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## ANTONY PITTS: 50 IS THE NEW 40

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The composer's new multi-choral work for Sydney Philharmonia Choirs is his largest yet. He explains how Bach's Magnificat and the 'bullet time' technique from The Matrix inspired his music.

by Angus McPherson and Antony Pitts on April 15, 2019

Antony Pitts will have his new multi-choral piece for Sydney Philharmonia Choirs at Sydney Opera House premiered on Easter Saturday. The composer and Artistic Director of The Song Company tells Angus McPherson about the piece, and why he hopes 50 will be the new 40.



Antony Pitts. Photo © Nick Gilbert

### **THE COMPOSER WRITES:**

The first composition I wrote down – I think I was eight – was a hymn in the classic four parts (soprano, alto, tenor, bass). In my 30s I was asked by Simon Halsey to write a 40-part companion motet for Thomas Tallis's *Spem in alium* to be sung by the Rundfunkchor Berlin in the Berlin Philharmonie Kammermusiksaal. Whether you're writing for four parts or for 40 parts, there's always a bottom and a top note at any one time, and a limit to the number of different pitches sounding simultaneously (in four parts, that's up to four pitches; in 40 parts, the maximum is still only 12, unless you're going microtonal). The difference of scale, however, does matter: in a 40-part piece each vocal line is more like an individual bird lost in but unequivocally contributing to the crowd dynamics of a giant murmuration. For the performer, it's much easier to get lost, while soaring independently among so many equals is a visceral pleasure – as anyone who has sung *Spem in alium* will know. For the composer it means dealing with a lot of notes!

When Brett Weymark asked me about writing a piece for Sydney Philharmonia Choirs, I came straight back with an idea that had been bubbling away for a while: expanding a few short but extraordinary bars from Bach's Magnificat into a choral piece for many parts. Bach sets the words *mente cordis sui* – "in the imagination of their hearts" very dramatically: he starts, most unusually, with an augmented triad of F Sharp, D and B Flat. In his Magnificat this moment flies past; I wanted to slow it right down and get inside the harmony – rather like the "bullet time" technique in *The Matrix* captures and explores a dramatic moment from different angles of space and time. So *Mente cordis sui* was the initial title, but as I started composing, it became clear that we were going larger even than 40 parts.

My 40-part piece for Simon Halsey was called, simply, *XL* – "extra-large" or in Roman numerals, 40. So the new piece became *XLX* – *Mente cordis sui* (the 40 of "XL" and the 10 of "X" adding up to 50, sort of). Settling on 50 parts – to be sung by approximately 100 singers from Sydney Philharmonia Choirs and Capella St Crucis Hannover – crystallised the multi-choral aspect. Whereas Tallis writes for eight five-part choirs, *XLX* is for five 10-part choirs, divided spatially South, East, West, North, and a Central Choir on stage in front of the maestro who has to keep everything synchronised (Brett requested we make good use of the geography of the Sydney Opera House Concert Hall). And how extra-large is *XLX* exactly? 9750 bars (195 bars x 50 staves) and 15856 notes.

### **ANTONY PITTS SPOKE TO LIMELIGHT:**

#### **What was it about the 'Mente cordis sui' moment in the Magnificat that struck you?**

It's just so unexpected. You have that chord – the first chord that Bach uses – and it just comes out of the blue after a silence. I've sung it many times, and I always think, 'wow, if you could just pause on that, and go, what is going on?' Bach has created, just with three little notes, the most extraordinary universe. Then the rest of the harmony – I think there are about 12 chords in the following bars, neatly divided into two halves – also goes in all sorts of unexpected directions, and then resolves beautifully. With very limited means – without lots of the normal counterpoint that he is well-known for – he's just created this extraordinary universe just with chords, essentially. So I thought, well, I would like to slow that down and see what's inside – to examine it closely. That's what attracted me, and it's an idea that's been at the back of my composing mind for a few years, that this would be a great piece for a big chorus, a lot of voices.

You're not necessarily looking for the sort of clean precision of a little solo consort, you're actually trying to get the best out of the hugeness that is many voices, many individuals, many people coming from different walks of life and singing because they want to be singing – singing their hearts out. And it creates a particular sound, which I thought would be perfect for this.

#### **Was there a moment that you really noticed that moment in the Bach?**

Since I was 18 or 20, I can't remember when I first did it. I guess as a composer I spend a lot of time making objects out of notes and chords and phrases, and then working at the piano, away from the piano in my head – on a walk or whatever – just trying to get inside what's going on here that's really interesting and ripe for development. And it's interesting for me also as a conductor, because I currently spend more of my time conducting – being a conductor is also about getting inside the combination of melodic lines that are going on and seeing what the possibilities are.

#### **What are the pleasures for you as a composer of having such large forces at your disposal?**

It's very different from writing for a small group. As Artistic Director of The Song Company, I'm always composing and conducting and arranging for six, seven, eight voices, and there it's about clean lines, very carefully drawn chords and so on. A chance to work with so many parts and so many singers – because it's probably going to be sung by about 100 singers – it's a chance really to get some of that power and that strength, and those colours and timbres that you can't really get from a small professional group.

There should be a great pleasure in singing. There should be a visceral, kind of physical sense of enjoyment – and probably sheer terror as well, which I'm very familiar with as a performer. Being part of so many voices doing different things, rather than singing one of four parts, is an unusual human activity – and it's a very high level human activity and pleasure.

I'm working on an opera at the moment, called *The Process*, and one of the parts of that is to do with murmuration, which is how birds, starlings, flock together and make all these amazing shapes. From the outside we see the whole shape, but from the inside, being one of the individual birds, every move they make is important – every move they make impacts on their immediate neighbours, which then ripples out and impacts on everybody else. That's a little bit like what I'm trying to get in this piece – as you're singing, it has an impact on everybody else. Maybe it's echoed a beat later, or it changes the colour of the chord that the other choir is already singing, then in turn moves on. It's that sense of being one in a crowd but the crowd is moving and changing – the dynamics of the crowd are what it's about.

**You mention the idea of the 'bullet time' technique from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, how does that play out?**

If you think of what happens in the Bach, it goes from "dispersit, dispersit, dispersit" to "superbos" and it's like the shot has been fired. There's this moment of silence as the bullet comes towards Neo, and of course he avoids it, but it's also the impact – it's that sudden moment of impact – in *The Matrix*, the camera is able to pan around, you're able to see above and below and around in a way that seems impossible in terms of time, even moving back and seeing the same things again.

**I understand you also include text from the Book of Revelations.**

Actually somebody suggested it to me while I was writing it. My wife's aunt from the Netherlands said those words came into her head, as they would fit. So I looked and, you know what, they really do. So there are three sections with words, all from the same chapter, and they're all songs. You've got the Song of the Elders, the Song of the Angels and then you've got the Song of Everything – the Song of the Universe – and the words are different in character but also the music is very different in character.

**What do you hope the experience will be like for the audience?**

I'd like it to be surprising and overwhelming and uplifting – that's what I'd like, and that's what I've written it to be. Surprising in that the drama of the piece and its relationship to the Bach should make you go, 'Oh!'. Because I think that's what music does, it makes you think – but not necessarily in words. Listening to music, performing music – writing, as well – clearly does stuff to your brain, your heart, your soul. You're a different person after listening to music.

What I'm trying to create is a world that builds on the microcosm of those bars from Bach's Magnificat, a very expansive world that – because it's got so many parts – allows the audience and the singers to be in the middle of it. And all those different voices and sounds are just a slight sort of sensory overload – but hopefully in a good way. Overwhelming in that sense, and then also just hopefully the beauty of the harmonies and the way that they are passed around from choir to choir, will be uplifting.

A big thank you to Brett and Sydney Philharmonia Choirs for commissioning this, because it's a real opportunity to write for them – it's a great honour – and it's very exciting that it is being done in the Sydney Opera House. I guess I hope that 50 will become the new 40.

**Sydney Philharmonia Choirs performs Antony Pitts' *XLX Mente cordis sui* at the Sydney Opera House on April 20**