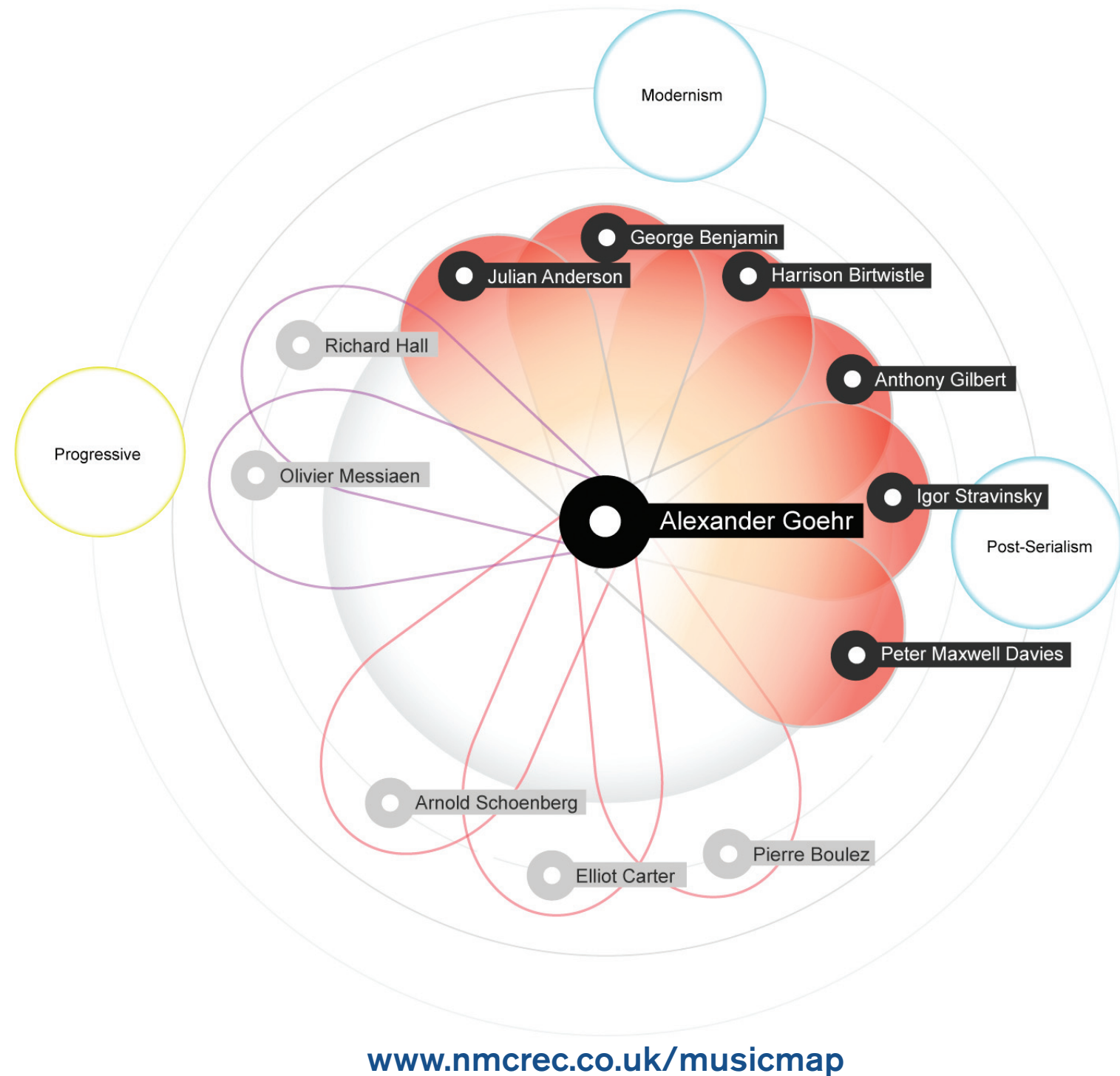




Alexander Goehr



Since Brass, nor Stone...

Colin Currie *percussion* • Pavel Haas Quartet
The Nash Ensemble

Largo *Siciliano* • ... around Stravinsky
manere • Clarinet Quintet

1 Since Brass, nor Stone... Op 80 (2008) 13'29

Fantasy for string quartet and percussion

Colin Currie *percussion*

Pavel Haas Quartet: Veronika Jarůšková *violin* • Marek Zwiebel *violin*

Pavel Nikl *viola* • Peter Jarůšek *cello*

...around Stravinsky for violin and wind quartet Op 72 (2002) 11'24

2 Prelude, 'Dushkin' 3'15

3 Stravinsky: Pastorale 2'41

4 Introduzione and Rondo 5'28

David Alberman *violin* • Gareth Hulse *oboe* • Richard Hosford *clarinet*

Ursula Leveaux *bassoon* • Richard Watkins *horn*

Clarinet Quintet Op 79 (2007) 18'40

5 I Maestoso 1'00

6 II Poco meno mosso 1'09

7 III Tempo 1 1'38

8 IV Tempo 1, poco scherzando 1'13

9 V Tempo 1, poco scherzando 0'54

10 VI Andante 3'34

11 VII Tempo 1 1'29

12 VIII Lento 1'24

13 IX Mosso, allegro 2'01

14 X Saraband 4'18

Richard Hosford *clarinet* • David Alberman *violin* • Laura Samuel *violin*

Lawrence Power *viola* • Paul Watkins *cello*

manere Op 81 (2008) 9'16

15 e = 80 ma poco liberamente 0'51

16 come sopra 0'56

17 poco meno, sostenuto 0'54

18 tempo 1 1'53

19 meno mosso 1'22

20 in tempo 0'54

21 andante 0'41

22 in tempo dell'inizio, ma liberamente 0'53

23 in tempo 0'52

Richard Hosford *clarinet*

Marianne Thorsen *violin*

24 Largo Siciliano Op 91 (2012) 20'13

Richard Watkins *horn*

Marianne Thorsen *violin*

Ian Brown *piano*

Total timing 73'45

The Nash Ensemble

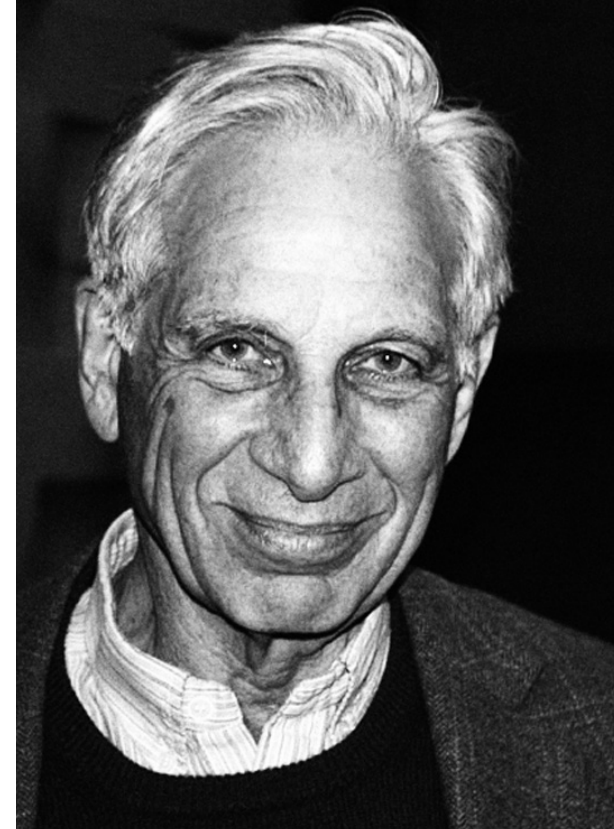
David Alberman *violin* • Laura Samuel *violin*

Marianne Thorsen *violin* • Lawrence Power *viola*

Paul Watkins *cello* • Richard Watkins *horn*

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Ursula Leveaux *bassoon* • Ian Brown *piano*



**Alexander
Goehr**

**Since Brass,
nor Stone...**

Photo: Raoul David Findeisen

Since Brass, Nor Stone...

Alexander Goehr's Chamber Music

by Guy Dammann

Does growing older affect the way you write music? Some years ago, Alexander Goehr put this question to Elliott Carter, a composer who before his death in 2012 at the age of 103, was producing music at a faster rate than almost ever before, and was thus in a better position than most to answer Goehr's question. Carter's answer was that composers should carry on doing the same things as before – which is of course exactly what he did. But Goehr, though still only a sprightly 80 years, has remained unconvinced, fearing the implication of repetition or even 'a resting on fading laurels' which

arises from such an attitude. He can't start again. At best he can look again at 'loose ends', his own and those of other composers he has admired, and try to make out of these something coherent and expressive.

It is in some respects unsurprising that the rather arbitrary factor of his own age should present itself as of artistic significance to Goehr. Among his contemporaries, Goehr has always been notable for his developed historical awareness, something borne out not merely in his immense musical (and other) scholarship but in his recognition

of the singularly awkward duty owed by today's composers to their forebears in the great Western tradition. A composer's greatest hope is also the source of his deepest despair: 'the illusion', says Goehr, 'that one can add to what is already there'.

This awareness is primarily manifest in his continuing efforts to broker a marriage between contemporary musical language and the forms and concerns of older Western music. This is a concern he inherited from Schoenberg, in direct line, so to speak – via the influence of his father, the conductor Walter Goehr, for some years a pupil of Schoenberg's – but it is also something which derives from more recent history, where many have sought to reject historical

categories altogether and start afresh. But Goehr has always sought to respect the continuity of listening, both in the sense that the listener needs to be able to follow the course of a musical work in some reasonable sense, but also in the sense that we use, whether intentionally or unconsciously, the same ears and kinds of listening for Bach as we do for Birtwistle. Tradition, even if it ends up stifling one, is not something any artist can meaningfully work without.

This impassioned but nuanced view of historical relationships and artistic identity is not merely evident in Goehr's attitude to his music, but frequently also visible and audible in the scores themselves. A good example is the **Largo Siciliano** (Horn Trio) where, as in a number of other recent

pieces, he takes an idea or, in this case, a direct quotation from elsewhere. The source here is from his former teacher Messiaen's *Mode de Valeurs et des Intensités*, a work which initially provided a point of departure for the short-lived movement known as total serialism, where in addition to the pitch, the duration and loudness level of each note is juxtaposed in a fixed order. The idea is then contrasted with more traditional material suggesting the dotted rhythms of the Siciliano.

The work is in a single continuous movement and opens with a confident statement of the Siciliano theme in violin and horn. But instead of building on itself, the theme's energy dwindles and it quickly dissipates, giving way to the fractured, unstable twelve-tone

material. The progress of the work, then, is marked by an effort to work through the apparent demands of the serial ideas while guiding them back to a more lyrical and perhaps ultimately more musical set of historical associations – leading them gently into an irresistible slow dance, as it might be. A significant proportion of the piece is given over to exploring the contrasting and distinctive timbres of three instruments, where each combination and permutation is given extended attention (besides the trio, three duets, three solo passages). The passages act to refract and refine the material and build up for the listener a heightened awareness of timbre. In the final third of the piece, this awareness is drawn back with a kind of irresistible force into a

more traditionally conceived working out of the Siciliano material through to an elegant, deceptively simple conclusion. In a sense, then, one hears a reintegration of a splintering musical surface into the wood of the tree.

As an essay in the integration of structure and texture, the *Largo Siciliano* is striking in the way it presents a formal problem and proceeds to a musical solution. Perhaps this is what Goehr has in mind when he speaks of music that ties up its loose ends, not merely in a biographical sense but in the exercising of discipline honed by a long career as a musical master-craftsman. Certainly, there is an air of this in the short duo for Clarinet and Violin that Goehr wrote at the request of the clarinetist Eduard

Burnner. As the title suggests, ***manere*** draws its material principally from the so-called 'manere' plainchant (from the *Graduale Romanorum*, to the words 'Sed: Sic eum vol manere'), reproduced at first literally and then played with, fragmented and reconstituted in a sequence of close, sometimes breathless sounding variations, so that much is made of the Latin title's meaning, 'to remain'. As in the Horn Trio, the play of unusual textural combinations is itself part of the motivation, as the two instruments dart in and out of each other's lines, so the distinctive colour of each instrument comes in and out of focus. Similarly, although Goehr never relaxes his grip on the material, the piece has a strongly spontaneous, almost medieval flow to it.

The more recent past is also visited in Goehr's short piece *... around Stravinsky*. This consists of a Prelude for solo violin and a Rondo for violin and wind quartet, intended to be performed either side of Stravinsky's early 1907 song without words, *Pastorale*. Goehr's Prelude is entitled 'Dushkin' after the composer's friend and collaborator, violinist Samuel Dushkin, who worked with him on an arrangement of the song for violin and the combination of instruments heard here, a quartet of oboe, cor anglais, clarinet and bassoon. The fantasia-like Prelude purposefully evokes elements of Dushkin's style, while the following Rondo is a more formal and tightly composed response to the song, and in some sense a celebration of the mature style presaged by Stravinsky's earliest surviving composition.

If much of Goehr's later music can be appreciated in this sense of looking to provide solutions to historical and music-aesthetic problems which have occupied him throughout his career, it would be a mistake to suppose this seriousness of purpose is in some sense equal to a uniform dryness and gravitas in the music. On the contrary, though his thinking and working out remain as rigorous as ever, Goehr's defiantly wry and quirky, even anarchic spirit is as present as ever. So often his music seems to defy expectations, or to run off at unusual tangents, leaving the listener dangling momentarily. This may have something to do with the peculiar pressures that sculpted Goehr's musical world as a younger composer, influenced by his father but also by such forceful musical personalities as Michael

Tippett, and later by Boulez. Although he rarely composes without having one or other of these figures on his artistic conscience, offering sharp criticisms and expressions of horror or disgust, Goehr has long since realised that it would never have been possible to please all three men at once, so he's much better off just trying to please himself. This relates to another compositional rule of thumb for Goehr, which is his desire to 'bury' his musical ideas in the process of composition, the idea being that however elaborate or high-falutin' one's theoretical ambitions might be before turning to compose a piece, the music itself must never be a simple 'execution' of these aims or ideas. Rather, the ideas must be discarded and the music left, as it were, to please itself.

The two largest-scale works on the present disc, the Clarinet Quintet of 2007 and the quintet for percussion and strings, *Since Brass, nor Stone...*, bear out this facet of Goehr's style in different ways. Indeed, one wonders if the composer was purposefully playing with his audience's expectations when he described the **Clarinet Quintet**, in the programme note for its first performance by the Nash Ensemble in the Wigmore Hall in 2008, as an 'austere and motet-like' work. That is not to say the description is inaccurate. On the contrary, the work is specifically motet-like in its use of a *Miserere* by Josquin des Prez as a kind of structural inspiration, where each section of the composition is based on a single pitch level lower than the previous, making an overall 'falling' continuity (though this is

hardly audible, either in the Josquin or the Clarinet Quintet). There is an element of austerity too, to the final section, a Saraband, which exhibits something of a regal poise: it provides a culmination of the preceding sections, less in a sense of reaching an emotional climax than in one of the thematic content, which has been continuously worked and reworked throughout, achieving its definitive form. But elsewhere the piece is remarkable for its textural warmth, echoing, much more than in the Horn Trio, the rich, autumnal soundworld of its famous Brahmsian forebear.

Since Brass, nor Stone... also contains something of a 'wrong signpost' – this time in its title, which is taken from Shakespeare's foreboding 65th Sonnet. The poem is concerned with the

ravaging effects of time on the physical world, destroying everything except, the poet hopes, the immortal qualities of beauty (and by extension the verse itself). For Goehr, however, though such questions may have also been in his mind, the line is initially taken as a convenient comic reference to the opening sequence in the percussion, which begins with Chinese gong and bell tree (brass), proceeds to stone drum (stone), to log drum (earth), lion's roar and rainstick (seas), all in the space of the opening four bars. Besides playing with Shakespeare's elements, there is perhaps also a suggestion, in the reference to the poem, of the implicit danger for any composer writing for solo percussion of the material's never transcending the status of passing effects, but of

simply being just a matter (as someone once joked) of one thing being hit after another.

A certain rhythmic vitality has, of course, always been a hallmark of Goehr's music, and in many ways the unusual combination of pitched unpitched percussion with string quartet may have made a less daunting prospect to him than to others. As it was, the forces were set by the nature of the commission by the Pavel Haas Quartet to make a companion piece to Haas's own Percussion Quintet. But Goehr's music is remarkable not merely for vigour and sense of continuity (like the other piece, the work is in a single movement), nor even for the virtuosity of the percussion writing – though both these elements are striking, the percussion part full of mind-boggling difficulty. What is

really remarkable, however, is the way the percussion writing manages to remain of a piece with the string writing. Indeed, if viewed another way, the purpose of the string parts could even be understood in terms of filling out the melodic and harmonic desires, as it were, of the percussion writing. Only in the final section does the percussion fall silent, the strings at the end left to bask in its glow. As with the other pieces on the disc, all examples in their various ways – if such a term is appropriate – of the concerns of Goehr's late style, the excitement comes not just from the rhythmic and cumulative energy of the music, but from the intellectual thrill of a problem being posed, elegantly solved, and then turned into a thrilling fairground ride.

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Alexander Goehr

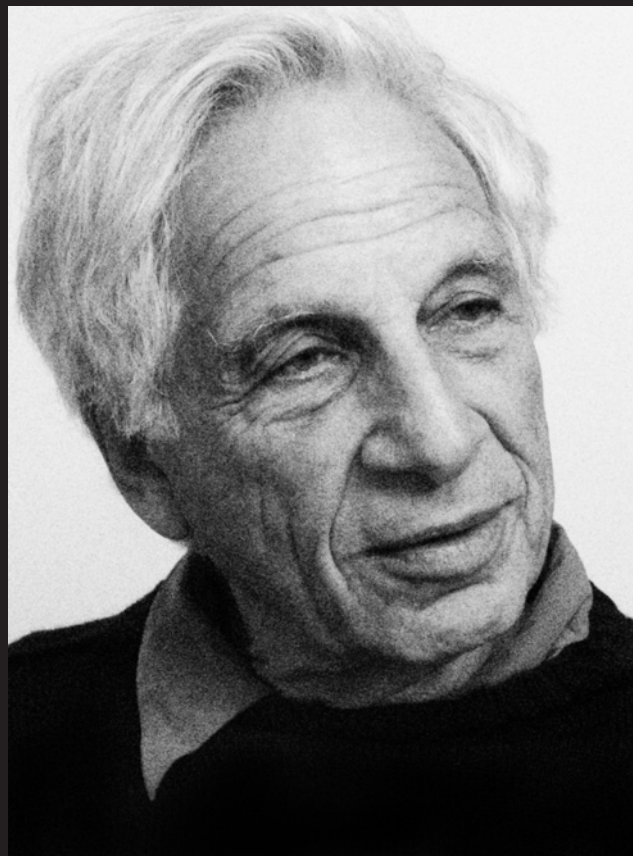


Photo: Raoul David Findeisen

Alexander Goehr, composer and teacher, studied in Manchester at the Royal Manchester College of Music with Richard Hall – where together with Harrison Birtwistle, Peter Maxwell Davies and John Ogdon he formed the New Music Manchester Group – and in Paris with Messiaen and Yvonne Loriod. Goehr worked for the BBC in the early 1960s, during which time he formed the Music Theatre Ensemble, the first devoted to what has become an established musical form. He has taught at the New England Conservatory Boston, Yale, Leeds and was appointed to the chair of music of the University of Cambridge in 1975.

Goehr has written a substantial body of works including five operas, the most recent of which, *Promised End*, was premiered by English Touring Opera in 2010. In recent years he has worked especially closely with Oliver Knussen and Peter Serkin, who have premiered and recorded multiple works. His latest orchestral work, *When Adam Fell*, was presented by the BBC Symphony Orchestra and its dedicatee, Knussen, in January 2012; the Nash Ensemble premiered the Horn Trio, *Largo Siciliano*, at the Cheltenham Festival in July 2012; and *To These Dark Steps* for tenor, children's choir and ensemble

was written for Birmingham Contemporary Music Group and premiered in September 2012.

Many of his works have been recorded; those released on NMC include the opera *Arianna* and orchestral work *Colossos or Panic*.

Information about the artists on this disc can be found on NMC's website:

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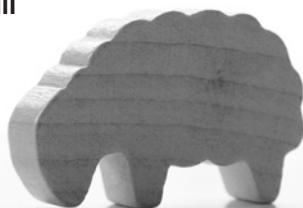
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Recording Producer/Engineer **DAVID LEFEBER**

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