Sticking one’s neck out

Adrian Horsewood talks to Matthew Wadsworth on uncharted territory for the theorbo

The history of music is awash with stories of the ways in which performers have persuaded composers to write for them: Mstislav Rostropovich alternately bullied and charmed some of the 20th century’s greatest names into producing new works; the Swiss conductor Paul Sacher used his wife’s immense personal wealth (her previous husband had been one of the founders of the pharmaceutical company Hoffman-La Roche) to commission dozens of leading composers; and pianist Paul Wittgenstein (brother of the philosopher Ludwig), whose right arm had been amputated after he was captured in world war one, encouraged many composers to write left-hand works for him (although he rather blotted his copybook by either deciding not to perform the works or often making unsanctioned alterations after receiving the scores).

With all that in mind, it’s refreshing to learn about the relatively sedate genesis of the world’s first ever theorbo concerto – yes, it has taken that long – from its soft-spoken dedicatee, lutenist Matthew Wadsworth. ‘It all began back in 2014,’ he recalls, ‘when I was playing in a concert with guitarist John Williams at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse [at Shakespeare’s Globe in London]. In the second half I was invited to play in a new chamber work called Flower of Cities, by composer Stephen Goss, whom I knew but whose music I wasn’t familiar with. I was really struck by Steve’s piece, and thought then that I’d really like to work with him again in the future.’

That chance would come around rather sooner than Wadsworth might have imagined: at Williams’s encouragement, Goss expanded and reworked that original theorbo solo into a new work for him (although he rather blotted his copybook by either deciding not to perform the works or often making unsanctioned alterations after receiving the scores).

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That chance would come around rather sooner than Wadsworth might have imagined: at Williams’s encouragement, Goss expanded and reworked that original theorbo solo into a new work for Wadsworth, and what emerged in 2016 was The Miller’s Tale, a suite inspired by the section of Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales with the same name. The Miller’s Tale was met with praise from audiences and critics alike; it was broadcast on Radio 3 from the Wigmore Hall in March 2017 on the occasion of its premiere, and was later released on the Deux-Elles label (on an album entitled Late Night Lute) alongside music by renaissance and baroque composers Dowland, Robert Johnson, Rosseter, Piccinini, and Kapsberger.

On the back of this, Wadsworth felt moved to go back to Goss with one of his longest-held wishes: the creation of a full-blown solo theorbo concerto. The composer responded with equal enthusiasm, although Wadsworth recalls the difference between the creative processes of Goss’s two works with some amusement. ‘Steve is a fine guitarist but had never written for the theorbo before, so when he was working on The Miller’s Tale there was a lot of conversation about the particular qualities of the instrument and how best to draw them out. Then when it came to the concerto, he had clearly remembered everything he’d learnt about the instrument the first time around and was very particular about every detail of the new piece. But always in an open and constructive way: we talked lots about how the piece might be structured, and how the theorbo would interact with the instruments of the orchestra.

‘For example, I was really keen for the double bass to play a prominent role; I’d once done some improvising with a double bass player after a rehearsal and thought it was brilliant. So in the concerto, the two instruments sometimes almost act as one, with the double bass echoing or filling in the bass strings on the theorbo.’

The concerto is in four main movements, separated by interludes, with a total duration of about 20 minutes. (Wadsworth mentions that while of course Goss was given free compositional rein, they were both keen not to end up with too long or complex a piece, in order to increase its attractiveness to future potential orchestral partners.)

At a surface level the work’s structure recalls the fast-slow alternation of baroque sonatas, both ‘da chiesa’ and ‘da camera’, but leans more towards the secular model with its heavy infusion of dance forms and rhythms.

Not for Goss, however, the bourrées, allemandes, and gigues traditional in the 17th and 18th centuries (although one movement is entitled ‘Passacaglia’):
rather, we hear tinges of the blues, a Mexican folk huapango, a waltz bedevilled in the style of Shostakovich and even a boogie-woogie bass. There are echoes, too, of English music of the 20th century – upper-string writing redolent of Tippett’s orchestral works, pastoral landscapes à la Vaughan Williams, and sensuous melodies like the very best of Britten.

Throughout, the theorbo is always present – strangely, even when it isn’t playing. Goss has so carefully and cleverly crafted a space for it within the orchestra – and photos of the recording sessions show the orchestra grouped around Wadsworth in a horseshoe shape – that every passage seems either to echo or expand on the theorbo’s sound, or to be creating the perfect backdrop against which the instrument can be brought to the forefront. It’s a remarkable achievement, and one the full detail of which is clearly revealed by the outstanding performances by Wadsworth and the Scottish Chamber Orchestra (SCO) and its concertmaster, Benjamin Marquise Gilmore.

Having the chance to work on the concerto with the SCO over a long period of time was, according to Wadsworth, invaluable. ‘One hears so often how concertos can, perversely, actually be deeply unsatisfying and unrewarding for a soloist. You get booked for a one-off concert with an orchestra on the other side of the country, turn up to rehearse the day before or even sometimes on the day itself, churn out another performance of an old warhorse of a piece, and then afterwards end up by yourself in a hotel room because all the orchestra have gone home to their families. ‘But because the SCO and I were starting from scratch with a new piece – and probably the hardest piece I’ve ever learnt – we all went through the whole journey from beginning to end, and there was a real sense of everyone being in it together.’

As funding for the commission was secured from both the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts and the North York Moors Chamber Music Festival, the two organisations gave the concerto its world and UK premieres in the summer of 2018, with the recording taking place on a single day between the two performances.

(Additional support was also given by Arts Council England, and the recording was sponsored by the Elizabeth Eagle-Bott Memorial Fund.)

In an interview with *Early Music Today* back in 2017, Wadsworth commented that, ‘The process of putting together Late Night Late and working on new music has helped me to feel excited and inspired again about performing. People love seeing and hearing the theorbo – I feel that part of my contribution to the musical world will be to bring some good new repertoire to the instrument.’

Two years on from then, and with this latest creation safely birthed and out in the world, Wadsworth’s self-appointed mission has been – and continues to be – a great success. But as we wind up our conversation, he modestly turns the focus back on his instrument, refusing to rest on his laurels.

‘I have several ideas for other composers to approach for future commissions, but I want to take the time to find the right person, who will really understand what the theorbo is about. ‘It has a wonderful past, but I want it to have a wonderful present and a wonderful future.’

Stephen Goss’s theorbo concerto, performed by Matthew Wadsworth and the Scottish Chamber Orchestra directed by Benjamin Marquise Gilmore, is now available on the Deux-Elles label as either download or limited-release CD. Wadsworth will perform Goss’s arrangement of his concerto for theorbo and string quartet with the Fitzwilliam Quartet on 22 July in the Fishguard Festival.

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