsates gently and colourfully, exploring myriad shadings through subtle gradations of tension and release.

**Liz Dilnot Johnson** lives on the beautiful Malvern Hills. Regularly commissioned by Ex Cathedra and the Fitzwilliam String Quartet, her music is featured on BBC Radio 3 and Classic FM and performed all over the world. *A Little Lockdown Lyric* is warmly lyrical and folk-like.

**Benjamin Oliver** is Associate Professor in Composition and Head of Music at the University of Southampton. Nearly 60 of his works have been performed, his music has been broadcast on BBC Radio 3 and his piece *Loop Concerto* was nominated in the Contemporary Jazz category of the British Composer Awards 2017. Oliver writes: "*From the sublime to the ridiculous*" contains a relatively limited set of materials: a perfect cadence gesture that is repeated in a variety of melodramatic ways and itchy materials including a semi-frantic trilly melody that owes much to Stravinsky. These basic ingredients are repeated, reordered and transformed as the piece develops." A colleague of mine in the music department at Southampton, Benjamin was pleased to flex his composing muscles during lockdown as a refreshing antidote to departmental administration, as we all adapted to working online. To me, his tongue-in-cheek title aptly reflects the vicissitudes of working in music and education in the year 2020!

**Hayley Jenkins** is a composer, lecturer, researcher and conductor based in the North East of England. She is a lecturer in performing arts, music and education at the University of Sunderland. *I hear you, Mr Blackbird* reflects on what Jenkins identifies as a positive aspect of the 2020 lockdown: "namely nature reclaiming the space that consumerism and busy 50hr work weeks left behind. The air quality improved, people started to value outdoor recreation and exercise and for many, birdsong returned to the soundscape of their world." This thought-provoking work is in two sections and features a field recording of birdsong in the second. The composer describes the sections thus:

1. *Before March 23rd, 2020* This captures the hectic sonic chaos of everyday lives before Lockdown was announced. There is no space here for Mr Blackbird's song to be heard or appreciated and our ears are left ringing with the hustle and bustle of the day's activities.

2. *After March 23rd, 2020* Here Mr Blackbird's sonorous song comes to us and our lives finally join the song of nature. The piece unravels to form a duet between human and blackbird.

**Charlotte Marlow** hails from County Durham and graduated from the Royal Northern College of Music with a Master of Music in composition with distinction, having studied with Gary Carpenter and Adam Gorb. Her works have been performed internationally, by ensembles such as Streetwise Opera and the Mannin Contemporary Ballet, in settings ranging from the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival and the Women of the World festival in London's King's Place, to the Isle of Man TheatreFest. Marlow writes: "*Wayfaring* is at once a piece and a puzzle, reliant on the performer's choices and different in every iteration. It is, at its heart, an exploration of uncertainty, and the beauty that can come from that fragile state."

**Zoe Sones** was born in Essex and now lives in North Devon. As a Masters student in composition graduating in 2020, she is both the youngest composer featured in this collection and the only one to have had her own studies directly affected by the coronavirus lockdown. The title *Rona* is derived from a colloquial abbreviation for the virus, and Sones captures her own response to what she describes as "dark days for everyone...I've used very low sounding pitches which continue throughout the piece, like a mist." She explains that lyrical writing gives way to "a more skittish or erratic feeling", becoming more dissonant to represent widespread panic. Sones comments: "The ending represents that we are still living in this (pandemic), it isn't over and we still have a way to go before things settle back to normal. The use of the piano harmonics ringing over the fragments is an eerie sound to depict (this) uncertainty."

Devon-born **Luke Whitlock** is a composer and producer for BBC Radio 3 and 4. He studied at Dartington College of Arts and the Royal College of Music, and his debut profile CD was released in 2015. *Refractions of Light*, composed in free time at the beginning of lockdown, reflects Whitlock's avowed debt to the Minimalist composers. The composer conceives it as the first in an ongoing series of "Oceanic Interludes."

Belgian organist, carillonneur and composer **Ludo Geloën** has broadcast extensively for radio and television in Belgium, the Netherlands and New Zealand. He has won prizes for organ and composition in competitions in Terneuzen and Utrecht, as well as the 1999 BAP-Sabam Prize for his work *Tension and Relief*. He teaches at the music academies in Ieper, Diksmuide and Poperinge. *Paralysis* is starkly dramatic, desolate and brooding.

**Paul Henley** was born in Worcester and studied singing, composition, trumpet and piano at the Birmingham School of Music, where he was co-winner of the BMI Prize for Composition in 1983. He toured extensively as a professional singer before deciding to concentrate on composition. His *Prelude for orchestra* was shortlisted for the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra Composers' Day 2017. *Adagietto* sings with an appealing lyricism, infused with the melancholy of Henley's lockdown at home in rural Shropshire.

**Peter Facer** has distinguished himself as both oboist and composer, and 2019 saw him appointed Co-Principal oboist of the Britten Sinfonia and elected an Associate of the Royal Academy of Music. His popular *Insect Etudes* for oboe is performed by oboists worldwide and is a set piece for the Australian Music Examinations Board oboe diploma exam. His *Diabolical Dance* is a virtuosic tour-de-force, and makes a suitably high-octane conclusion to the disc!

#### **Duncan Honeybourne, August 2020**

This recording is dedicated to the memory of my former RAM teacher Rosemarie Wright, 1931-2020 (Professor of Piano at the Royal Academy of Music, 1978-96), who died on 25th April 2020. It was Rosemarie who first kindled my interest in playing contemporary music and instilled a sense of responsibility towards living composers that has flourished ever since. In my last letter to her, dated 8th April 2020, I told her about the Contemporary Piano Soundbites project, and I dedicate the disc to her with gratitude and affection.