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Judith Weir (photo: Suzanne Jansen)

JUDITH WEIR IN CONVERSATION

Bernard Hughes

Judith Weir (b.1954) is one of Britain's leading composers. Her three full-length operas (*A Night at the Chinese Opera*, *The Vanishing Bridegroom* and *Blond Eckbert*) have been widely performed in Britain and abroad. Since the 1990s she has had a fruitful association with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and its sister group, the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group (BCMG). Weir's theatre work includes collaborations with the Royal National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company. Her interest in community music projects included an innovative spell of six years as the Artistic Director of the Spitalfields Festival in London. Recent works include the orchestral piece *The Welcome Arrival of Rain* for the Minnesota Orchestra, heard at the Proms in 2002, and the ensemble work *The Tiger Under the Table* for the London Sinfonietta.

This conversation took place at Judith Weir's South London home on 18 May 2005.

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BH: *Was there a piece you heard when you were young which inspired you to become a musician?*

JW: I played the oboe in the National Youth Orchestra with, believe it or not, Boulez as conductor, and I remember one programme in particular: Stravinsky *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*, Bartók *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* and Webern *Six Pieces,* op.6 and the Berg Violin Concerto with Yehudi Menuhin as soloist. And I remember, aged sixteen, drinking in that music.

BH: *Do you still have an affinity for the oboe?*

JW: I played the oboe up to the end of my twenties, and as that is a formative time I think it has left an impression, a kind of basic sound in the back of my head which I think comes from sitting in the middle of the orchestra, next to the flutes, behind the strings, which are quite faint. So a bright, piercing sound is a very basic sound to me.

BH: *Was there a piece you wrote which convinced you you could be a professional composer?*

JW: The first time I felt I'd written a piece which was really something was my piece for Jane Manning called *King Harald's Saga,* which I wrote when I was 24. I think the reason that has stayed in my memory was because of her: she was so enthusiastic, whereas previously it had been my own enthusiasm that had kept me going.

BH: *The two composers most often cited as influences on your music style are Stravinsky and Janáček. Do you accept this or does it baffle you?*

JW: Stravinsky certainly, although at the time I was a young composer in the Seventies, people didn't always mention Stravinsky in the pre-eminent position we think of him now. It was very much the era of the Second Viennese School. And when I was at school

Stravinsky was still alive and we would hear his very last works, and people were very puzzled by them, and didn't like them. So perhaps it was more unusual than you might think to say that Stravinsky was an influence. With Janáček I'm a little more puzzled. I think that came about because from a fairly early time I was experimenting with folk influence, and there weren't at that time so many people doing that. Another reason might be because I started writing opera with my own librettos and at that time people were re-discovering Janáček. But I haven't spent long periods of my life listening to Janáček; I don't object to him at all, but it's hard to pick him out above others.

BH: *Something I have always enjoyed about your music is that you write very striking openings, for example* The Consolations of Scholarship, *or* The Art of Touching the Keyboard. *How early in the conception of a piece does the idea for the opening seconds happen?*

JW: Good question. I think it must come very early, actually. The very first thing I do is some very laboured working out of a melody, which comes from a mode. I don't, having done that, say 'Now, how am I going to open the piece?' so I think it does come early on.

BH: *And in terms of planning a piece, would you start with notes, as opposed to drawings or graphs or diagrams…?*

JW: I think notes. It's a pity because I haven't any music to show you – there's just a blank sheet, which is a bad sign – because I do write things out, and mark very clearly for myself so I can see structural points.

BH: *Much of your music seems to be conceived melodically, and very modally.*

JW: Absolutely so. I think that again it was perhaps a correction to what I had heard in the Sixties and Seventies when melody was not something that was really talked about very much. I would say it's gone even further now that my aim in starting a composition is to construct a melody out of which everything else will come.

BH: …*for example,* The Welcome Arrival of Rain *is made like that…*

JW: Yes, it's really just two melodies out of which comes timbre, form and so on, although of course an enormous amount of work has to go on before that melody can be constructed.

BH: *Your titles are often very graphic and immediate: do you have a stock of them waiting to be used? At what point does the title present itself?*

JW: Sometimes I think of the title straight away, and the piece is working towards it. I've often thought the title is a kind of crystallization of what the piece is about, and it is indeed a help to the listener, giving them an idea of the atmosphere of the piece. Do you think other people think a lot about titles?

BH: *I don't know, but it strikes me that a title like, for example,* The Tiger Under the Table, *immediately poses questions and makes the audience approach the piece differently from if it was called, for example, Chamber Symphony.*

JW: Yes that's true. I think I would just get rather bored thinking I was writing a piece called Chamber Symphony. *The Tiger Under the Table* in a way caused me problems as everybody assumed there must be some tiger story attached, but it was really more that the opening gesture was a growly-type thing. I think I saw it somewhere: maybe it's the name of a Chinese restaurant somewhere, or something like that…

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BH: *But you also did go through a phase of calling pieces Piano Quartet, Piano Trio, Piano Concerto…*

JW: That was a deliberate thing, almost like abstract painting. Sometimes you see things with titles like 'Composition #1' and this was an attempt to do something neutral like that.

BH: *The Piano Concerto is interesting; it is a very modest piece, and the piano part is completely un-virtuosic.*

JW: It's a sort of correction to piano concertos.

BH: *When you put it alongside pieces like* Distance and Enchantment, *or* I Broke Off a Golden Branch, *what makes it a concerto as opposed to a chamber piece in their mould?*

JW: I think in a way I was questioning the words 'piano concerto': it is almost an anti-concerto.

BH: *Is virtuosity is over-indulged in contemporary music?*

JW: That is true, in that the accent is still on being on the verge of playability. And that can be exciting. But there's a lot of re-discovery to be made; for example the string music I wrote in that chamber music series was very much on the string, not even pizzicato, and I guess it was just to say, there are interesting things to be done with those techniques, when so much stuff is very extreme. There's a saxophone part in the piece I'm doing at the moment for the BCMG tour and the sax player said to me 'It's really quite interesting for me to play in the middle of my register'.

BH: *The Piano Concerto is full of moments of re-discovery: there's a passage in the slow movement where you have a string of perfect cadences, and that feels as if you are just pausing to re-examine the perfect cadence.*

JW: It's just taking these moments and having a look at them. I am not a great exponent of new tonal music as a cause, and in fact with some of the composers people would expect me to like – for example, John Adams, whom I respect (and I do think has a great operatic gift) – actually, I get impatient during that kind of music.

BH: *And it seems to me that his music is more genuinely tonal: there's an argument and a development. Whereas your music is often diatonic and pitch-centred, but it's not got that symphonic feeling…*

JW: For me it would be a little too obvious to do those things. And as you say, there can be a perfect cadence there, but it's got to be disengaged from the music around it.

BH: *There is something immediately approachable or – dread word, 'accessible' – about your music. What do you think that is?*

JW: It's a sort of direct address. So much is said about the business of engaging the listeners and, without getting caught up in a debate about 'accessibility', I feel that a piece is not complete without the active engagement of some listeners somewhere, and laying down the gauntlet to them is part of that. I try to be involved in subject matter that is of wide interest, and it's my genuine feeling that out there there is a wide community of interested, intelligent listeners, and a sense that we don't always do very much for them in the world of new music.

BH: *Your entry in* Grove *says: 'Weir's compositional style was achieved through rejection of the structures and materials of the avant-garde.'*[1] *Is this a fair assessment?*

[1] David C.H. Wright: 'Judith Weir', *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 31/5/2005), <http://www.grovemusic.com>.

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JW: I feel possibly the word 'rejection' gives the wrong impression. I grew up during that era and found it exciting going to Stockhausen or Boulez concerts, but I did feel those techniques were not appropriate to what was in my head, so I couldn't really work in that style.

BH: *In your working method, are you more a Schoenberg or a Stravinsky: that is, do you wait for months for inspiration to strike, or are you every day in your studio, even if it's going really badly?*

JW: It's probably a combination of the two. Firstly, I don't by any means get to my work-room every day, but I try and keep at it. For a long time it is difficult to make progress, until you get to a point, quite a way through the piece – often I think it's at the golden section – when suddenly the piece has written itself, and the final part of the piece gets written quite quickly.

BH: *You said in an interview many years ago: 'I'm very slow… I'm slow in a kind of flowing way and for me the greatest pleasure is to think that I now have all the time in the world to tinker with a piece.'*[2]

JW: I would say I work very hard, and put in long hours. I have written quite a lot of music, but that's really through doing it for a long time. But I feel that it's a slow process just because you must be re-inventing all the time. I see people like John Tavener, who is a terrific composer, but I wonder if he thinks of himself as writing fast? I don't know.

BH: *You mention John Tavener: you had lessons with him when you were still at school. What did you learn from him?*

JW: It's such a long time ago and as with most stuff you learn at that age I barely have retained anything, except the ethos, meeting someone who took composition so seriously. I remember once showing him something with a religious text, and using a rather cheesy harmony, and him actually *shuddering* – I remember thinking that it actually *mattered* to him what this chord was. I would say for him, and for my teacher at Cambridge, Robin Holloway, that neither of them laid down the law about style. You meet so many people who say – I don't know true this really is – that they were forced to write serial music or whatever, and certainly I was not criticized on those grounds.

BH: *Have you done much composition teaching yourself?*

JW: I've done a lot of visiting teaching. Since I finished teaching [at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama] in Glasgow at the beginning of the nineties I haven't had any kind of regular job. I certainly see a lot of young composers' music, but I don't think I would describe myself as a professional teacher.

BH: *Do you feel it is odd, as a composer who has taught, curated a festival,*[3] *run community workshops and so on, that composers are expected to do all these other things, whereas a novelist just sits at home and writes novels?*

JW: For me, being involved with the world of music has been a huge strength. I do sometimes think the world of British novelists seems very bourgeois, writing their precious little books, and actually I don't think the readership of those people is numerically all that great. You know, we're always being told as composers that

[2] Brian Morton, 'The Slow Leap Forwards', *The Wire*, Issue 56 (1988), p.42.
[3] Judith Weir was artistic director of the Spitalfields Festival, 1995–2000.

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we don't have an audience, but I'd have thought that people like James MacMillan, John Tavener or Mark-Antony Turnage have certainly got a public, and I don't see why that's less good than some of these novelists. And the same thing with the British art scene: I think it can be rather loathsome, really. There's a real feeling they're like the 'Loadsamoney' character of Harry Enfield – at least, they come across a bit like that to somebody like me on the fringes of it. You know, if the alternative is that then I'd rather be out doing the workshops.

BH: *You've had a long and successful association with the BCMG.*

JW: That's true. In a sense the collaboration has been with the administrators of the group, first with Simon Clugston, and now Stephen and Jackie Newbould – it's there that the creativity happens, with the planning of projects.

BH: *And through the BCMG, a long-term project with the storyteller Vayu Naidu and tabla-player Sarvar Sabri…*

JW: Yes, we've done three or four of those tours over ten years.*

BH: *And this involves improvisation…?*

JW: It's difficult to say what it is. None of the group, particularly the tabla player, likes that word, because they all feel the piece is very planned in certain ways, but because the storyteller changes the way she tells the story at every performance there has to be immense flexibility. So it's more a question of covering the bases.

BH: *But it's fully notated?*

JW: It's largely notated, but sometimes notated in ways that allow a lot of space. It really is a meeting between improvised music and I suppose the way jazz players play, with a big repertoire of things they can do, which they choose, and the tabla player says he works on this piece like that, and then I do notate some sections.

BH: *From studying your scores I see that most of them are handwritten…*

JW: Oh yes, they're all handwritten by me, before they are published.

BH: *Do you feel a regret that hand-copying is disappearing?*

JW: I think I'm of the generation that's just over the hill in that I'm in that last group of people for whom computer notation came a bit too late, and I think a lot of us had a lot of encouragement to develop our hand-writing because even photocopiers were thin on the ground. And when you think of composers like Michael Finnissy – the writing is absolutely beautiful…

BH: *…or Brian Ferneyhough…*

JW: Yes, and Ollie Knussen. In fact, all the people of that vintage have lovely handwriting, and very vigorous and spirited, and I really enjoy writing out a piece by hand: it's part of the craft. From time to time I've had a go at computer notation and I can see that it is something that has to happen.

BH: *But lots of composers of your generation are a little bit concerned about young composers writing straight into the computer…*

JW: The first point is that composers might use the MIDI facility too much, and not do enough thinking through: that desperate wrestling in your head about how an idea is formulating.

* For a review of the most recent Judith Weir/Vaya Naidu /Sarvar Sabri collaboration, see p.42 of this issue (Ed.).

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BH: *Or 'cut and paste'…*

JW: Indeed, that's even worse.

BH: *In terms of 'cut and paste', your music uses repetition more than, for example, the avant-garde composers, but it is rarely exact repetition. Do you think that's a function of writing everything out by hand?*

JW: Maybe they're just mistakes! I think that it ought to be a law that if you are going to repeat material you should be made to write it out by hand. I certainly don't believe in exact repetition: I'm enough of a Schoenbergian in that respect.

BH: *You are notable, in the field of opera, for writing your own librettos, which is usually the kiss of death. How did that first come about?*

JW: I remember when I was working on an early piece, based on a Grimm fairy-story, re-writing the story to suit what we needed and it worked fine.[4] And doing things like that gave me the confidence to adapt existing texts. *King Harald's Saga* is an adaptation. So I built up an enthusiasm for doing that and I suppose it just went from there. I was asked by the Kent Opera to write a children's opera, which I suppose was my first official opera,[5] and again it just seemed *simpler* to do that. I didn't live in literary circles, particularly when I lived in Scotland.

BH: *Your librettos don't suffer from the perennial problem of verbosity…*

JW: Well that's the thing. In a way I long to work with writers, and I get sent a lot of stuff, as you can imagine, but this is always the problem. Really, a libretto for me has to be so short of words that I think it would be frustrating for any writer…

BH: *And the writer has to sacrifice their ego…*

JW: Yes, unfortunately. I feel that's something that's not appreciated enough by those who try to get composers and writers together. So many decent composers have not wanted to make a fuss, so they've ended up setting many more words than they've wanted to, and frequently when you go to a new opera, there are just all these words all over the place. It still worries me in a way that I write my own words.

BH: *Do you write the text before the music, or do they evolve together?*

JW: I write what you might call the book, a scene by scene description, and then each scene unfolds. And that seems to be an advantage of this way of working: you write a scene about something, and it is a way the words and music can develop alongside each other. And frequently I will think 'maybe we don't need any words in this scene'. Can you imagine what would happen if you had to square that with a writer…? When I meet young composers who have written their own librettos, I always encourage them to keep doing it. I think it's always worth developing that capacity, and finding an extra sensibility for words.

BH: *You have said that the personal toll of spending a couple of years writing an opera is too much to want to do it again. Does that mean there will be no more operas?*

[4] *Hans the Hedgehog* (after J.L. and W.C. Grimm), 1978.
[5] *The Black Spider* (after J. Gotthelf), 1984.

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JW: To some extent that isn't true as I've just finished writing an opera for television.[6] But certainly for about ten years after *Blond Eckbert* I didn't write any operas. I think partly I just felt I'd written an awful lot and I should stop. But the toll is enormous.

BH: *What music do you listen to?*

JW: The first thing is that people send me a lot of things, students and so on, and I feel some obligation to listen and comment because I feel that's important. So that provides a large proportion of my new music listening. I listen to a lot of jazz, in the last maybe ten years, that's a recreational interest. And I don't like the expression 'world music', but that has formed a part of my listening for a long time. Improvised music does interest me, but that's better listened to live than on recordings.

BH: *In Ivan Hewett's generally quite gloomy book about the future of 'serious' music,* Healing the Rift,[7] *you are named, with only three other composers, as the future of classical music. How does it feel to be identified as a standard bearer in this way?*

JW: I did flick through that book. I saw myself mentioned, but it wasn't quite that…

BH: *Well, he said: 'The recent music of composers as various as Ligeti, Judith Weir, John Zorn and Brett Dean shows that it is possible, after all, to connect a genuinely contemporary practice with classical music's past, without slipping into reach-me-down expressivity.'*

JW: Well, thank you, Ivan, that's very kind. And Ligeti is one of the modern masters, John Zorn is very interesting – I don't know much about Brett Dean, I must confess. I don't think Ivan's book was that gloomy. I think rather he was saying what I am saying, there are an awful lot of things you can't blame the intelligent public for not being interested in, and also things they could be interested in but don't know about.

BH: *With the Ivan Hewett remark, and the recognition of an honour,*[8] *having your portrait in the National Portrait Gallery and so on, do you feel you have reached the status of a senior figure in your field?*

JW: People say this to me, but I really don't feel it very much. Firstly, as a total freelance, every year it is still a question how I am going to make a living. It still feels a little risky in that way. I've got to the point where I don't read every review, but still my impression is that they're not always glowing at all. Also – and I'm really not a moaner this way – but I've never had a piece played by a London orchestra, apart from the BBC Symphony.

BH: *What is the climate in terms of being a composer, compared with when you were starting out, in terms of establishing yourself, and getting commissions and performances?*

JW: I have a feeling for the younger composers, it really is much harder. When I started out in the 1970s, immediately leaving college I got a job as a community musician, and at the time it was possible to get a commission fee from public funds, and now it's much more difficult. I'd say the plus side is that the whole scene

[6] *Armida*, directed by Margaret Williams (MJW Productions for Channel 4), scheduled for broadcast in December 2005.
[7] Ivan Hewett, *Music: Healing the Rift* (London, Continuum Books, 2003), p.246.
[8] Judith Weir was awarded the CBE in 1995.

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has widened out – even just the thing of people having websites seems to me a great democratic thing. We've got over the idea that the publishers choose two or three young stars and everybody else goes nowhere. Particularly now with file-sharing and so on – it's much easier to get your music around. But, on the basic financial thing, it's much harder.

BH: *We are always being told that classical music is in crisis – as we have been for a thousand years. What's your take on that?*

JW: Well, it's difficult to know how to approach this subject. I feel there are a lot of institutions in classical music that are still in denial about the fact we are living in a different world – particularly orchestras, I think. So it's almost as if some element of crisis is deserved. That's not to endorse the fact that we are living in a very shallow age where we are not given a lot of encouragement to concentrate on spiritual and inner things. I feel that a huge amount of my work is working in growth areas. With the most recent thing I've been involved in – the storytelling project – the BCMG has these rural tours, going out to country towns, but they do it really properly. It has the most tremendous response, people really love it, and I can't help but see that as part of an answer to the crisis.

BH: *You once made a comment which I really liked, to the effect that although it is difficult making a living as a composer, no-one asked you to do it. You think it is right that composing should be a difficult profession?*

JW: Certainly I do feel that there's plenty of music in the world already and plenty of musicians, so I think it's rather up to those of us who decide to do it to try to make our way. That's not to say that I don't think composers should have support, and I do think composers work incredibly hard and I look at colleagues who are very humble and hard-working people. But I rather like that.

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