

Two men meet, each presuming the other to be from a distant planet

A concerto for percussionist and twenty-four instruments

When I first contemplated the idea of a percussion concerto, I was immediately aware of an inherent clash of cultures. The percussionist would embody a musical tradition dating back to man's most ancient musical experience, whilst the modern, 'hi-tech' orchestra would represent a more sophisticated world of 'high art'. The eloquent and elaborate rhythmic language articulated by the percussionist would inhabit a totally different world from the richly melodic, harmonic and colourful music of the orchestra.

It would have been easy to let this culture clash rest as the sole idea for the work, however I was determined to find a way to integrate these two opposing forces into a coherent musical medium. This problem preoccupied me for many years before ever having an opportunity to write the concerto. When this opportunity finally came, I suddenly recalled the early and highly satirical etching by Paul Klee, entitled *Two men meet, each presuming the other to be of higher rank*. The etching depicts two skeletal figures deeply bowing to one another, whilst at the same time eyeing each other with suspicion. In twisting the title to *Two men meet, each presuming the other to be from a distant planet*, Klee's satire is taken further - each of my two men almost certainly considers himself to be superior, but at the same time threatened by the other - nevertheless, they wish to find a common language in which to communicate.

I eventually realised that the solution to the problem of integration lay in the instruments themselves. I would have to take care that each 'player' was dealt an equal hand of cards - both percussionist and ensemble would need an instrumentation that was well matched in dynamic range, and which could articulate effectively in all domains of rhythm, melody, harmony and timbre.

For the percussionist I settled on a choice of three sets of instruments - thirteen wooden-headed drums, thirty-seven cowbells (covering a range of about two octaves, including several quartertones) and four 'microxyls'. The massive, sonorous sounds of the wood-drums would balance the powerful wind group (seven woodwind and five brass), whilst the more subtle harmonies, melodies, microtonal trills and timbres of the eight strings, harp, vibraphone and two electronic keyboards could be equally well matched in the cowbells and microxyls.

The work is cast in a single movement which takes the form of a dramatic dialogue between percussionist and ensemble. However there are several clearly differentiated stages, or paragraphs in the dialogue, which are laid out in an almost 'classical' form. In the rhetorical exchange of greetings in the introduction, the percussionist clearly identifies himself and the culture he represents, by using his voice to articulate a form of 'rhythmic solfege' reminiscent of ancient drum languages. Thereafter one could describe the main paragraphs as 'exposition', 'scherzo', 'reconciliation' (an extended series of 'questions' from the percussionist and 'answers' from soloists among the ensemble), 'recapitulation', 'dance' and 'coda'.

Two men meet was commissioned by the BBC for the 1995 Promenade Concerts, and was first performed at the Royal Albert Hall on 11th September 1995 by Steven Schick and Critical Band, conducted by the composer.

James Wood