

GHOSTS

Commissioning History

Ghosts was commissioned by Timothy Reynish and first performed by the Royal Northern College of Music Wind Orchestra conducted by Clark Rundell at the RNCM in April 2001.

The work is published by Maecenas and has been recorded a number of times, notably by Philharmonia à Vent/ John Boyd (Klavier) and Tokyo Kosei/ Douglas Bostock (Univisual). Using the North American grading system, *Ghosts* is grade 4 / 4.5.

Stephen McNeill

Stephen McNeill is Composer in the House with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra (funded by the Performing Right Society Foundation and the Royal Philharmonic Society) and has already written two major orchestral works for them as well as a number of chamber pieces. His music is heard regularly on Radio 3 conducted by Jan Pascal Tortelier, Marin Alsop and others.

As well as working with the BSO, McNeill has recently written for Battersea Arts Centre and Opera North, and projects like *Names of the Dead* and *What I Heard About Iraq* reflect an interest in music forming part of a debate about important current issues.

He has also written a great deal of music for young people including the *Beatrix Potter Suites* for the BBC Concert Orchestra and Oscar nominated Imelda Staunton (recently released on Chandos to outstanding reviews), and his opera based on Henry Williamson's *Tarka the Otter* for the Two Moors Festival won a 2007 British Composer Award. *Gentle Giant* was commissioned by the Royal Opera House, and played at Covent Garden before touring as part of ROH On the Road, whilst his music for wind orchestra is performed world-wide and with an increasing number of commercial recordings.

As well as working intensively with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra on orchestral projects, McNeill is committed to broad-reaching work in the community. Initiatives like the South West Composers' Project, where as part of his time in the South West he works with

non-professional individuals and groups, form an important element in his work. More information about the composer can be found at www.stephenmcneff.co.uk

Instrumentation Considerations

Ghosts is scored for a fairly standard wind orchestra (although only two horn parts and no doubling instruments): Flute 1 & 2; oboe 1 & 2; 3 x Bb & bass clarinets; 2 bassoons; AATB saxophones; 2 horns; 3 trumpets; 3 trombones; euphonium; tuba; timpani & 2 percussion

The composer's intention is that the work can be played with a flexible instrumentation and that while bassoons, for example, are desirable there is sufficient cross-cueing to allow the work to be played without them. McNeill also notes that parts can be played by multiple players if wished, save where marked *solo*. Although there are only two percussion parts, there is plenty to keep four players occupied and in fact it would require two very competent and experienced players to manage everything between them.

There is quite a long list of percussion, all of which is vital. Some of the more unusual items are two triangles of different pitch and chains, of which more later.

Rehearsal Suggestions

To quote from the programme note in the score: '*Ghosts* is complete fantasy. It is a type of (not very strict) theme and variations starting with 'The Haunting', followed by seven episodes suggested by famous ghosts and other spectral occurrences, with a short epilogue.'

The composer goes on to note that while he recommends always starting with the opening theme and finishing with the prologue, individual movements may be omitted where they prove too difficult for inexperienced players.

In performance, I have found it very effective to have either the conductor or a player in the band narrate. The opening paragraph (as above) is spoken just as the piece begins, and the short sentence given in the score about each variation is announced just before the relevant variation. I am also aware of performances

where this idea has been taken much further and school band directors have worked together with colleagues in the English department to research or compose poems based on the different ghost stories.

One of the most appealing aspects of this work is the way the composer writes music which is technically within the grasp of inexperienced players without compromising musically. Many of the variation movements feature parts of the band, often in music which has significant non-technical challenges and some quite exposed writing. This also calls for some thought to rehearsal scheduling and I would suggest a combination of sectionals and rehearsing the 'chamber' movements in the middle of the rehearsal with different players taking breaks as required. As the conductor, you don't get tired playing an instrument so you can manage without a break.

A more detailed discussion of specific rehearsal and performance issues follows, and having a score to hand will be of some benefit.

The Haunting

The metronome of $\text{minim}=48$ is fine, but resist the urge to conduct in four as this will affect the desired *misterioso* character.

2 Percussion 2 is asked to play 'chains'. I have found this to be achieved best with a length of fairly substantial chain pulled around on a resonant surface such as a metal tray. I also ask the player not to stick to the printed rhythm too exactly on the basis that in my experience ghosts wandering around in chains tend not to keep a strict two in the bar!

5 The tuba and bass wind parts are quite low and the ability of the players to sustain in this register will dictate the phrasing to an extent. I actually quite like it to be two phrases of two bars followed by one of four and this seems usually to be manageable. This section is obviously quite exposed and lots of work can be done on phrasing and breath control with the players in question.

Ghosts

I The Haunting

Stephen McNeff

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pp

Flute 1
Flute 2

Oboe 1 & 2

Bb Clarinet 1
Bb Clarinet 2

Bass Clarinet

Bassoon 1 & 2

Alto Sax 1
Alto Sax 2

Tenor Sax

Bari/Soprano Sax

Bass in F 1
Bass in F 2

Trompete in Bb 1
Trompete in Bb 2 & 3

Trombone 1
Trombone 2 & 3

Euphonium

Tuba

Timpani

Percussion 1
Percussion 2

Stephan Moore

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14 The woodwind chord should start extremely quietly and I can guarantee that the *diminuendo* part of the hairpin will not happen quickly enough – in other words make sure the dynamic returns to *pianissimo* by bar 15. From this point on, you may begin to think of longer phrases in the theme and so work out some staggered breathing.

23 I suggest keeping the *crescendo* which begins as early as 21 in some parts under wraps so that the arrival of the first *fortissimo* comes as quite a surprise. For me, this is a small *fortissimo*, the main climax of the movement coming at 47. Throughout this phrase look for a contrast between the very 'gluey' legato of the majority and the *marcato* crotchets of horns, bassoons and timpani.

31 Make sure the low brass and timps do a quick *diminuendo*. The piece is full of dramatic effects which do not necessarily need to be 100% accurate to be effective. The clarinets in bar 33 are a good example: much more important to get the impact of the *forte* and a rapid *diminuendo* than the right notes! Make sure the players know they are not meant to have the same rhythm.

35 Make sure the *solo* and *soli* lines project and are balanced. At 43 ensemble can be tricky between the syncopated flutes and oboes and the crotchets. I strongly advise training the players to listen and understand how it fits rather than beating crotchets.

47 As mentioned above, this is the climax of the movement and the only place the composer marks a *ritardando*. Bar 46 is therefore the only place I conduct crotchet beats then back into two for the *a tempo*.

The Gray Lady

1 There are two difficulties with the opening. Firstly, you will probably need to work with the clarinets to get a continuous even line of semiquavers as they will tend to accent the first note of each group a bit. Secondly, ensemble between the clarinets and glockenspiel is tricky. This is an excellent opportunity to get young players thinking about the way different instruments produce sound and how to compromise in order to play together. I find the printed metronome mark a little on the slow side and usually go a notch or two quicker.

3 Make sure the alto sax and oboe are correctly balanced with the lower



octave a little stronger. Ask them to take plenty of time over the grace notes which need not be hurried at all. At 9 the flutes should join the phrase delicately, as opposed to stamping all over the poor saxophone and oboe – fewer players may be the answer if you have a big section.

13 With a big woodwind section you might ask them to come away from this *forte* a little if the brass is not audible. Ask the trumpets and trombones to separate their notes here slightly for clarity and that the horns do quite a generous *crescendo* in 14.

20 Brass headed mallets will most likely be needed in the glockenspiel here and this is a place where the player needs to play confidently and the conductor's role is to coordinate the rest of the ensemble with him or her. Be sure also that the winds observe the *diminuendo*.

28 This *crescendo* can be very dramatic with a very piercing and shrill oboe entry in 29 (the Gray Lady screaming perhaps?). The oboes also have a hard job in the next bar, both rhythmically and in terms of intonation. Asking the trumpet to project the muted solo will help.

and Performance

34 The ending is made difficult by the fact that the saxophones play the clarinet rhythm for the first time. This will probably need some work but if the worst comes to the worst you could always leave out the sax parts. The glock should lead the *ritardando*. There aren't many thirds in the last chord so balance it carefully.

The Dog of Godley

After the calmness and melancholy of the previous movement this exciting chase is much enjoyed by the players.

3 Note the percussion dynamics but make sure the drums are not so loud that the timpani is inaudible.

7 The theme of the movement is in the bass instruments and surely the triplet at the end of bar 9 is the dog barking? Make sure this figure is played with *brio* and is always heard, especially later on when more is happening.

35 Be sure that the bassoons and tenor sax know they should really be *forte* and that everyone else starts *piano* and doesn't get too loud too soon.

53 Again, the 2nd and 3rd clarinets have a very big gesture compared to the prevailing dynamic and need to be encouraged with the conductor's gesture.

57 The rhythmic layers are quite easily worked out by breaking it down to the various parts in rehearsal.

67 I strongly suggest that the 1st flute in 67 to 69 and the 1st clarinet in 69 are played *solo*. After the second beat of the 6/4 there is no need to beat the rest of the bar: freeze and give the upbeat to the *fortissimo*.

94 Make sure the players understand the marking – *poco più piano* – i.e. not *piano*, just a bit quieter than the previous dynamic.

110 The same things as in bar 67 except you can maybe wait a bit longer before the last note.

Other than the above specifics, the movement is an exercise in controlling your players in loud and energetic playing. As I once heard Maurice Murphy say, "don't let the brass play louder than they can" – he never did; it is just that he could play louder than anyone else! Make sure long notes are released in order that others can be heard and insist on *diminuendi*.

The Bank of England Clerk

With its alternating 5/8 and 6/8 structure, this one will probably be an unmitigated disaster on a first read through. Don't despair, and don't be tempted to conduct quaver beats except when rehearsing it extremely slowly.

All the 5/8 bars are 3+2 and make sure the stick keeps moving. By that I mean don't stop the motion of the beat because this is what makes it hard for the players to understand the pulse when the meter is changing. It sounds obvious but remember that the short beat in the 5/8 is two thirds of the length of all the other beats. That means you need to move your arm correspondingly quicker for those beats.

During rehearsals, you might want to get the whole band playing the constant quaver *ostinato* – it doesn't matter what pitches they play. If you have good percussionists enlist their help. If you can sort their parts out quite quickly they can really help train the rest of the players, even to the extent of putting them in amongst the other sections during rehearsals. Once it starts coming together the following specifics might help:

3 The *staccato* quavers will tend to rush, the *legato* phrases will probably drag.

12 Make sure you keep subdividing in your head as you conduct 12 to 15. If you get a little quicker here there will be problems later. In 16, make sure the saxes realise their entry is after the sixth quaver of the bar.

25 If the woodwinds find this difficult, rehearse it with them playing quavers in the rests and working out how to fit with the trumpets.

31 These four bars are tricky and lining up the different semiquaver groups may take some time. Be patient and take the other stuff out of the way so that the players have a chance to hear each other.

48 The little interjections in saxophone and bassoon are hard, but as long as each pair is together it doesn't matter so much if they aren't in exactly the right place.

Clearly, this variation is one of those that directors may consider omitting but I would urge you not to take that decision too soon. This movement is terrific training for the players and conductor and it will come together if you give it a chance.

The Girl in the Tower

This is an elegant little movement which will take as much subtlety of phrasing and *rubato* as you and your players are able to give it. I find it works most successfully with one player on each part which means you need only 13 players. It is a challenge to conduct as there are constant decisions about whether to be in one, three, or - more likely - somewhere in between.

1 I find giving a couple of crotchets beat preparation then conducting immediately in one works quite well. However, within that you may need to indicate the second beat sometimes. Ask the horns and 2nd/ 3rd clarinets to play as in a waltz with a bit of articulation and release.

13 There are some misprints. In bar 13 and 15 the 1st clarinet should have a written F#.

16 A trick I learned from one of my conducting teachers is sometimes to go into smaller value beats the bar before you are going to start slowing down. The rationale is that if you are in one, then go into crotchets to slow down, what the players actually see is quicker gestures so they are confused. So I suggest conducting crotchets in 16, but in the same tempo, then indicating the *ritardando* over the next two bars. 19 is in one again, then because there is no rhythmic movement in the first two beats of 22, in this case it works going into crotchets directly in the *rit.* bar. Hopefully that makes some kind of sense!

23 The muted trumpet phrase has a certain sinister quality to it and can be played a little more than *pianissimo*.

39 I conduct the *meno mosso* sections in crotchets.

55 Even with only five people playing, this *crescendo* can be quite a big gesture, and then even more so on the *tutti* at 58.

The Oldham Coliseum Ghost

Again, the change of pace, energy, texture and instrumental colour from the previous variation mitigates against omitting movements if at all possible. This movement features the brass and saxophones in a brash, sassy style which they will certainly enjoy.

1 The parts are confusing because the brass play two semiquavers into bar 2,

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yet the saxes and tubas have this as a whole bar rest and then there is a rehearsal number for bar 7 which is actually at the beginning of bar 8. Just make sure you've figured this out in advance or confusion will reign.

5 Throughout the movement the constant quavers should not cover up the running semiquaver line. The other main tendency is for the semiquaver/ dotted quaver groupings to be wrong. Inexperienced players will tend to put the semiquaver just before the beat.

28 The G.P. bar should be the right length but it is not necessary to beat all four beats. In 29 make sure the *pp* part of the *sfpp cresc.* registers. The semiquavers of bar 30 are pretty rapid at the correct tempo – the most important thing is that even if some players don't quite fit them all in they stop in time! Bar 32 should be, as it says, the tempo of the first movement although I find it easier to do it in crotchets here. Treat the beginning of 35 as a quasi fermata: give only the downbeat, stop, then 3,4 in the new tempo.

The Blackpool Tram

1 The percussion should be extremely soft in the opening; perhaps you might ask the timpanist to play a bit closer to the centre of the drum to aid clarity.

4 The numerous *crescendo / diminuendo* phrases should have an element of sea-sickness to them, so very rapid and dramatic dynamic changes are important.

10 Keep your ears on the syncopated lines which may just need a little help.

25 These percussion solo bars should be very dramatic. Make sure in 27 that the off-beats do not come early or the 12/8 feel can easily be lost.

40 The ship's bell is of course infinitely preferable to the *ossia* of a large triangle. In 41 I find the trumpets need to aim for the beginning of the figure, not the end, if the first couple of quavers are not to get lost.

115 Try, if possible, to persuade the players that the last note should be quieter than the rest of the bar – not ten times louder.

The Polish Sailor

The bar numbers in the score, but not the parts, are one out in this movement.

1 Again, dynamic extremes are the order of the day so work with the snare drum player to get the opening two bars as dramatic as possible. The flute and oboe lines from bar 5 should have a certain 'wailing' quality.

9 The little brass fanfares should always be heard, although never too dominant. There are some printing issues in bar 11. In some of the woodwind parts the bracket indicating the second group of triplets is not clear and you will need to explain where the beats fall and what exactly is within the triplet. After that, they probably still won't play it right and you'll need to make them aware that the second triplet group is on the third beat, not before or after it.

14 The little bassoon and tenor sax solos can be brought out here and at 24.

29 If you are using a narrator, they should deliver the last lines of text here to allow for the *attacca* into the last movement.

Chorale

Once again, the bar numbers are one out.

1 Of course this should be extremely *legato* and you could rehearse it slurred and then ask the players to add a little articulation but keep the length. Be careful bar 6 does not get suddenly louder when the brass and saxes come in. The *crescendo* only goes to *forte* and should not be too big.

8 Keep the long notes a little out of the way so that the bass crotchetts are featured. The articulation of the accent at the end of bars 11 and 13 should exactly match the timpani.

18 The trumpets can play a little more than *pianissimo* because of the mutes and so that the woodwind can hear where to put their semiquaver.

20 The effect of the ending is the various entries gradually building up the sound so the accuracy of the rhythm is not vital. Of course you need to be with the timpani and percussion in the penultimate bar. I slow down a little during the bar then subdivide the fourth beat to give them some space to organise the last beat where the temps and bass drum need to be together.

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