

## *Sea Dances*

Like the British Isles, Norway has always enjoyed a specially close relationship with the sea - its long and spectacular coast-line dominates the country's natural history, and the sea has provided sustenance and livelihoods for its people for centuries.

When asked by the Norwegian percussion trio, SISU, if I would write a work for them, I immediately saw the perfect opportunity to explore my own fascination with the sea. Several years earlier I had assembled a large number of recordings of the sea in a wide variety of states and conditions - gentle river waves lapping against a pontoon, gentle ocean waves on a pebble beach, rough sea waves against a rocky shore-line and so on. My work on *Sea Dances* started with an extended analysis of these recordings from two specific points of view - firstly rhythm, and secondly movement; the data resulting from these analyses went on to form the basis of the rhythmic, dynamic and spatial structure of the work. In the rhythmic domain I studied the preparation, crest (and its amplitude) and decay of each wave, and in the movement domain I studied the 'ripple effect' or ricochet of each wave - that is to say the way a wave strikes different points along a shore-line in succession. Once I had compiled the necessary data from a series of 30-second 'snap-shots' of the sea in a wide variety of conditions, I chose eight of these snap-shots ranging from a very calm swell to a rough, choppy sea, in such a way that the rhythms could develop imperceptibly from one into another, just as they do in reality.

In *Sea Dances*, the resulting 'wave cycles' have a close resemblance to breathing - preparation (inhalation) - crest and decay (exhalation). Perhaps this is the reason why we can often sit and watch the sea for hours, experiencing its profoundly calming effect. The preparation of the wave (or inhalation) is presented, naturally enough, as a crescendo, often from silence. The crest (or exhalation) of each wave is presented as a short melodic fragment, from 2 to 11 notes, in one player, which is then ricocheted to the other players in turn. With each successive ricochet the melodic fragment is subject to subtle transformations in several domains: in the number of notes, the dynamic, the pitches, the tuning, the tone-colour, and of course the position in space. Each player takes turns in being the 'leader', or the one who presents the first crest of each chain of ricochets, and the players are spaced out widely on the stage, so that the movement of the ricochets can be clearly felt. The speed, rhythm and direction of the ricochets is also in a constant state of flux, so that a rich polyphony of overlapping, ricocheting wave-cycles is built up.

The work, which lasts about 22 minutes, falls broadly into five sections, or 'sea-states', although the way that these sections develop from one to the next should be so imperceptible as to be unnoticeable - the first is calm - the second is fresh - the third is light but with occasional squalls - the fourth is rough - and the fifth is very calm. The changing sea-states are also represented by a change of predominant register and instrumentation. The importance of the subtle changes in colour in the successive ricochets has resulted in an extremely rich, exotic and extensive instrumentarium which includes several specially-built instruments.

I am grateful to Tomas Nilsson, from SISU, for his close collaboration specially on the development of the instrumentation, and for his constant help during the composition of the work. *Sea Dances* was written between July and November 2012, and is dedicated to SISU.

James Wood (November 2012)