***The Cave of Wondrous Voice*: Composer Mark Abel in conversation BY COLIN CLARKE**

California-based composer Mark Abel’s life journey is a fascinating one. After starting off as a rock musician, it was during a stint as a newspaper editor in San Francisco that the Classical side of his output developed. In 2012, Abel became affiliated with the Delos record label; since then there has been a steady stream of releases of which the most recent, *The Cave of Wondrous Voice*, forms the basis for the present interview.

*CC: When did your involvement with Classical music begin and which composers appealed the most—and why?*

MA: The involvement began at a very early age, as my dad loved classical and played records frequently at home. I latched on quickly and absorbed the emotional DNA of the music probably before elementary school—as much as a listener is capable of at that age. My dad’s taste didn’t extend much beyond the 19th century (as far as Mahler, to be precise), but he knew and listened to a lot of Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms and certain works by other composers. He was also a friendly acquaintance of some top-level musicians, like Leonard Bernstein and Nathan Milstein … The heavy dosing of classical eventually wore off for me as adolescence approached. I’m not entirely sure why, but it likely had to do with the pressures of socialization among young people in the very conformist America of the time.

*And I wonder if you could talk a little about how jazz influenced you? One can hear the importance of jazz in your first opera for example,* Home Is a Harbor *… (actually the subject of a feature article in Fanfare 39:6, in the Summer of 2016).*

I first fell in love with modern jazz in 1960/61, at the approximate age of 12, and set out to investigate it as much as I could despite living at home, going to school and not possessing a driver’s license! Coming from the intense interest in classical in younger years, it was predictable that early heroes would be composition-oriented musicians like Dave Brubeck, the Modern Jazz Quartet and the Charles Bell Contemporary Jazz Quartet, whose now-forgotten debut LP on Columbia was one of the most original records of the era. I saw these three bands live while still in my early teens.

That period didn’t last long, though, as several older guys who worked in record stores in downtown Washington, DC, brought the Blue Note and Riverside catalogs (among others) to my attention. My fast-expanding collection soon included John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, Miles Davis, Sonny Rollins, Eric Dolphy, Cannonball Adderley, the Jazz Messengers, the young Herbie Hancock, etc. Before long, the avant-garde beckoned as well, as I delved into Ornette Coleman and the out-there New York players of the time. Cecil Taylor came a bit later for me, but I got into him too. As my teens wore on, I saw Coltrane twice and Monk once at a DC club called the Bohemian Caverns, Rollins with Don Cherry in his piano-less quartet at Howard University, Coleman and Taylor when they came to California, a young Chick Corea at Birdland with the Blue Mitchell-Junior Cook band, Pharoah Sanders, Sam Rivers, Archie Shepp and many others. Good Lord! The ‘60s was absolutely the golden era of modern jazz! Before I leave it, I must mention the pianists Paul Bley and Denny Zeitlin, whose ‘60s records were simply phenomenal and I still love to listen to.

But this rather vast exposure was consumed entirely as a devoted *fan* —not as an aspiring young musician. I didn’t begin to concentrate on playing until I was 20 and the psychedelic rock explosion was in full flower. In the many, many years it’s taken me since then to eventually achieve some credibility in the classical field, the jazz I grew up with has remained an important touchstone—both harmonically and rhythmically.

However, and I’m sure I’ll offend some people by saying this, jazz has not really advanced as a creative idiom since then. Most of what one hears today is highly derivative of earlier eras and holds little appeal for me. The music still requires extremely skilled players, for sure, but fresh ideas are scarce. When confronted with the number of “Tribute to …” and “Rethinking …” albums and concerts around these days, one can be forgiven for suspecting the music may be on its last legs. It’s sad.

*How did you find your own compositional voice?*

When stripped to its analytical basics, my music can fairly be called a synthesis of classical, rock and jazz—with classical clearly exerting the strongest influence. This hybrid encompasses and draws inspiration from *everything* I’ve heard and loved in my lifetime. I think what makes the style original is that it’s pretty seamless, with the three component parts thoroughly integrated and even indistinguishable to some people. That goal has taken a long time to achieve—and, in my view, very few who’ve attempted this particular mix over the years have done so successfully.

*Were there any teachers of yours that were particularly important for you?*

I am entirely self-taught, so there haven’t been any teachers at all—only what I’ve picked up from listening to records and attending performances, and from my days of playing rock, which ended in the mid ‘80s.

*The disc begins very happily, with the bouncing, alive lines of* Intuition’s Dance*. There’s plenty going on compositionally here, too! Could you introduce the piece?*

My fairly recent move into chamber music has caused me to rethink aspects of my compositional process and make some adjustments that I believe will help me going forward. I’ve listened to a lot of chamber music over the years, but my few attempts at it prior to the *Clarinet Trio* never got far because I couldn’t with any ease slip into the fluidity-coupled-with-inspiration-while-respecting-architecture template that chamber writing requires. My failed attempts were too stiff. And it was frustrating because I feel I successfully deploy a similar approach in the art songs I’ve written. Anyhow, for reasons unknown, something finally shook loose in 2017 when I decided to make another try. I’m very thankful it happened; as much as I love vocal music, instrumental music has been more important to my development overall.

*Intuition’s Dance* in some ways speaks to the conceptual recalibration I just mentioned. I’ve described my art song portfolio as “my take on art song”; i.e., “This is what I want to do with this form—work it with respect and love but don’t allow it to restrain or eradicate signature aspects of my style.” I must work with chamber music the same way. As I wrote in the liner notes for *The Cave of Wondrous Voice*, *Intuition’s Dance* gets off to a bouncy and apparently purposeful start; it is then truncated rather abruptly and continues on a search for a new paradigm that in the end proves elusive. I realized as I was writing this piece that if I stuck to a conventional model, I’d end up with a “clarinet sonata.” I didn’t want that; a freely ranging concert piece for clarinet and piano is more appealing to me and more in tune with my intentions as a composer. In recording *Intuition’s Dance*, David Shifrin and Carol Rosenberger fully understood that the piece celebrates its own episodic nature and refuses to be pinned down.

Paul Hindemith once said (or wrote) something along the lines of “If a composer hasn’t decided on the structure of a piece before beginning to write it, all is lost.” Although I greatly respect Hindemith, I couldn’t disagree more. In my view, “structure” should be something that grows spontaneously and eventually emerges with an identity and character that the composer can shape into a final manifestation that hopefully stakes out some new ground in his or her canon.

*You’ve worked with the soprano Hila Plitmann before on a number of occasions, including on your Delos* Time and Distance *disc I reviewed in Fanfare 41:6. Here, it’s four settings of the Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva (1892-1941) that is on offer. Translation is a particularly thorny subject when it comes to poetry and as one moves from one language to another (I’ve just been working with Stewart Spencer’s translation of the* Ring*, a piece which brings up all sorts of issues!); preserving the linguistic nuances is key. But your translation finds you very much in alignment with the translator, Alyssa Dinega Gillespie, chairperson of the Russian Dept. at Bowdoin College, Brunswick, Maine. Can you talk a bit about this area and the specific translation?*

Translation is a thorny subject, for sure. I feel strongly that a composer should be setting only poems that have been rendered into his/her native language; some insist they be set in the original language in order to achieve optimum “authenticity” (even if the composers themselves aren’t fluent in the original tongue). To me, this is utterly silly. I’m an American and know all too well that Americans have little interest in foreign cultures, let alone their languages. If I set Marina Tsvetaeva in Russian, 99.8% percent of my countrymen wouldn’t understand the texts.

There are an awful lot of linguistic nuances in Tsvetaeva, which makes her poetry particularly challenging to translate. While there’s a wide variance in the quality of the translations one encounters in print, her artistic persona is so strong and original that its essence emerges even in subpar translations. A person taken with Tsvetaeva, however, would obviously want to lay hands on the most incisive and elegant of interpretations. Turning up Prof. Alyssa Dinega Gillespie of Bowdoin College was a great stroke of luck for me, as she’s one of the foremost analysts of Tsvetaeva and also does an outstanding job of rendering the verses in English—avoiding the clunkiness and ill-considered shortcuts some translators fall into.

*You include an English horn in the scoring of these songs, which makes its plaintive mark right at the beginning of the 1922 poem “The Sybil” (incidentally, is it possible to hear this instrument without hearing Tristan? Or is that just me?)*

I love the English horn and feel it is very under-utilized. One certainly responds to its signature timbres when they are highlighted in brief sections of operas or symphonies. But I wanted to try it in a chamber context, which is quite rare. I think it works well in the Tsvetaeva cycle. The part can also be handled by B flat clarinet, but I’m hoping the English horn players of the world might welcome the chance to display their wares in a song cycle context. I was very pleased with the work of Los Angeles reeds player Sarah Beck on the Delos recording.

*You seem to find the consonance at “God has come” as a comfort in “The Sibyl” too?*

Yes. The poem’s opening imagery of a burnt-out stump and “all birds perished” is downright dystopian. In the section you’re referring to, I wanted to convey the pathos and sense of spiritual relief at the realization that the destruction is part of God’s plan. This juxtaposition is very Tsvetaevian, in my view. The woman was many times steamrolled by life and fate—and sometimes by herself—in appalling ways but never completely lost touch with her sensitive side.

*In “Two trees desire to come together” (1919) there’s an incredible beauty to the text about the two trees and their “relationship”; and the poem is unforgettable. When you’re setting poetry of this clear stature do you find it intimidating or stimulating? What about the weight of responsibility to set these poems to music?*

I did feel the weight of responsibility in the sense that Tsvetaeva is still quite underappreciated (in the U.S. especially) and the fact that no American composer has set her work in English until now. But intimidating? No. A composer must truly bond with the sentiments in a poem to do justice to it, and if you’re intimidated you won’t succeed. … Some basic knowledge of 20th century Russian history can’t help but spur one to want to do a very small part in remembering Stalin’s countless victims.

*Certainly the cor anglais has connotations with melancholy (perhaps Dvořák has something to do with this!).*

Yes, melancholy—at least in the sinuous phrase at the beginning of “O sorrow floods my eyes!” Fascism was on the march when this poem was written and Tsvetaeva’s premonitions of what was to come soon enough were dead on.

*Was the cycle written for Hila Plitmann? The opening of the final song, “God bent under” suits her voice perfectly!*

Yes, it was. Hila has been a staunch supporter of my work for nearly six years—starting with “The Palm Trees Are Restless” on the 2016 album *Home Is a Harbor* and continuing with three works on *Time and Distance* in 2018. She’s been inspirational in many ways. Few world-class and widely celebrated singers stop to take the time to investigate and encourage not-very-well-known composers. But Hila has for me. This has not only bucked up my spirits but helped me raise my sights higher as a composer. In terms of technique, she can handle anything (as her work with Corigliano, Del Tredici and Danielpour has shown); but her even greater gifts are the emotional intensity she commands and her ability to connect with an audience in live performance. She’s also one of the nicest people I’ve ever met.

*What determines the choice of poet? In a sense you have more freedom than most as you have also set your own poetry! (“Rainbow Songs” and “The Dark-Eyed Chameleon” on the* Terrain of the Heart *CD, Fanfare 37:6, and your texts on the* Time and Distance *disc— “The Invocation,” “In the Rear View Mirror, Now,” and “The Benediction.”)*

Besides Tsvetaeva, I’ve set Rilke, Neruda and the California poets Kate Gale and Joanne Regenhardt. It would be hard to say what they have in common. Tsvetaeva, Rilke and Gale I suppose are more “interior” than the more image-oriented Neruda and Regenhardt, but I probably just respond to poetry that moves me, pure and simple.

My own texts are something different; the writers who’ve found merit there seem to value them for their often unusually personal nature — “The Dark-Eyed Chameleon” and “In the Rear View Mirror, Now,” for example. There are also societal ruminations in “The Dream Gallery” and “The Benediction,” philosophical and sometimes dream-like musings in “Rainbow Songs” and “The Invocation.” I haven’t written any of these for a while but intend to do so again. They’re an authentic window into my thinking beyond the musical decisions and, as you say, there’s a freedom inherent in going your own way with texts. I’ve often written them at the same time I’m composing the music. Hindemith would undoubtedly be aghast, but as we Americans love to say, “It works for me!”

*The question of programmatic titles for instrumental music is often a thorny one, particularly if the titles are added after the composition of the music, as is the case with* The Elastic Hours*. So I wonder, can you please give some background to the piece, and its ideas? I have to say I love the sense of dance in the second movement; and the performance is astonishingly vibrant!*

Agreed about the thorniness of programmatic titles added later. However, I don’t think that giving listeners a clue or signpost is a bad thing. I could have called *The Elastic Hours* “Violin Sonata No. 1” instead but can’t see any value added there. The piece didn’t have a predetermined roadmap when I embarked on it, and I wasn’t entirely sure I could produce a credible work in this vein. But the thing took hold more rapidly than I expected and pretty much followed the arc I mentioned earlier—“structure” growing and asserting itself spontaneously and eventually assuming a full-blown character. In my notes for *The Cave of Wondrous Voice* I wrote: “Both movements follow a near-seismographic path that strongly suggests the subconscious mind’s journey through the course of a day.” I’m going to stick with that, as I think it’s a good description of how the music feels as you experience it.

I’m so glad you enjoyed the performance of *The Elastic Hours*. Once again, I was very fortunate in terms of collaborators. I knew (the German violinist) Sabrina-Vivian Höpcker from her excellent Delos disc of the Brahms *Hungarian Dances* and got in touch when I heard she would be in Los Angeles last summer. When she expressed her liking for *The Elastic Hours* right off the bat there was no need to look further. Sabrina is a terrific violinist and a very dedicated musician in all respects. The rising young American pianist Dominic Cheli had some time available between engagements and also expressed enthusiasm for the piece, so we were set. Sabrina and Dominic came into the recording session well prepared, retaining the flexibility to make on-the-spot adjustments if needed. Things went very smoothly, which is not always the case in the studio. I hope to work with both of them again; they’re fine players and exude a very welcome positivity.

*We talked a little earlier about taking on poetry and the weight of responsibility that can be seen to carry, but in a sense with the Clarinet Trio you’re taking on history with the great figure of Brahms’ Clarinet Trio looming over. But you say you found that inspirational rather than intimidating?*

Well, I’ve known and loved the Brahms op. 114 since I was a child. To me, it’s a deeply cherished old friend, so I’ve never thought of it as a towering peak I’d be foolhardy to try to climb myself. It’s hard enough to write something that might garner respect, so it’s best to simply absorb what an object of inspiration has to offer, then (possibly) put it to use in a sublimated way. Often, a piece that’s so adored simply melts into your personal ecosystem and subtly fertilizes the growth process.

*I do love the idea of the first movement of the Clarinet Trio (‘The Unfolding’), that of discourse that goes off in various directions but is called back on course. It enables the structure to be understood very easily. It strikes me as a novel but effective way of elaborating a structure! Also, the final movement has a Brahmsian autumnal glow, and the booklet notes hint a eulogy as the basis here. Might you elaborate?*

Regarding “The Unfolding,” I’m glad you think its internal process works. Intimate dialogue is the most widely accepted cornerstone of chamber writing, yes, but dialogue doesn’t always happen easily in life. People invariably have their own agendas, and I think it’s perfectly permissible—and honest—to depict this in musical terms. Charles Ives is of course the *ne plus ultra* in this regard.

The finale, “In Good Time,” does have a bit of Brahms’ patented “autumnal glow,” but I think only in the closing measures. I hadn’t ever written anything in this vein before and found it an irresistible way to close out the piece. I view the earlier sections of this movement as something akin to the painted panels one sometimes sees in medieval art—individual parts that can be admired separately but in the end make up a whole.