



Requiem for Utøya

Requiem, by British-Norwegian composer Andrew Smith, is a response to the tragic terrorist attack on the Norwegian island of Utøya in June 2011. Scored for equal girls' voices, choir and improvising instrument, a recording featuring the saxophonist Trygve Seim has recently been released on the 2L label. Michael Pearce hears from both Smith and Seim about the work

Throughout history, composers have responded to tragic events through music. On 22 July 2011, the right-wing extremist Anders Breivik detonated a car bomb in Oslo's government quarter, killing eight people and injuring 209. Two hours later he boarded a boat to the small island of Utøya, killing 69 mainly teenage children and injuring a further 110 attending a youth summer camp organised by the Norwegian Labour Party. It was the deadliest attack on Norway since World War Two and continues to have a profound psychological impact on the country's citizens.

Originally from Merseyside, Andrew Smith's Oslo home was within earshot of the first explosion. The composer had already been commissioned to write a requiem by the Trondheim-based *Nidaros Cathedral Girls' Choir* before the attack; inevitably, the terrible events of that day changed its course. 'It was a natural link to make,' he explains, 'especially since the attacks affected so many young people, including girls from the choir I was writing for.'

Raised in a musical family, Smith moved to Norway aged 14 when his father was

offered a job as an organist. He later read musicology at Oslo University before working as choirmaster and organist at Oslo's English church and as a producer for the Ultima Oslo Contemporary Music Festival.

Now 48, he began composing as a hobby from his first piano lessons aged eight, but it wasn't until he studied music at university

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that he even considered it a viable career path. Primarily a composer of 'modern choral music', his works have since been performed by groups including Ensemble 96, the Norwegian Girls Choir, New York Polyphony,

the Girl Choristers of Washington National Cathedral and the UK's Gothic Voices.

His requiem came about after writing a piece for the Norwegian vocal group Trio Mediaeval and Norwegian jazz trumpeter Arve Henriksen, who improvised around the notated score. 'It was a fascinating project, writing for both notated music and for something that was improvised,' says Smith. 'Arve subsequently worked with the Nidaros Cathedral Girls' Choir and performed one of the movements, and it was on that basis that I decided it would be wonderful to expand this idea into a large-scale work. So I approached the Cathedral Girls' Choir and they came back with a commission to write a requiem.'

Scored for organ, equal girls' voices and improvising instrument, the work is loosely based around the traditional catholic requiem mass, but with several traditional texts changed to biblical references concerning the plight of children: Rachel screaming at the abduction of her children by the Babylonians, Herod's brutal infanticide after the birth of Jesus, and Mary crying at the loss of her son. Like much of

his music, Smith's requiem is influenced by Gregorian chant but reimagined within his own contemporary sound-world, here including spaces for the improvising soloist.

Following the Trondheim premier in 2012, Smith's requiem received three UK performances in 2013 by the Choralia Girls' Choir from Wells Cathedral School, Henriksen and jazz keyboardist, Ståle Storløkken. With no organ at the three venues, Storløkken played the organ part on a keyboard set-up, which he also used to perform an improvised set with Henriksen – one of his regular improvising partners – before each performance.

SAXOPHONE RECORDING

In January 2018, the requiem's first CD recording was scheduled with Henriksen, Storløkken and the Nidaros Cathedral Girls. But at the last minute, trumpeter Henriksen had to pull out due to illness.

Having conceived the work with Henriksen's distinctive trumpet sound in mind, Smith says, 'I think it became apparent after the first performance this was something that could work with other instruments, but it wasn't really a question until we were faced with the necessity of finding somebody else to play the solo part.'

Having played in every performance before the recording, Henriksen recommended his close friend and playing partner of over 20 years, saxophonist Trygve Seim, to take his place. 'I was fully booked the month before the recording so I didn't have time to listen to the piece,' Seim says. 'But since they told me my role was as an improviser, I preferred to just go there with a clear head, so I could just listen and react to what was going on.'

During the recording breaks, Smith explains that Seim and organist Storløkken would often stay in the church and improvise, leading to their suggestion they could add some transition passages between movements. Smith says, 'When you have two musicians who are so used to being able to create music, they can take the material and do something with it. So in a sense their contribution was more than just performing – they were also co-composing.'

None of these transition passages, however, have been notated in the recently published sheet music (available through *Norsk Musikforlag*) and neither has the solo part aside from some simple cues at the beginning of each improvised section. Smith says, 'Since the original idea was not to notate the solo part, I didn't want to go back on what I originally decided. If someone wants to perform the work, I think having the recording as a reference point will help. People can pick up some of what Trygve does or simply make their own version. I feel if I had tried to notate all the nuances of the saxophone or trumpet it would have been counterproductive to the ethos and free spirit of the music. It could be prohibitive rather than emancipating, so I'd rather let it be free than dictate exactly what should happen in the score.'

Requiem is bookended on the CD by two works for girls' choir and string orchestra by the Trondheim-based composer Ståle Kleiberg, performed by the Nidaros Girls'

Choir and the Trondheim Soloists. Smith says, 'The other two works on the disc have a sort of thematic link to the *Requiem* in that they express hope, light and warmth in contrast to the *Requiem*'s anger and despair. The album is called *LUX* – Latin for light – so the CD also has a more positive message: that despite the tragedy that happened at

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Utøya, there is also hope and consolation.'

Reflecting on the recording, Seim says, 'I have to say it's very seldom that I am so unbelievably touched by music that I'm a part of myself. Many times during the recording I had to stand in my place in front of the choir and wait one or two minutes while they were singing, and on several occasions I was just so touched that I started to cry. I simply love this composition. Andrew is such a great composer and it's been a real privilege to be a part of this project.' ■

LUX is available on 2L records.

www.andrewsmithcomposer.com
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