



From strength to strength

Having progressed from being a PhD student to a composer-in-residence with the BBC, Dobrinka Tabakova has had an eventful 14 years. **Harriet Clifford** catches up with her to discuss everything from the highs of her career so far, to the landscape of composition in the UK

As a teenager, being in a choir was probably one of the highlights of my social life,' Bulgarian-born composer Dobrinka Tabakova admits with a laugh. More seriously, she explains, 'I love writing for voices ... I always go back to that and think about how much I felt part of something, at an age where you can feel a little bit isolated.'

The composer has lived in London since 1991, and when asked how she found herself in this profession, she responds with surprise: 'I haven't thought about it being a profession. It's how I make a living but it's also kind of a hobby.' She has been composing through improvisation for as long as her hands have been big enough to stretch across the piano keys, but she takes the hard work put in over the years in her stride, saying, 'It just found me, I guess.'

Since the last time she was interviewed for *C&O* [September/October 2005], Tabakova's career has flourished, taking her from being a PhD student in composition at King's College London to chairing the BBC Young Musician jury and holding a long-term residency with the BBC Concert Orchestra.

Looking back over the last 14 years, she acknowledges that two of her proudest achievements have been the release of her Grammy-nominated debut album, *String Paths* [EMC New Series, 2013], as well as her most recent album, released on Regent

Records this September, *Kynance Cove; On the South Downs; Works for Choir* [REGCD 530], which earned a five-star review in *Choir & Organ* (see October issue). 'Releasing albums for a composer is important because other than live performances, the only time that people can hear your music is through recordings.' She explains that an album allows a composer to step back, gain perspective, and see a culmination of their work programmed under one theme or idea.

'Streaming opens up [music] to more people who otherwise may have felt that they didn't belong at that kind of concert'

As well as these successes, Tabakova is candid about the challenges of being a freelance composer. 'The fact that I'm still doing it is something that I'm proud of,' she says, explaining that she tries not to think about the 'strange responsibility' of being in charge of her career in such an all-consuming way. 'As anyone who does it will tell you, the exciting thing is that nothing is the same from day to day, but at the same time you have to be the person who sets the structure of your days or longer-term projects.'

Rather than having a day-to-day routine, though, she says, 'It's mostly month-to-month. It takes me a long time to really get into the compositional zone. But once I'm in it, it can be a few months of not really going out very much and just concentrating on

writing.' This then swings in the opposite direction once the music is written, with lots of rehearsals, talking to people and attending events. 'I think that's also one of the challenges, just learning about the gear shifts of a compositional life.'

From 2014 to 2016, this pendulum-like lifestyle saw Tabakova immersed in reading almost all of Shakespeare's plays as part of her residency with the Orchestra of the Swan, an ensemble based in the

playwright's birthplace of Stratford-upon-Avon whose aim is to champion new music. This project culminated in *Immortal Shakespeare*, a cantata for choir and orchestra commissioned to mark the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death. She describes this as 'a very significant project' of around 35 minutes in length, which involved shaping the text to go alongside the score. Taking Jaques's famous 'All the world's a stage' monologue in *As You Like It* as a starting point, she brought together a selection of texts from across Shakespeare's oeuvre, charting the seven ages of man, from infancy to old age. The final chorale took the words from Shakespeare's funerary monument at Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon, where the cantata was premiered in April 2016. ▶

◀ 'The fact that I'm still doing it is something that I'm proud of': Dobrinka Tabakova on composition

COURTESY TRURO CATHEDRAL CHOIR



▲ Truro Cathedral's director of music Christopher Gray, Dobrinka Tabakova and producer Gary Cole at the recording of the Truro Canticles

COURTESY DOBRINKA TABAKOVA



▲ The choral postlude of the cantata *Immortal Shakespeare*, set to the inscription above the playwright's grave

◀ Her 2016-18 residency in Truro made Tabakova the first female composer commissioned by the Cathedral, and resulted in the recording of her most recent album. This also coincided with the appointment of the first girl choristers at the Cathedral, which she explains made the project all the more significant: 'I feel really proud knowing

that the first girl choristers will in some way associate their experience with the pieces I've written for them during this time. That's why this album is quite important and dear to me.'

During her residency, Tabakova spent time listening to the choir rehearse for services, and walking around the cathedral to develop an understanding of the acoustics and timbre of the voices. 'Compared with one-off commissions, it's a more intense relationship and one where each piece written seems to lead to the next ... The culmination was the *Truro Canticles*, which are very special to me, as I cannot imagine writing this music for anyone else or for another space.'

Before the introduction of girls to cathedral choirs (in 1991, at Salisbury), she says, no one questioned the status quo, 'so it was a comfortable state'. 'It was really great that Christopher Gray [Truro's director of music] took a step back and saw the bigger picture – it's not just [about having] girl choristers, it's about involving *everyone* in the music that's made in cathedrals.' By ensuring that this project was not just a box-ticking exercise, 'he embraced the whole vision of how the future I think will look – however many different types of people there are, everyone can have a

chance of developing their skills.'

Tabakova feels hopeful about the future for female composers, acknowledging the ground laid by previous generations, including women she has studied with, such as Diana Burrell. 'There are great women composers who have been working consistently hard for decades, and what I hope my generation can do is to make it easier for following generations not even to question these kinds of opportunities.'

Despite the high profile of many of the musicians and singers she has worked with, Tabakova does not see composing for amateur groups as an inferior craft. 'You can write with so many extended techniques, and a professional choir can just do it like that, but if you still want to achieve that level of excitement with limited technical ability, I think that's actually more challenging to you as a composer.' She would advocate a flexible, all-rounded approach to composition and believes that 'the ability to write for a variety of instruments and sonic palettes is also translated in the variety of difficulty levels that you are able to write for.'

In 2016, Tabakova demonstrated this approach in her role as the chair of the BBC

Young Musician jury. She speaks of the heavy weight of responsibility, 'because it's young musicians' careers and lives that you are helping to launch,' with three 'incredible' finalists and a lot of successful musicians coming before the final round. She was proud of the programme and explains that it was 'almost like another Master's degree,' learning how it worked backstage and being involved in the production as a whole.

Tabakova is currently in her third major residency – her second was with the Leipzig MDR Orchestra for the 2017/18 season – this time with the BBC Concert Orchestra, a partnership that also began in 2017. She takes stock of the value of residencies, appreciating the 'luxury' of spending a concentrated amount of time with one group of people: 'I think they've confirmed my personal aim, which is to work with individual musicians – it's something that's run through the whole of my compositional life.' In approaching a composition, Tabakova says her work is shaped by emotion, innovation and storytelling, as well as historical composers such as Schubert with his strong melodic lines, but then adds, 'Mostly, I think about the musicians.'

Her residency with the BBC Concert Orchestra involved Tabakova in composing a piece for the 2019 Proms to mark the 150th anniversary of Henry Wood, the event's founding conductor: 'What a way to have a

first Proms commission!' she reflects, with a combination of amusement and disbelief. The piece she had envisaged writing if she were ever asked to compose for the Proms space was 'something really quiet, transparent and still,' but she felt that this wouldn't reflect Wood's character, deciding instead to write something more 'energetic,' 'fun' and 'bold'. *Timber & Steel* was born, a piece written not only to celebrate Wood, but also to reflect the rise of industrialisation during his lifetime, as well as growing technological advances since his death.

Tabakova was particularly excited about 'The Fruit of Silence', a programme with the City of London Sinfonia, which toured the UK in October, bringing an immersive musical experience to nine cathedrals across the country [see *Freestyle*, p.35]. Audience members were encouraged to sit on cushions around the cathedral, as well as walk through the building and admire the awe-inspiring architecture, creating their own musical journeys. Her *Organum Light* (for string quintet) and *Centuries of Meditations* (for choir, strings and harp, written for Three Choirs Festival in 2012) were performed alongside works by Arvo Pärt and Pēteris Vasks, among others, with the hope that these accessible performances would bring classical music to a wider demographic.

Thinking about the current demographic at concerts of her own music and of others,

Tabakova explains, 'Although it's a double-edged sword, the fact that there's so much streaming at the moment is opening up those kinds of sounds to more people who otherwise may have felt that they didn't belong at that kind of concert.' She hopes that the streaming will translate to walk-in attendance by younger audience members and those who may not usually find themselves exposed to classical music.

She believes that the breadth of styles in the UK makes it 'one of the healthiest musical landscapes anywhere,' reflecting the variety of musicians who want to see music that represents them. In conjunction with this, she hopes that innovative programming continues to be celebrated: 'I don't think you can just get away with a symphony, a five-minute new work and then a concerto – I think people will need to be a little more inventive.'

The last time *C&O* spoke to Tabakova, she expressed a desire to compose a rock concerto for viola. Did this project ever come to fruition? She responds with a laugh, neatly bringing the conversation to a cyclical conclusion: 'I did write a jazz suite, but the rock thing didn't really happen. I wonder why?' *dobrinka.com* ■

Information about purchasing scores of Dobrinka Tabakova's music can be obtained from info@valonius.co.uk.

▼ The composer at a rehearsal of *Timber & Steel* with the BBC Concert Orchestra, conducted by Bramwell Tovey



RUTH POTTER/BBC CONCERT ORCHESTRA